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How Masculinity Beliefs Impact LGBTQIA+ Relationships

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Abstract

This research study looked at the masculinity beliefs of individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community and whether they were associated with participants' relationship satisfaction. 85 participants completed questions from the Male Role Norms Inventory-Revised (MRNI-R) to determine their masculinity beliefs and the Couples Satisfaction Index (16-item version) to measure relationship satisfaction. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, ANOVA, correlation, and regression analysis. Our research hypotheses were that LGBTQIA+ individuals will have a low MRNI-R score (indicating less traditional masculinity beliefs) and that a lower score on the MRNI-R would correlate with higher relationship satisfaction. Our hypotheses were partially supported. Participants did score quite low on the MRNI-R. However, the correlation between masculinity beliefs and relationship satisfaction indicated that they were not correlated. We then divided up the participants into categories to look for differences in masculinity beliefs across genders and sexualities. Results indicated a difference in masculinity beliefs amongst different genders, but no significant difference in masculinity beliefs amongst different sexual orientations.

Introduction

In society, men are taught to be tough and suppress fear. They need to be muscular, never cry, and watch sports. These stereotypes of what a man should be, have been around for a while. The concept of masculinity and manhood is a huge part of life, regardless of one's gender or sexuality. Thus, people's opinions on masculinity determine many aspects of their lives, and they especially impact their relationships with others. One of the main reasons why men attempt suicide after a breakup was that they had "distressed intimate partner relationships, which manifested... 'tainted masculine honor'" (Knizek & Hjelmeland, 2018). In addition, the masculinity beliefs of gay men affect their self-image and confidence. The far too frequent sexual assault of women in the LGBTQIA+ community is, in part, due to toxic masculinity ideals. (Bedera & Nordmeyer, 2021). Clearly, the effects of masculinity beliefs reach men, the romantic partners of men, women who are not in romantic relationships with men, etc. Despite this, people who do not identify as men are not a huge part of research done regarding masculinity.

Another concept that affects most, if not all, of society is human relationships. Everyone has at least one type of relationship, and many people are involved in romantic ones. Naturally, it is a topic that is researched as it is a vital part of human development and culture. However, the research on relationships is heteronormative and really only applies to straight individuals. Much less research has been done on LGBTQIA+ relationships. With a larger number of people identifying as LGBTQIA+ in this generation than generations before, it is especially important to give people some insight into their relationships. One of the goals of this research project is to help ensure that the unique beliefs of the community are part of the conversation on masculinity in relationships. Having a better understanding of LGBTQIA+ relationships will enhance the

field of relationship science and allow researchers to no longer have a heteronormative view. Social scientists will begin to be able to see how opinions might differ across a community that includes men, women, nonbinary, and other gender identities. The research could begin to reveal which masculinity norms are harmful and which are enhancing LGBTQIA+ relationships; seeing this connection could help everyone adjust their relationships for the better.

Literature Review

With the LGBTQIA+ community becoming a much more prevalent and visible part of society, it is important that they are included in relationship science. However, as far as LGBTQIA+ relationships, the research is limited. There have been studies investigating relationship satisfaction and its relation to “outness” as well as legal legitimacy (Akers, Cashwell, & Blake, 2021). There was a study done looking at the correlation between relationship support and satisfaction in gender diverse couples (Blair, Hudson, & Holmberg, 2023). Another study looked at the effects that changing social attitudes had on LGBTQIA+ relationships (Frost, Fingerhut, & Meyer, 2022). While this research is important and informative, it does not relate to the masculinity beliefs of the community.

Masculinity beliefs have been a topic of research for quite some time, with the field really beginning to bloom in the 1980’s. Now we have scholarly journals related to the topic, classes taught in college, as well as researchers dedicated to discovering the impact of society’s masculinity beliefs (Cochran, 2010). Much of the research has focused on the pressure to adhere to traditional masculinity beliefs. There have been studies about how heterosexual men feel the need to separate themselves from women and gay men, (Berent, Falomir-Pichastor, & Chipeaux, 2016), studies comparing the endorsement of traditional masculinity and political ideology

(Iacoviello, Valsecchi, Berent, Borinca, Falomir-Pichastor, 2021), and studies about how masculinity impacts men's mental health and boy's behavior (Pearson, 2023).

