

# Are All Men the Same?

## An Examination of Homosexual and Heterosexual Male Personal Ads

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### Abstract

*Interest in interpersonal relationships is one of the cornerstones of social work. By developing knowledge of what characteristics are offered and sought by homosexual and heterosexual men, social workers will be able to better understand the mindset of each group and their respective approaches to relationships. This study examined two hundred personal advertisements (fifty homosexual and fifty heterosexual personal ads on two different internet dating sites). The researchers then coded every fifth ad based on the following characteristics: age, ethnicity, education, employment, body type, income, religion, disclosed attractiveness, expressive traits, sincerity traits and sexual references. Significant differences were found between the two groups regarding their demographic information, as well as the personality characteristics the respondents were seeking in a partner and were offering through a description of themselves in their advertisements. Heterosexual men were more likely to offer and seek sincerity in a relationship as well as prefer an attractive partner. In contrast, homosexual males were more likely to include sexual references in reference to themselves in their ads.*

### Introduction

All clinicians encounter clients seeking to understand their romantic relationships; thus, this is an area to which social workers need to be particularly attuned. By examining the various differences between sexual orientation in men and the traits they desire in mates, clinicians can therefore better understand the factors that drive males towards romantic relationships. This knowledge can subsequently have important clinical applications in the social worker's ability to assess and "start where the client is." While information is readily available on the homosexual community, it is infrequently discussed as a part of social work curricula. As social workers, it is essential to fill this void in order to better educate the community and to understand this diverse client group. For this purpose, a study was designed to examine the attributes that homosexual males value in both themselves and in potential mates in comparison to characteristics valued by heterosexual men.

In order to gain access to this type of information, personal ads were studied and coded. Personal advertisements provided the opportunity to assess individual advertisers in a noninvasive and unbiased way. Not only was additional personal information unknown about the advertiser, but the advertiser had placed the ad without any consideration of the possibility that it would be used for research. This avoided any opportunity for subject reactivity. In lieu of printed advertisements (which are becoming more scarce) and taking advantage of technological advancements, the researchers examined personal advertisements that were placed on two different internet sources.

### Literature Review

#### *History of Personal Ads*

The first gay personal ads were published in Los Angeles, California in the mid 1960's (Harris, 1997). The tradition of cruising for "pen pals" through ads became well established because it offered a relatively safe method of communication for those not prepared to "out" themselves to the greater community. These early authors of personal ads did not have the luxury of being as selective as modern advertisers. These men were more indiscriminate about the sort of man they were seeking (Harris, 1997).

Harris noted that in the early 1970's, a new characteristic emerged in gay personal ads. Gay men began to be more expressive in their ads (Harris, 1997). They were looking to custom order an ideal partner, rather than placing the more generic, less expressive ads of the previous decade. A shift was noted in the types of relationships sought in ads. They evolved from "friend" in the 1960's to "lover" in the 1970's as gay relationships assimilated into mainstream society, becoming more and more accepted (Harris, 1997).

#### *Theories of Sexual Development*

Howard, Blumstein and Schwartz (1987) examined evolutionary theory to better understand mate preferences, both in heterosexuals and homosexuals. Evolutionary theories claim that heterosexual men prefer attractive, healthy women because of their reproductive capacity and that heterosexual women prefer secure men who will be financially capable of

providing for their children. Acknowledging the heterosexist bias of this theory, Howard, Blumstein and Schwartz (1987) commented that although homosexual couples may not consciously consider procreation when choosing a mate, evolutionary drives should be consistent across sexual orientation. These findings suggested that gay men should prefer attractive gay men and lesbians desire secure women. This application of heterosexual theories to homosexual men is an all too common occurrence. Given that heterosexuality is the status quo, minimal attention is given to homosexual relationships and the unique traits that characterize them.

