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## The “Okay” Gay Guys: Developing Hegemonic Sexuality as a Tool to Understand Men’s Workplace Identities

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### ABSTRACT

This research investigates gender and sexuality identity management among gay men. Thirty self-identified gay men participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews and provided their accounts of how they manage performances of gender and sexuality in the workplace. This research contributes to the scholarship of gender and sexuality by highlighting how sexuality, as an organizing principle, contributes to the further marginalization of an already marginalized population of gay men, via a concept I call hegemonic sexuality. The men’s narratives help us understand how certain performances of sexuality permit some men to be recognized as “acceptable,” while others are labeled “too gay” in different work environments. I investigate the motivations and consequences of men’s concerted workplace identity management strategies. I conclude by suggesting that hegemonic sexuality be used as a tool to understand how some gay men are deemed more acceptable than others in additional social spaces.

### KEYWORDS

Gay identities; hegemonic masculinity; performance management; sexuality; qualitative methods; masculinities; gay masculinity; professionalism; workplace

I’ve had people say things to me like, “I don’t normally like a lot of gay guys, but you’re cool.” What does that even mean? I’m the *okay* gay guy? Like there is an acceptable gay and a not acceptable gay? That’s still disrespectful to me. – Gavin (26, Social Media Marketing)

### Introduction

For more than 20 years, Connell’s (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity has shaped the way sociologists make sense of gender relationships between the dominant and subordinated. Scholars have relied on this concept to help explain men’s dominant position over women, as well as some men’s dominant position over other men. Certain performances of masculinity are valued within a society over others, but almost always they are valued over performances of femininity. Since femininity is often associated with homosexuality, Connell (1995) suggests gay men are positioned as subordinates in this hegemonic gender structure. These performances of femininity and masculinity, as Judith Butler (1990) explains, take on meaning through

repetition. That is, gendered meanings are socially constructed so that gender exists as a concept that is anything but fixed.

Performances of sexuality remain complex, intertwined with both gender and sex. For example, throughout history, gender performance has been used as a marker for sexuality. Some women have, at times, worn men's clothing as a way to resist expectations of both femininity and heterosexuality (Tarrant, 2006). Men too, develop ways of signaling sexuality through specific gendered performances. In his most notable book on gay men in New York at the turn of the 20th century, George Chauncey (1995) describes how accessories like red neckties and suede shoes were subtle "tells" of a gay identity. R. W. Connell (1995) explains that performances of masculinity, by both women and men, are used as ways of distinguishing some individuals from others, and that this results in unequal relationships to power so that masculine performances are nearly always rewarded more than feminine performances.

Colloquial stereotypes posit that gay men are commonly characterized as being feminine, which is somehow also used as an indicator of gayness (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009). Building on Connell's notion that multiple masculinities exist, other scholars have described a plurality of gay masculinities (Hennen, 2005; Nardi, 2000) that also exist, complicating the notion that all gay men are inherently feminine (indeed, they are not). And while Connell explains that the idealized form of masculinity is both culturally and situationally specific, we know less about how performances of sexuality might be involved in the ranking and rating of men. Hegemonic masculinity provides a way to understand how men's gendered performances are valued within a given society. However, this concept is not entirely useful in terms of understanding to what extent gay men's performances of sexuality are similarly valued. In this paper, I develop a concept I call hegemonic sexuality to explain how gay men, who are subordinated by hegemonic masculinity, might also be susceptible to the same type of hegemonic structure based on their performances of "gayness." Since gay identities already represent a subordinated group, I argue that hegemonic sexuality can explain why some men are, as Gavin at the beginning of this article, described as "okay gay guys," and others are deemed "too gay." Since masculinity is generally valued in societies, gay men who perform masculinity in various ways are closer to achieving the hegemonic ideal. Straight-acting men (i.e., gay men who can "pass" as straight) are able to capitalize on certain social privileges (e.g., avoidance of harassment and discrimination). Since passing as straight might yield certain privileges, being "not gay enough" is viewed as more desirable than being "too gay," as these two categories sit at opposite positions in the hegemonic order.

I develop this concept of hegemonic sexuality using examples from interviews with gay men who provide accounts of their experiences, primarily in the workplace. Through this analysis, I demonstrate how hegemonic

sexuality operates in conjunction with hegemonic masculinity. I use hegemonic sexuality as a theoretical tool to explain how sexuality, as an organizing principle, contributes to the marginalization of an already marginalized population of gay men.