As the research continued, the studies began to partially include men of sexual minorities. There was a study done on the beliefs about gay and straight male friendships (Johnston, McKie, Levere, Russell, Prokosch, & Reissing, 2021), and one about traditional masculinity leading to anti-LGBTQIA+ attitudes (Vandello, Upton, Wilkerson, Kubicki, & Kosakowska-Berezecka, 2023). Some studies even looked at masculinity beliefs amongst the LGBTQIA+ community, but not really in the context of relationships. A study, done recently in 2023, focused on the unique challenges of bisexual men, and looked at how bisexual men express their masculinity in both queer and heteronormative parts of society (Anders, Stuart-Maver, Hong, & Amos, 2023). Another study, published in 2021, examined how masculinity beliefs affect the sexual victimization of women in the LGBTQIA+, and found that their sexual assaults were viewed by their attackers as expressions of masculinity (Bedera & Nordmeyer, 2021).

There has also been research done on masculinity beliefs somewhat pertaining to relationships in the LGBTQIA+ community. However, much of the research only focuses on one or two sexualities. A survey study was conducted in 2009 on gay men's masculinity beliefs and their relationships (Sánchez, Greenberg, Ming, & Vilaindone, 2009). A study done in 2019 looked at predictors of men's sexual objectification of other men (Szymanski, Mikorski, & Dunn, 2019).

It is clear from these studies that more research is needed to understand LGBTQIA+ relationships in the context of masculinity beliefs. Much of the research is limited in that it only focuses on the masculinity beliefs of straight men, only focuses on LGBTQIA+ relationships and not masculinity, or it only includes one gender or sexuality. The purpose of this study was to

include a range of LGBTQIA+ identities and find out about their masculinity beliefs and their relationships to see how the two relate.

Methods

Participants

For the current study, we conducted an online survey of college students (18 years or older) that identified as LGBTQIA+. Data were collected via Qualtrics and the study was advertised via UConn's Daily Digest and on social media, including on Reddit's LGBTQ Research subreddit. Overall, 105 individuals responded to the survey, but 20 participants were deleted due to completing less than 20% of the survey, leaving us with 85 participants for the current analyses. Of those participants whose data we retained, all surveys were at least 67% complete, with most of them being almost 100% finished.

Among the 85 participants, the average age of the participants was 20.67 years old with a standard deviation of 3.48 years. The most frequent categories of demographic characteristics were that 42 participants were women, 50 were White, and 28 identified as bisexual. As far as relationship status, 45 were single/not dating and 66 of the 85 participants had been in a relationship before, with the average length being 19.47 months with a standard deviation of 20.80 months. See Tables for full descriptive statistics about the current sample.

Measures

Participants began the survey with demographic questions about their age, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and relationship status.

Masculinity beliefs. Masculinity beliefs were assessed in the current study using the Male Role Norms Inventory- Revised (MRNI-R; Levant, et al., 2010). The MRNI-R contains 49 items with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Our survey used

40 items with the deletion of the “Negativity Towards Sexual Minorities” category, as we felt that such items were likely to be inappropriate and offensive for our sample (entirely members of the LGBTQIA+ community). Responses were coded such that a higher score reflected more traditional masculinity beliefs. Sample items included “Men should be the leader in any group” and “A man should never admit when others hurt his feelings”. Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was 0.96, indicating that it had very high reliability.

Two additional questions at the end of the survey also asked participants “Do you see yourself as ‘masculine’?” (responses ranged from *very masculine* to *very not masculine*) and “Do you see masculinity as a positive or negative trait in a person?” (responses ranged from *very positive* to *very negative*).

Relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was assessed for those participants who indicated that they were or had previously been in a romantic relationship with someone, using The Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007). The CSI contains 16 items and responses ranged from 1 to 6, but the actual referents for the responses varied from question to question. For example, one sample item was “In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well” with responses ranging from *All the Time* to *Never*, whereas another item of “Our relationship is strong” had responses ranging from *Not at all true* to *Completely true*. Responses were recoded such that higher scores indicated greater relationship satisfaction. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.98, meaning that both measures were highly reliable.

Results

RQ1: What Are the Masculinity Beliefs Amongst LGBTQIA+ Individuals?

The first research question was addressed by analyzing descriptive statistics of responses to the Male Role Norms Inventory-Revised. The mean score of participants was 1.84 with a standard deviation of 0.75 (on a scale from 1 to 7), indicating that overall, participants held few to no traditional masculinity beliefs. However, responses ranged from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 5.35, indicating that there was variability in beliefs across individuals, with at least some individuals holding relatively high levels of traditional masculinity beliefs. Therefore, we next turned to whether certain groups tended to be higher or lower in their masculinity beliefs.

RQ2: Do masculinity beliefs differ across LGBTQIA+ groups?

This question was assessed via ANOVA (analysis of variance). First, we had to divide up the participants into categories. For gender, we had categories for men, women, transgender, nonbinary, and “other”. If we had a sufficient number of responses for transgender women, we would have liked to split up the transgender category into men and women. However, with only 2 responses, we did not have sufficient data to make transgender women stand alone. After running the analysis, we discovered that there was a significance of $p < 0.001$, meaning that there were differences between the gender groups. After looking at the Post Hoc tests, we found that women, transgender individuals, non-binary individuals, and everyone else held similar beliefs, but differed significantly from men, who held the strictest masculinity beliefs with an average score of 2.945 on the MRNI-R. Every other group was 2.027 or below. For sexual orientation, we had a sufficient number of participants to make categories for gay/lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, and “other”. When we ran the analysis of variance, our significance was $p = 0.287$, indicating that there was no real difference in masculinity beliefs amongst the different sexual orientations. However, then we decided to split up the gay/lesbian category and compare the masculinity beliefs of gay men to those of lesbians. We ran the analysis and got a

significance of $p = 0.046$ indicating that gay men and lesbians hold different masculinity beliefs. The mean score on the MRNI-R was 2.68 for gay men and 1.51 for lesbians, indicating that gay men held more traditional beliefs than lesbian women.

RQ 3: Are masculinity beliefs associated with relationship satisfaction?

This question was assessed via correlation and regression analysis. First, we tested for the bivariate correlation of masculinity beliefs and relationship satisfaction. We got a Pearson's Correlation of $r = -0.044$ with significance of $p = 0.728$, meaning that the two variables were not correlated. We then ran regression analysis including masculinity beliefs along with multiple other variables such as age, length of relationship, and sexual orientation vs. relationship satisfaction, and the only association found was between length of relationship and relationship satisfaction; masculinity beliefs continued to be unassociated with relationship satisfaction.

Discussion

Our hypothesis for the first question was that the masculinity beliefs of the LGBTQIA+ community would be relatively nontraditional, and our hypothesis was supported by our results. The participants had an average score on the MRNI-R of 1.84, which is very low on the scale. These results make sense because the LGBTQIA+ community already rejects certain hegemonic views regarding gender and sexuality. Therefore, it is fitting that they reject hegemonic views around masculinity as well. For our second research question, it was clear that there was a difference in masculinity beliefs amongst genders, with cisgender men being higher and more traditional in their masculinity beliefs than women, non-binary individuals, and transgender individuals. While other gender groups are affected by masculinity, it does make sense that masculinity standards hit those who identify as men a little harder, because they are the ones who have to struggle internally as well as with feedback from others about the concept.

There were no significant differences between different sexualities when “gay men/lesbian women” was one category. However, the difference in beliefs between gay men and lesbian women was consistent with our other finding showing that LGBTQIA+ men have stricter masculinity beliefs than other genders in the LGBTQIA+ community.