Daryl Bem (1996) attempted to transcend available sexuality theories and offered a more gay-friendly developmental theory to examine the origin of same-sex desire. By examining the origins of homosexuality, Bem provided an explanation for the types of characteristics sought by homosexual men. He claimed that children begin to derive pleasure or feel more comfortable participating in either sex-typical or sex-atypical activities. They also begin to associate with those who are like them. Most adult homosexuals report having felt more comfortable participating in female typical activities, thus serving to differentiate themselves from other boys very early in their childhood. This exoticness of sex-typical boys is initially expressed as autonomic arousal in children and develops into erotic or romantic attraction in adulthood. Bem's ideas are more commonly referred to as "exotic equals erotic". This observation of exotically preferred traits can be seen on multiple planes. As adults, homosexual men who preferred participating in female typical activities have been noted to prefer other men who participate in more male typical behaviors, such as weight training and professional careers. More intrinsically, the identification of feeling more feminine intensifies the level of attraction to the male form in general, with which the homosexual male may not have identified in childhood (Bem, 1996).

### *Known Factors in Mate Selection*

Personal advertisements have been used to better understand the basis of same-sex attraction. Bailey, Kim, Hills, and Linsenmeier (1997) examined personal advertisements in a multiple-part study in order to learn if gay men and lesbians desired romantic partners who exhibited sex-typical (meaning traits that are characteristic for that gender, e.g. masculine gay males or feminine lesbians) or sex-atypical traits (e.g., feminine males and masculine

females). Traits were examined via multiple comparisons across groups. In one such comparison, they studied personal advertisements in gay and lesbian publications, and in another, looked at heterosexual advertisements to have a basis for comparison.

Upon exploring the homosexual advertisements, Bailey et al. (1997) found that gay men both described themselves and their ideal partners using masculine terms. Those males that described themselves as feminine did not show a clear preference for either a more masculine or feminine partner. This study implies that gay men prefer partners who exhibit more sex-typical traits.

In the second portion of the Bailey et al. (1997) study, the authors examined heterosexual responses in order to compare them with the results from the homosexual sample. Again, they were looking to see whether heterosexual males and females mentioned a preference in their advertisements for a masculine or feminine partner. Compared with the males in the first study, the heterosexual males were less likely to describe themselves as masculine. The authors attributed this outcome to the societal assumption that a heterosexual male is by definition masculine and that a heterosexual female, in turn, will always be feminine. Both studies showed that both populations preferred partners who were sex-typical.

Sprecher, Sullivan and Hatfield (1994) looked at gender differences in mate selection preferences. Their sample was nationally representative and consisted of single adults who assessed twelve attributes, eight of which were related to physical attractiveness, youth, and earning potential. The findings of their study indicated that there were in fact gender differences in mate selection. In addition, it was noted that men were more willing than women to marry someone younger by five years, someone who was not likely to hold a steady job, who had earned less, and who had less education. Women were found to be more willing to marry someone who was not attractive, older by five years, earned more than they did, and had more education.

In addition, Sprecher et al. (1994) noted that race and age did not impact mate preference between genders. However, different socioeconomic groups did vary slightly in the degree of gender differences for several of the preferences. It was found that White men were more willing than Black men to marry a mate who did not hold a steady job, and that both White and Black women were less willing to marry a man who did not have consistent employment. Moreover, White women noted more frequently than did Black women that it was necessary for a man to

have a steady job before marriage was considered.

Whether or not age impacts mate selection has been a common subject in the analysis of the qualities sought in a partner for a romantic relationship. Kenrick, Keefe, Bryan, Barr, and Brown (1995) have investigated this by studying homosexual and heterosexual personal advertisements and making comparisons between the two groups. They observed that individuals choose the age of a mate based on their reproductive potential, which is consistent with evolutionary theory (Kenrick et al., 1995).

Another thought is that hormones play a contributing role. Kenrick and colleagues (1995) looked at research done by Bailey et al. (1994) who found that sexuality did not influence mate preferences. This means that there were more common mate characteristics between homosexual and heterosexual men than with heterosexual males and females, or homosexual males and females.

The Kenrick et al. (1995) sample included heterosexuals and homosexuals who placed personal advertisements in one of five publications. In order to be included in this sample, the advertisements had to include the preferred sex in a partner, the advertiser's age and the age range for which they were looking in a mate. The authors found that both heterosexual and homosexual males preferred younger partners as they age. The sampled males who were younger preferred mates who were a few years older. Females were found to desire older partners at any stage of their lives. These findings contradict the belief that homosexuals choose their mates in the opposite fashion of heterosexuals.