## Literature review

Connell (1995) developed the concept of hegemonic masculinity in the quintessential book, *Masculinities*, as a way to explain the domination of men and subordination of women, as well as the domination of some men over other men. Specifically, Connell (1995) recognizes the subordination of gay men. The organization of male dominance, according to Connell, is culturally configured so that gendered performances are interpreted through the lens of a particular culture's expectations of what masculinity or femininity "should" look like. As cultural expectations of masculinity have shifted over time, other scholars have, of course, taken on the important work of studying how masculinity is being conceptualized in practice today. While some authors see contemporary masculinities as being inclusive and progressive (Anderson, 2015, 2009), others see these hybrid masculine performances as representing more covert versions of hegemonic masculinity. These "new" masculinities might actually reinforce the hierarchical power structure, rather than dismantling it (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Demetriou, 2001; Messner, 1993).

Connell's analysis offers a foundation for understanding how a non-heterosexual identity fits into the hegemonic structure on the basis of gender. And just as Connell explains that multiple masculinities are possible within a society, we understand that a wide array of gay masculinities—performed by gay men—is included. Gay bears, leathermen, clones, twinkies, otters, daddies, etc. (Albo, 2013; Levine, 1998; Manley, Levitt, & Mosher, 2007; Mosher, Levitt, & Manley, 2006), all perform sexuality and gender in various ways, and thus cannot be simply lumped together under the singular category of gay men.

While hegemonic masculinity is useful for understanding how performances of gender result in a hierarchy that rewards or punishes certain individuals, this concept fails to fully account for the ways that performances of sexuality similarly result in a kind of sexualized hierarchy. And while hegemonic masculinity is characterized with rewarding heterosexuality over gayness, it does not provide us with a tool for understanding the ways that various gay masculinities (or various performances of gayness, period) fit within a hierarchical system of gender and sexuality.

Several authors have described what might constitute a gay aesthetic or a gay sensibility—elements of gay culture or "gayness" that contribute somehow to the ways that gay people are distinguishable from their heterosexual counterparts (Alexander, 2010; Chauncey, 1995; Halperin, 2012; Levine,

1998). These characteristics include dress and grooming habits, preference for particular music genres, and the stereotypical “gay lisp.” Taken together, these characteristics become part of a performance of a gay identity—one that is recognizable to both gay and straight audiences. To be clear, I am not suggesting that there is a “right” way to perform gay identities, or that a gay formula does or should exist. What I (and others) are suggesting is that within any cultural context, there emerges some set of characteristics that serve to distinguish gay from straight identities (Alexander, 2010; Chauncey, 1995; Halperin, 2012; Levine, 1998).

Similar to the notion of hegemonic masculinity, the notion of hegemonic sexuality captures the ways that sexuality too, has dominant forms. Hegemonic sexuality extends specifically to gay sexuality, indicating that some performances of gayness are more desirable than others, and are rewarded as such. This term might help make sense of what David Halperin (2012) means when he asserts in his book *How to be Gay*, that he is “a miserable failure as a gay man” (p. 34). Halperin discusses gay culture at large, where a gay collective identity has been fostered. Since he does not participate in gay culture the way that others think he ought to, he writes that he often feels “like an outsider to [gay culture]” (p. 36). Whether or not he thinks he is performing his sexuality correctly, the responses from others indicate that he is doing something wrong. In some people’s eyes at least, there must be a correct way (and an incorrect way) to be gay. Halperin explains that within gay culture, there is more to claiming a homosexual identity than simply being attracted to the same sex. Performing sexuality is a crucial component of claiming the “right” kind of gay identity. Thus, some performances are rewarded more than others depending on both the audience and the situational context.

Part of understanding how performances of sexuality might result in a hierarchical structure similar to that of hegemonic masculinity is to first acknowledge the powerful forces that already guide much of this performance. Michael Warner (1999) first offered the concept of heteronormativity to explain the ways that heterosexuality is privileged over non-heterosexual identities. This follows from Adrienne Rich’s (1980) concept of compulsory heterosexuality, which challenges the notion that individuals are considered innately heterosexual and that non-heterosexual identities are by default deviant. Both Warner and Rich’s concepts describe heterosexuality as the “default” sexuality—one that comes with it a set of norms for “appropriate” heterosexual performances. I extend these concepts to form the notion of hegemonic sexuality.