Our third research question asked how masculinity beliefs impact LGBTQIA+ relationships? Our hypothesis was that, given the often toxic effect of traditional masculinity beliefs on relationships, people with less traditional masculinity beliefs would have happier relationships, but this was not supported by our data. It is possible that masculinity beliefs are not a big factor in LGBTQIA+ relationships because, with the slight exception of men, other gender and sexuality groups had very similar and relatively nontraditional beliefs. In addition, with the exception of a few outliers, even the men did not score too high on the MRNI-R. Thus, it is a possibility that their masculinity beliefs are not traditional enough to cause potential issues, and thus were unassociated.

Limitations

This research project had a few limitations that could have impacted the results. The timing of the project was not ideal for surveying college students, as data were collected over the summer. A couple of places that we reached out to for help advertising never responded. In addition, students were likely checking their emails and notifications less. Those limitations made it difficult to get the 200 participants that we were aiming for. In addition, due to the fact that we were unable to get a larger number of participants, we could not have all the categories be compared separately to one another. For example, due to only having 2 transgender women fill out the survey, we had to combine transgender men and women into one gender category when we had hoped to analyze them separately. We also only had one straight individual fill out

the survey, and so they were excluded. It would be helpful to have a sample with more gender minority only individuals. With a survey, it is also always possible that people did not take enough time to fill it out diligently, which could have impacted their answers.

Next Steps

This project was meant to be an exploratory study on masculinity and LGBTQIA+ relationships. In the future, it may be beneficial to survey LGBTQIA+ individuals on their masculinity beliefs on a much larger scale, thereby including more identities. In addition, it may be interesting to do a qualitative study on what the basis is for the LGBTQIA+ community's masculinity beliefs and if they have a strong impact on their lives, and not just their relationships. It also would be beneficial to test other factors that may impact LGBTQIA+ relationships such as negative stereotypes, familial support, and being in a college environment, which may be more supportive of them.

These findings are significant because we now can begin to understand how the LGBTQIA+ feels about masculinity. As more and more research is done, this will help us have a better understanding of how their relationships are unique. Therefore, it could also help tailor relationship therapy and education programs specifically to them. In addition, further research into other potential factors that could influence their relationships would help understand what makes a happier and healthier LGBTQIA+ relationship.

TablesSexual Orientation

Straight	1
Gay or lesbian	22
Bisexual	28
Asexual	5
Pansexual	10
Queer	17
Something else:	2
Total	85

Race

African American or Black	9
Asian American or Asian	13
European American or White	50
Hispanic or Latinx	10
Something else:	3
Total	85

Gender

Woman	42
Man	8
Transgender man	8
Transgender woman	2
Intersex	2
Non-binary/genderqueer/gender fluid	20
Something else:	3
Total	85

Relationship Status

Single, not dating	45
Dating casually	8
Committed relationship(s), but not living together	26
Committed relationship(s) and living together	5
Married	1
Total	85

Age and Length of Relationship

	What is your age?	How long have you been/were you in this relationship (in months)?
# of participants	82	58
# of participants missing	3	27
Mean	20.67	19.47
Std. Deviation	3.475	20.802

Appendix: Survey Questions

Q1: “I agree” to the Prospective Agreement/Consent

Q2: This survey is designed for LGBTQIA+ individuals. Do you identify as LGBTQIA+?

Q3: What is your age?

Q4: How do you identify your gender?

Q5: How do you identify your sexual orientation?

Q6: What racial or ethnic group(s) do you identify with?

Q7: Do you generally identify as monogamous (being with one person) or polyamorous (being with more than one person) in your romantic relationships?

Q8: What is your current romantic relationship status?