Taking this study a step further, Rassmussen et al. (1998) found that the age of the individual being sought does not change. This means that regardless of the aging of the individual seeking a partner, he or she is always looking for a person of a specific age. For example, a man in his thirties who seeks a twenty-five year old woman will still seek a twenty-five year old woman when he is in his fifties.

The authors of the present study focused this research on a sample of men from the metro-Chicago area to determine the differences, if any existed, in the characteristics most valued by heterosexual and homosexual males. By examining personal advertisements and coding for age, ethnicity, education, employment, body type, income, religion, attractiveness, expressive traits, sincerity traits and sexual references, the researchers posited that a better understanding could be gained of the most common and valued attributes from each of the aforementioned communities.

## Methodology

### *Design*

In order to obtain the desired information, the researchers examined personal advertisements from two internet dating sites. This naturalistic research design was non-experimental and did not manipulate any variables or have a control group. This research did not require the administration of a pre-test or post-test because no intervention was being introduced. In addition, this study was an exploratory, quantitative study for the purpose of obtaining a better understanding of the characteristics sought by heterosexual and homosexual males in romantic partner selection. Causality was not tested, and therefore internal validity is not a direct concern.

There are, however, limitations to the study. The internet sites chosen by the researchers allowed participants to select from pre-made sets of attributes when indicating their preferences in a mate. Not only does this diminish the level of autonomy of the participants, the individuals placing the ads may only identify with one of the attributes in three or four that have been grouped together. Furthermore, advertisers may have also included information on the site that they may not otherwise have deemed important enough to include in their search for a partner. Additionally, the online aspect of the ads allowed advertisers to mention or select as many attributes as desired. This reduced the opportunity to assess the relative weight of attributes mentioned in relation to newspaper ads that mandate brevity. A caveat of this study was that the findings could only be generalized to heterosexual and homosexual men who placed personal advertisements in the metro-Chicago area. A final limitation is the possibility that individuals writing the personal advertisements may not be representative of the general population. Therefore, sexual orientation is only one of many variables that could impact trait preferences between these two groups.

### *Sampling/Subjects*

The authors utilized personal advertisements posted by homosexual and heterosexual men on the free internet sites Yahoo and American Singles. Ads written by men aged 20-50 were examined to ensure that several generations of men were included within the study. According to the principle of random sampling, every fifth ad for both sexual orientations was coded until fifty ads representing each groups was collected from each site. This provided a total of two hundred advertisements. Selecting ads randomly eliminated the potential for bias in ad selection.

### Variables

The main variable in this study was sexual orientation. The researchers looked at the differences in characteristics sought and offered by both heterosexual and homosexual men. Other variables included were attractiveness (physical characteristics such as height and weight, as well as descriptive terms such as handsome, athletic, muscular etc.), occupation/salary (direct references to occupation and salary range, as well as descriptive terms such as professional, accomplished etc.), expressive traits (characteristics such as emotional, nurturing, sensitive), sincerity (references that include faithful, monogamous or commitment-minded), and sexual references (any reference to explicit sexual acts such as top/bottom, cuddling, kissing etc.). The authors also coded for covariates such as educational level, age, race and religion as these attributes were available (Gonzales & Meyers, 1993). Please see Appendix B for a comprehensive list of coded terms utilized in this study.

### Procedures

Data was collected by coding the aforementioned variables in every fifth personal advertisement posted on the websites Yahoo and American Singles. Ads were selected from males seeking females aged 20-50 and males seeking males aged 20-50. Additionally, ads were selected from a population of men who lived within fifty miles of the metro-Chicago area. Every fifth ad was then printed and analyzed using a coding sheet that elicited information on all of the variables sought and offered by each advertiser. The following variables were also measured for frequency: disclosed or requested attractiveness, expressive traits, sincerity, and sexual characteristics. This was done in order to ascertain the relative weight, or value of a given characteristic to each population.