In what follows, I develop a theory of hegemonic sexuality, which explains how, based on men’s relationship to a particular performance of gayness, gay men recreate hegemonic structures that are similar to, yet different from, hegemonic masculinity. That is, hegemonic sexuality can be used to explain

why some gay men are considered to be “acceptable,” while others are deemed to be “too gay,” thus recreating a dominant-subordinate relationship based on performances of sexuality.

A review of previously published literature finds that only a few authors have previously used the term hegemonic sexuality in their writings. However, these authors have not developed or used the concept to the extent that I present in this research. To my knowledge, this term has been used very little, and is sometimes presented as “hegemonic masculinity and sexuality” which indicates two separate terms—hegemonic masculinity as one concept, and sexuality as a second, but not hegemonic sexuality (Gieseler, 2014; Jackson, 2008; Jenkins, 2012; Johnson, 2010; Riggs, 2010). The authors may, in fact, be discussing hegemonic sexuality as I have developed it, but these authors do not call it this. When the term “hegemonic sexuality” is explicitly used, its meaning is not necessarily explained. Other authors (Boyd, 2010; Morris, 1995; Shilling, 2001) use “hegemonic sexuality,” but do not explicitly define what they mean by this. Lorraine Nencel’s (2010) article, which focuses on the ways that women’s choice of dress in the workplace is in part a performance of sexuality, does not fully develop what is meant by “hegemonic discourses of sexuality” either. While I also argue that hegemonic sexuality is evident in workplace environments, I suggest that this is only one of several ways that hegemonic sexuality operates in the marginalization of some men. I extend the use of this term not only to men, but gay men specifically (no other literature uses this term to reference gay men), and demonstrate that not only clothing, but gestures, speech, and other performative elements are all used as ways to subordinate some gay men more than others.

Hegemonic sexuality starts from the notion that various performances of sexuality are differentially valued by a particular society. Specifically, I am concerned with how various performances of gay identities are also ranked in a hierarchical fashion. I argue that this is also different from Lisa Duggan’s (2003) use of the term homonormativity, which refers to a kind of cooptation of heterosexual norms and values into LGBTQ communities. While homonormative practices may be valued by the larger society to a greater extent than more radical or transgressive practices, they only account for a portion of a holistic sexual identity. That is, hegemonic sexuality takes into consideration all aspects of a person’s identity and performance, including their gender, race, social class, HIV serostatus, etc. Hegemonic sexuality can help explain why, for instance, some gay men are considered an “okay” or acceptable kind of gay person, while others are considered either flamboyant or “too gay.”

Gender and sexuality are so closely entangled. Thus, I suggest that, while hegemonic masculinity includes sexuality as part of its organizing principles, so too does hegemonic sexuality include gender as part of its organizing principles. In other words, taken together, the notions of hegemonic

masculinity and hegemonic sexuality provide insights into the social pressures that are placed on these co-constitutive identities and how variously situated men respond to them. In this paper, I focus on the workplace as one location in which gay men manage their gendered and sexual identities, in order to support the notion of hegemonic sexualities.

## Methodology

For this analysis, I draw data from thirty in-depth, semi-structured interviews with adult gay men. Participants were recruited for this study using both convenience and snowball sampling. Interviews took place between 2012 and 2014, in a variety of locations. Some took place at coffee shops, some at bars, and others at the participant's residence. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2.5 hours. All interviews were audio-tape recorded with participants' permission and transcribed in full.

All participants are self-identified gay men aged 22–52. The majority of respondents are white. Of the thirty respondents, only five described themselves as non-white. Three of these men are black, one is biracial, and one is Hispanic. One man identified his race as being white and Jewish. Men in this study work full- or part-time in a variety of occupations. Some are in white-collar jobs such as marketing, information technology support, and education. Others work in service jobs such as restaurants, hair salons, and retail. The range of participant educational attainment is just as varied as their occupations. Some participants have earned high school degrees, and others hold doctoral degrees. Most participants in this study are “out” (in terms of sexuality) to at least some people in their lives, although the degree to how “out” they are varies. For example, some men are only out in their private lives, and remain closeted at work.