Q9: Please state how much you agree or disagree with the following questions about boys and men. (7 choices ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”)

- A man should never admit when others hurt his feelings.
- Men should not be too quick to tell others that they care about them.
- Men should be detached in emotionally charged situations.
- A man should not react when other people cry.
- One should not be able to tell how a man is feeling by looking at his face.
- Fathers should teach their sons to mask fear.
- Being a little down in the dumps is not a good reason for a man to act depressed.
- A man should avoid holding his wife’s purse at all times.
- Men should not borrow money from friends or family members.
- I might find it a little silly or embarrassing if a male friend of mine cried over a sad love story.
- A man shouldn’t bother with sex unless he can achieve orgasm.
- Men should have home improvement skills.
- Men should be able to fix most things around the house.
- A man should know how to repair his car if it should break down.

- Boys should play with action figures not dolls.
- Men should watch football games instead of soap operas.
- Boys should prefer to play with trucks rather than dolls.
- A man should prefer watching action movies to reading romantic novels.
- Men should not wear make-up, cover-up, or bronzer.
- Boys should not throw baseballs like girls.
- Men should not be interested in talk shows such as “Oprah.” Men should excel at contact sports.
- A man should always be ready for sex.
- A man should not turn down sex.
- Men should always like to have sex.
- It is ok for a man to use any and all means to “convince” a woman to have sex.
- When the going gets tough, men should get tough.
- I think a young man should try to be physically tough, even if he’s not big.
- Men should get up to investigate if there is a strange noise in the house at night.
- It is important for a man to take risks, even if he might get hurt.
- A man must be able to make his own way in the world.
- Men should be the leader in any group.
- A man should always be the boss.
- Men should make the final decision involving money.
- The President of the U.S. should always be a man.
- A man should provide the discipline in the family.
- A man should always be the major provider in his family.
- In a group, it is up to the men to get things organized and moving ahead.

Q10: Are you now or have you been in a romantic relationship?

If current, please answer the following questions about your current romantic relationship. If you have been, please answer the following questions about your most recent romantic relationship.

Q11: How long have you been/were you in this relationship (in months)?

Q12: Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship. (7 choices ranging from “extremely unhappy” to “perfect”)

Q13: In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well? (6 choices ranging from “never” to “all the time”)

Q14: Our relationship is strong (6 choices ranging from “not at all true” to “completely true”)

My relationship with my partner makes me happy (6 choices ranging from “not at all true” to “completely true”)

Q15: I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner (6 choices ranging from “not at all true” to “completely true”)

Q16: I really feel like part of a team with my partner(6 choices ranging from “not at all true” to “completely true”)

Q17: How rewarding is your relationship with your partner? (6 choices ranging from “not at all” to “completely”)

Q18: How well does your partner meet your needs? (6 choices ranging from “not at all” to “completely”)

Q19: To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations? (6 choices ranging from “not at all” to “completely”)

Q20: In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship? (6 choices ranging from “not at all” to “completely”)

Q21: For the following item, select the answer that best describes how you feel about your relationship. Base your responses on your first impressions and immediate feelings about the item. (6 choices ranging from 0-boring to 5-interesting)

Q22: For the following item, select the answer that best describes how you feel about your relationship. Base your responses on your first impressions and immediate feelings about the item. (6 choices ranging from 0-bad to 5-good)

Q23: For the following item, select the answer that best describes how you feel about your relationship. Base your responses on your first impressions and immediate feelings about the item. (6 choices ranging from 0-empty to 5-full)

Q24: For the following item, select the answer that best describes how you feel about your relationship. Base your responses on your first impressions and immediate feelings about the item. (6 choices ranging from 0-fragile to 5-sturdy)

Q25: For the following item, select the answer that best describes how you feel about your relationship. Base your responses on your first impressions and immediate feelings about the item. (6 choices ranging from 0-discouraging to 5-hopeful)

Q26: For the following item, select the answer that best describes how you feel about your relationship. Base your responses on your first impressions and immediate feelings about the item. (6 choices ranging from 0-miserable to 5-enjoyable)

Q27: How would you personally define “masculinity” for yourself or for others? (open-ended)

Q28: Do you see yourself as “masculine”? (5 choices ranging from “very masculine” to “very not masculine”)

Q29: Do you see masculinity as a positive or negative trait in a person? (5 choices ranging from “very positive” to “very negative”)

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