In order to establish interrater reliability the authors collectively comprised a master list of characteristics for the group's use that was utilized in the count of traits attractiveness, expressive traits, sincerity traits and sexual references (see Appendix B for complete list). Furthermore, all data sets were recalculated by another rater to ensure all characteristics had been included. That is, all cases were coded twice, each time by a different rater. Any discrepancies were noted and discussed before making a final tabulation. All variables were then assigned a numerical value when entering data for statistical analysis. Numerical values were also assigned to code for ethnicity, level of education, employment status, body type, income, and religion. (See Appendix A for a detailed coding sheet).

### Data Analysis

The raters examined the frequency of responses from each category and found that there was an uneven distribution of responses. As a result, the decision was made to combine some categories in order to accentuate variations. The variables to which this applied included education, employment, body type, and income. The variable of education was grouped such that people with a high school education or some college were compared to individuals reporting a college degree or higher. For employment, those reporting a professional career were compared to all others. The variable of body type was combined to create a grouping for the responses of slim, athletic, and average, in comparison to respondents who indicated they were overweight. Income was divided into two categories: those who disclosed income and those who did not. In addition, the authors recoded the offered and sought sexual references and the sincere references to indicate those who cited these traits versus those who did not. This was done in response to the small number of the aforementioned traits offered and sought in the advertisements. Even distributions were found for the variables of religion and ethnicity, as well as expressive traits.

### Results

In examining the demographics of this sample, several significant findings were discovered. In terms of age, homosexual respondents were likely to be 4.1 years younger than heterosexual respondents,  $t(198) = 4.074, p = .000$ . The mean ages for homosexuals and heterosexuals were 30.09 and 34.07 respectively. The relationship between ethnicity and sexual orientation was also significant,  $\chi^2(4) = 11.2, p = .025$ . The heterosexual respondents were more likely to be white (72% vs. 54%). Homosexual respondents were more likely to be black (18% vs. 10%), as well as Hispanic/Latino (12% vs. 3%). A significant difference was not found between groups for educational level. Homosexuals with high school and some college represented 44.9 % and heterosexuals 48%. Homosexuals with a college degree or higher represented 55.1% of the sample and heterosexuals represented 52%. A significant difference was found between groups for the variable of employment,  $\chi^2(3) = 18.8, p = .000$ . Homosexual respondents were more likely to report that they were professionals (67.7% vs. 57.1%), while heterosexual respondents were more likely to be in a technical/trade occupation (26.5% vs. 5.1%).

An additional significant difference was found between the groups in terms of body type,  $\chi^2(3) = 20.2, p = .000$ , although most respondents reported themselves as being anything (fit, slim, or average) other than overweight. Most heterosexual respondents reported being athletic/fit (61% vs. 31.6%), while most homosexual respondents reported being average (37.8% vs. 17%). Concerning the willingness to disclose income, there was a significant difference between groups,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.8, p = .016$ . More heterosexual respondents disclosed information about their income (57% vs. 40%). Finally, there was also a significant difference between groups in regards to religion,  $\chi^2(7) = 20.1, p = .005$ . Heterosexual respondents were more likely to be Catholic (31% vs. 23%) and Jewish (7% vs. 0%). Homosexual advertisers were more likely to report their religion as other (35% vs. 28%), and agnostic (8% vs. 2%).

In reference to the characteristics described in this sample regarding offered and sought traits discussed in the advertisements, differences were found between groups regarding offering sincerity,  $\chi^2(1) = 25.8, p = .000$ . Heterosexual respondents were more likely to describe themselves as sincere (51 vs. 17%). Additionally, significant differences were found between groups in the self-disclosure of sexual traits,  $\chi^2(1) = 32.6, p = .000$ . Homosexual respondents were more likely to include sexual references in their advertisements (94% vs. 60%). However, significant differences were not found between groups in regards to self-description of attractiveness and expressive traits.