I relied on a grounded theory approach to analyzing interview transcripts. As I read, reread, coded, and recoded transcripts, I created theoretical categories and then proceeded to analyze the relationships between categories (Charmaz, 1990). For example, while my interview schedule included questions about the workplace, I found that many men used the word “professional” to describe their behavior in this space. Asking additional questions about how professionalism coincides with respondents' notions of gender and sexuality performance helped inform my understanding of the relationship men have with their work identities. It is through this process that I move from listening to men's accounts of dress and behavior in the workplace, to understanding a concept of professionalism and developing a theory of hegemonic sexuality. After each interview, I immediately made notes of my observations from the interview, including how the participant dressed, use of hand gestures and body language, as well as how my own identity as a researcher related to the interview conversations (LaSala, 2003). This work

is part of a larger study that investigates identity management among gay men and thus the questions for the interview covered a range of topics including men's relationships with their families, friends, intimate partners, online identities, and other social environments.

### **“Professionalism” in the workplace and hegemonic sexuality**

When discussing appropriate performances of sexuality and gender in the workplace, many men described their performances in terms of “toning down” their sexuality, or acting more masculine—not because they were trying to disguise their sexuality, but because they wanted to be seen as “professional.” Participants often talked about not acting “too gay,” or that men who were perceived as being too gay were somehow looked down upon by their colleagues or employers. Being labeled “too gay” might sometimes have to do with the clothes one wears, use of certain body language, or other characteristics, such as the sound of one's voice. For men deemed too gay, there is something about their performance that diverges from how gayness “should” be performed, at least in a work environment. I address these areas and also discuss what the perceived consequences are for being “too gay” in the workplace.

### ***The clothes that make the (gay) man***

In his essay on fashion, Georg Simmel (1957) describes fashion as the replication of dress within a particular social class that distinguishes it from other classes. While Simmel here is referring to social classes, we might also interpret this to mean that fashion can separate different groups of people, such as differentiating gay men from straight men. While clothes are not inherently gendered or sexualized, clothes carry with them socially constructed meanings that we then wear as part of our performances of gender, sexuality, social class, and so on (Goffman, 1959; Simmel, 1957). In her often cited work on gender performativity, Judith Butler (1990) reinforces this point. Gender is constructed through a series of repetitious acts that taken together, form an understanding of our gendered selves (Butler, 1990). The men that I interviewed discussed the ways that choice of dress contributed to their perception of gender and sexuality.

A majority of men in this study report that their choice of dress in the workplace has less to do with concealing (or revealing) their sexuality, but has more to do with appearing “professional.” James, a 27-year-old grade school teacher, articulates this. “Obviously, there is a certain professional dress appropriate for men opposed to women. But as far as gender and sexuality, it's not as much about trying to be in or out of the closet. It's just not something I'm that concerned about.” James acknowledges that in order to dress professionally, men and women often wear different clothes. And of course, what is seen as professional largely depends on the place of



employment (Martimianakis, Maniate, & Hodges, 2009). In general, the men interviewed for this study discussed wanting to be seen as responsible workers, and as such, they are cautious with their choice of dress while at work. Men are particularly concerned with their dress depending on their audience. Meetings with managers, clients, contractors, etc. might necessitate a different dress attire than if meeting with other colleagues. Men consciously dressed in certain ways in order to not make others uncomfortable, and also to not draw too much attention to themselves. Isaac, a 24-year-old copy writer says, "I'm afraid that [the men I work with] might think that because I'm gay, that I'm hitting on them if I look at them too long or look at them the wrong way." Consequently, Isaac carefully monitors his dress and behaviors in the workplace. Neil (25), shares Isaac's concern, but also expresses his frustration with having to consider how professional his attire might be. "I think about what I'm wearing and if it looks too gay probably every single day. And you know what? Straight guys don't ever have to think, 'is my outfit going to be *too straight* today?'" In considering what might be "too gay" to wear, Tanner (25) describes his strategy in dressing for work:

In a work environment...I try to wear something that is more socially acceptable. I think about more what it looks like when I'm at work. It is kind of exhausting. I wish I didn't have to as much, but I feel like there is a kind of inappropriate need for that...so that I can keep things professional.

Dressing appropriately, or in a socially acceptable manner then, is also synonymous with dressing professionally. The men in this study imply that dressing in a way that might reveal their sexuality would be considered inappropriate, unacceptable, and unprofessional.

This strategy of dressing professionally relies, of course, on gendered assumptions of what it means for men to be dressed professionally. Cal (39), who works in human resources, tells me that:

When we have meetings, I might dress in dress pants and a shirt, but that's not for masculinity reasons—not because I'm concerned about the group perceiving my masculinity, it's about a presentation of an image that shows that I take the work I'm doing professionally.

Cal indicates a lack of concern for how his work clothes contribute to his masculine identity, but does consider himself dressing for his job. Cal fails to acknowledge, however, that the pants and shirt he chooses to wear actually *are* consistent with norms of masculinity in his workplace (Dellinger, 2002). Cal's clothes symbolize professionalism and the fact that he takes his work seriously. He wears the same kind of pants and shirt that the other men he works with are wearing, thus signaling that he is just like his other male colleagues.

Tanner (25) works full time in a jewelry store as a jewelry designer. At first, he tells me that he does not think much about what he wears on a daily basis. “I just wear what I want. My clothes aren’t that tight or crazy.” But as throughout the interview, he starts to indicate that he does, in fact, consider what he wears quite a bit. He places a certain value on some kinds of clothing. Even as he mentions what he *doesn’t* wear (e.g., tight or “crazy” clothes), he makes a distinction between clothes in terms of what they might signal about him. “I [like to] look nice, but I’m not overly feminine in my clothing attire. I think there are some outfits that I do realize that I look more gay [in].” Dressing femininely or dressing too gay is seen negatively, at least to Tanner. He later becomes very specific about what makes an outfit too gay. “If I’m wearing a salmon-colored V-neck T-shirt with a cardigan over it, I’m going to feel more gay than if I had pants and a button-down shirt on.” Here, Tanner has indicated that “looking gay” and “looking professional” are mutually exclusive, contrasting aesthetics, and that the latter is more appropriate than the former.

When asked about the way he dresses for work, Christopher (24) says, “I think about what I can and can’t wear. When it comes to [being] professional, I’ll wear a shirt and tie maybe. I don’t accessorize or anything like that. I stick with the basics.” Vance (23) describes changing the way that he dresses when he is going to work. “Mostly it’s from a professional standpoint and not a fashion standpoint.” Another respondent, James (27), describes the difference between dressing for a gay social space and the workplace. He says, “I wear more professional attire to work. I just think of it as dressing professionally versus dressing for a gay bar.” While James does not see this as important, he does make a point to identify that there is a difference between looking professional and being in a gay space. Dressing “too gay” is seen as unprofessional, and therefore undesirable in the workplace.

But what about the clothing might indicate something that is “too gay?” Several men discussed how the *color* of their clothing mattered to both their gendered and sexual identities. Evan (40), who works in marketing and public relations, tells me that at certain work functions “I am not wearing my pink shirt—period. I wear as much black as I possibly can.” Evan tells me he tries his best to fit in with his other co-workers as much as he can and to not look “too gay.” He says, “Maybe it’s more of a culture thing, but my big bright shirts? I will purposefully avoid [wearing them]. I don’t think that would help my cause any. If I’m wearing a bright shirt [they’ll know I’m gay]!” His “cause” of course, is in trying to fit in with his co-workers, which means not appearing to be too gay. He fears that the brightly colored shirts will indicate something about his sexuality, and people will have a negative impression of him if the first thing people notice about him is his gay identity.

Neil (25) is a social worker who works with inmates. Like Evan, Neil also stresses the importance of the color of one's clothing when it comes to managing identities. Neil describes his dress as "business casual," and thus he has some flexibility in what he wears to still be dressed professionally. He describes one day where he felt that he made a mistake in his wardrobe choice. In order to meet with his clients, he has to walk through a long hallway lined with windows where he is visible to the inmates. On a particular day at the justice center, he wore a pair of burnt orange khaki pants. He described feeling like he was being stared at, as if all of the inmates somehow knew that he is gay, just from his choice of pants:

I distinctly remember seeing them all staring at me and I was like... "fuck." Ever since then, whenever I go to the justice center I make a very concerted effort to contain my posture and presentation. It sounds ridiculous to care about what inmates are thinking of you. Their opinion matters to me—what does that say about my own insecurities?

Neil felt that he was being stared at, and he perceived this as a threat—at least in terms of his confidence. The color of his clothing was significant in Neil's perception of his own masculine and gay identity—it was too flamboyant in Neil's mind. He suddenly became insecure, feeling that he looked too gay—or not masculine enough in the eyes of the inmates. At that moment, Neil was uncomfortable, thinking that the color of his pants indicated something negative about his sexuality. This caused Neil to later feel insecure and change his behaviors, as well as what he wore around the inmates.