In the examination of desired partner traits, significant differences were found between the groups in terms of the desire for an attractive partner,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.1, p = .024$ . Heterosexual respondents were more likely to look for an attractive partner (58% vs. 42%). Furthermore, there was a significant difference in regards to sought sincerity,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.1, p = .024$ . Heterosexual men were more likely to be looking for a sincere partner (40% vs. 25%). Conversely, significant differences were not found between groups for the inclusion of sexual references and expressive traits sought in a partner.

## Discussion

Through this study a great deal was learned about the differences between homosexual and heterosexual men in terms of the characteristics they are willing to disclose about themselves, in addition to the characteristics they desire in a partner. Demographics aside, heterosexuals were more likely to describe

themselves as sincere in their relationships as well as seeking partners who were attractive and sincere in return. This corresponds to the previously discussed evolutionary theory in terms of the desire for attractive partners. Their references to sincerity could be attributed to the greater likelihood of seeking a long-term relationship in an effort to procreate. However, limitations were also found in this study. The most important limitation is that the results found can only be generalized to a specific population, namely, men who place online personal advertisements in the metro-Chicago area.

Homosexual men were more likely to reference sex in their self-description. This may be an indication of the changing times and a greater societal acceptance of homosexuality. This supports Harris' (1997) theory that homosexuals today are more comfortable in describing themselves in a sexual manner. It could potentially be inferred that sexual attraction and sexual prowess are more important factors in mate selection for gay men than heterosexual men. With the knowledge that sex and intimacy are essential parts of any relationship regardless of sexual orientation, further examination of the societal impact on the discussion of sex is necessary to better understand the implications of these findings.

## Applications for Social Work Practice

It is important to consider the issues that homosexual men would bring to therapeutic settings. Society has always treated this population as the "other." Not long ago, homosexuality was classified as a mental illness in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-II, 1968). Homosexual men have many of the same issues as the general population, but their issues are compounded by the complications of internalized homophobia, guilt from their family of origin or religious institutions and the self-alienation that can result from these issues (Brandell, 1997). For these reasons, it is essential that clinicians are empathic to the problems as presented by the client and are understanding of the characteristics valued both in themselves and a partner in order to further strengthen the therapeutic alliance.

It is imperative that clinicians be aware of the preferences by homosexual males for qualities and traits, both within themselves and their partners, in order to adequately address their relationship needs. The knowledge gained through this study allows clinicians to be more understanding of issues in the homosexual community.

So, *are* all men really the same? It appears that there are some distinctions to be made. With respect to sexual orientation, men have demonstrated that they are a dynamic gender. Given that the homosexual population is coming more to the forefront, it is imperative that this population be given the same opportunity for quality treatment. This can best be accomplished by working with a culturally competent clinician who is well versed with the interpersonal issues of homosexual men.

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## Appendix A

Coding Values

### Ethnicity

1. White
2. African American
3. Asian
4. Hispanic/Latino
5. Other

### Education

1. High school
2. Some college
3. College degree
4. Post graduate degree

### Employment

1. Professional
2. Technical/trade
3. Student
4. Other
5. Unemployed

### Body Type

1. Slim
2. Athletic
3. Average
4. Overweight

### Income

1. Undisclosed
2. \$15,000-25,000
3. \$26,000-50,000
4. \$51,000-100,000
5. \$101,000+

### Religion

1. Catholic
2. Agnostic/none
3. Christian
4. Baptist
5. Lutheran
6. Protestant
7. Jewish
8. Other

## Appendix B

Coded Terms

### Attractiveness Traits

Stocky, slim, healthy, large/broad build, average/medium build, “a few extra pounds,” athletic, fit, muscular, lean, slender, proportional, attractive, good-looking cute, buxom, curvy, pretty

### Expressive Traits

Emotional, sensitive, unique, easy going, well-balanced, adventurous, wild, spontaneous, practical, compulsive, flexible, open-minded, friendly, kind, high-energy, humorous, witty, intellectual, low-maintenance, self-confident, talkative, outgoing

### Sincere Traits

Faithful, monogamous, commitment-minded, honest, truthful, good-heart, serious, responsible, family-oriented, “not playing the field”

### Sexual References

Sensual, flirtatious, playful, sexy, horny, romantic, hung, hot, cuddly, “big equipment”

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