### ***Behaving professionally on the job***

Style of dress is not the only act of professionalism that men discussed. Some men also discuss professionalism in terms of what makes for acceptable workplace behavior. Rodney (41), a college professor, comments on his gendered behaviors in the workplace:

When I go into professional settings, I act more reserved. I talk less. I definitely think that being reserved is more of a masculine affect. It's more about me being read as professional. Being reserved is a masculine kind of performance or behavior.

Rodney associates professionalism with acting reserved, which he also associates with masculinity. Being professional means being masculine, which seems to also exclude gayness. Being "too gay" is seen as non-masculine, and also unprofessional. Barry (31), who works at a non-profit agency, describes his relationship with one of his coworkers. This particular coworker, who Barry says is also gay, scolds Barry for what he considers to be behavior that is somehow too flamboyant for the workplace. Barry tells me:

I have a coworker who is out everywhere except at work, and he gets freaked out about some of the things I say in front of him. He gets really nervous. Essentially, he thinks that I'm too flamboyant in the office. But I don't think

I am! I feel like people associate flamboyance with bad. Like you get annoyed with a really loud flamboyant friend...I don't know why, but we associate femininity with badness.

This is an example of what Tim Bergling (2001) calls “sissyphobia.” Bergling (2001) observes a pattern among gay men where they find feminine behavior (e.g., dress, mannerisms, speech patterns) to be undesirable. Being a “sissy” means being too flamboyant or effeminate, and is to be avoided at all costs. While Barry might not alter his behavior to fit in at his workplace, other men describe the ways that they do alter their performance at work. Tanner explains, “[Around some people], I get to be a little more relaxed and I let my feminine side show more easily. I do feel myself needing to dial down when I'm around other people though. If I use hand gestures, [I might] feel criticized.” Tanner, who was introduced earlier in this article, is not out at work. He tells me that he does not want people to know he is gay because that will change how people think of think of him as a worker. “Disclosing that you're gay in a professional environment might hinder you in some way. I don't want that to be an issue where I work.”

Other men describe ways that professionalism and flamboyance are incongruent. TJ (25), currently works as a flight attendant, but told me that before working for an airline, he used to work in North Dakota on an oil rig. He became nervous about interacting with the other men on the job, after one conversation with his boss:

My boss had told me, ‘Hey – you can't act gay. You can't do that.’ I had to start making up stories. I would make up stories of the girls I was seeing. [My coworkers] started to invite me to go out to the bars with them, but I wouldn't go. I started having a hard time keeping my stories straight. I'm happy that I finally got the courage to leave that part of me behind. If I couldn't be who I was, then I couldn't be doing [that job], so I left.

Part of TJ's workplace culture involved spending time with coworkers both on and off the job. TJ found it increasingly challenging to contribute to conversations among his peers—since he could not tell them about the gay bars he visited over the weekend, or the dates he had been on. His boss had told him to “man up” and carry himself “like a man” while at work. If TJ was unable to perform masculinity to the standards of his boss, he would be viewed as gay instead, and that type of behavior was simply not professional. TJ left his job for one where he felt more comfortable—one where he could dress more freely, and one where his sexuality was not devalued. He says now, “I feel okay being out at work, because there are a lot of gay people in the airline industry.”

The concept of professionalism is one example of how hegemonic sexuality operates. I argue that gay men who are seen as professional (i.e., fitting in with a heteronormative work environment), are more acceptable or seen as more

desirable workers compared to other gay men who might not dress or behave in accordance with heteronormative workplace standards. According to hegemonic sexuality, it is okay to be gay at work, as long as you are not *too gay*. Being “too gay” is considered unprofessional. The inverse of this, obviously, is to say that professional men who are also gay, are somehow performing sexuality and gender in an acceptable way.

For many men in this study, professionalism and gayness are incompatible. Being “too gay” (or sometimes just being gay at all) is seen as being unprofessional or unacceptable and could hurt your future career prospects. In some workplaces, gay men are accepted but must conform to a particular set of behaviors to be considered professional (this includes styles of dress, use of gestures or mannerisms, and what makes for appropriate conversation). I consider this narrow set of expectations to support the concepts of both hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic sexuality. Professional men must act and dress masculine, must not act or dress femininely, and must not act or dress too gay. The word “professional” in the workplace has become something of a code word for being masculine and straight, so much so that the men in this study sometimes failed to recognize that this meant they were adhering to heteronormative rules at work.

### ***Consequences of being “too gay”***

Participants in this study describe several reasons for hesitating to come out of the closet in their work environments. There is an ever-present fear of experiencing discrimination from co-workers, bosses, and clients that may be enough to keep a potentially stigmatized identity hidden (Bouzianis, Malcolm, & Hallab, 2008). Gavin, who works in marketing, describes hesitations about being out at work. Before coming out, he said, “I felt like I might be shunned. Like my opinion wouldn’t be as valued. Everyone might judge me.” Gavin was concerned that colleagues would discredit him if he came out.

Hunter describes the ways that he keeps his sexual identity concealed. “There have been some times during a job interview I intentionally censor myself just in case they might have a negative view of gay people. I don’t want to hurt my chances of getting hired, so I leave out the fact that I was the advisor for an LGBT youth group, for example.” Again, the specter of discrimination in the workplace forces gay men to, at the very least, consider what potential negative consequences might lie ahead if they are discovered to be gay. Whether the fear is not being hired, not being promoted, or being fired, gay men face anxieties in the workplace that cause them to manage sexual and gendered identities in different ways.

Men’s fears of unwelcoming workplace environments are not unsubstantiated. Men also reported times at work where they felt that not all gay men were seen in the same way. For instance, Anthony (26), who works as

a manager of an automobile manufacturing plant, is not out at work. He had been warned by his boss to remain closeted:

My boss had kind of just figured out that I was gay because I never seemed interested in talking about women at work. He confronted me and advised me that if I wanted to move up the management ladder, I shouldn't come out at work. He warned me that people in the auto industry are not very tolerant of gays, so I've just made sure to not let anything slip in regards to me being gay.

While Anthony's boss had looked out for his chances of promotion, not all men received this kind of warning. Jamai (46) had been working for a bank in several different capacities. He told me that because of his outstanding performance, they transferred him from Ohio to Florida. But very quickly, he realized that he wasn't welcomed at this new location:

I would keep getting written up on for tiny – little things! The managers would listen to all my calls looking for issues so that they could write me up. I strived for perfection, but they worked overtime listening to my calls. Finally, the inevitable happened and they pulled me aside to tell me that I wasn't a good fit for their environment. They didn't have a good reason to fire me, but they did anyway! And I experienced – well, I'll put it like this. I was fired – and I think it was because I am a gay black man. I was friends with a nice white lady, and she would tell me, "It is so clear. Look around. They don't want you here. They don't want a gay black man here." And they fired me.

While Jamai didn't have explicit proof that he was fired for being gay, he perceived that his identity as both gay and black were unwelcomed in his new work location. He described that there were other black men working there, but he encountered hostility from coworkers, managers, and even workers in the cafeteria. For Anthony and Jamai, the message was clear. Openly gay workers were not welcome.

Not all workers faced this same kind of discrimination. Rodney (41), who is an English professor, recalls a time when he came out to a coworker. He explains that her response was still frustrating to him:

She said something like, "Yeah you're gay, but you're not *gay* gay." She said something stupid like that. "Like you're not *too* gay." [She was okay with me,] but she was saying something homophobic about a particular kind of gay person she doesn't like. It's hurtful for me to hear that!

The message for all these men is quite plain. Being gay, or being a certain "kind" of gay man, is not welcomed in the workplace. There is a certain level of gayness that is sometimes tolerated in the workplace (e.g., in Anthony's situation, being gay was fine as long as he did not come out), but men who are "too gay" are not considered to be professional or desired in some workspaces. Holding a non-heterosexual sexual identity comes at a cost for these men, whether it is real or perceived. And even when gayness is accepted, it is accepted only conditionally, so long as the individual's sexuality is not "too gay."

## Conclusion

Gay men had much to say while discussing identity management strategies in the workplace. From the way they dressed at work, and the conversations they held with coworkers, to their body gestures, and the way they interacted with their boss/manager/coworkers, men manipulated their performances of gender and sexuality for a particular outcome. Sometimes, this was a conscious effort to either appear more masculine or to conceal a gay identity. Other times, however, the men refused to equate these behaviors as “butching up,” but rather, described their actions as part of the professional decorum expected at their workplace.

Performances of gender and sexuality are closely woven together. Thus, it is sometimes difficult to discern whether particular actions are intended to manage a perception of gender, sexuality, or both. I suggest that, while a man may attempt to “butch up” their behavior in the workplace, this is just as much a sexuality identity management tool as it is a gender identity management tool.

Most significantly, this study provides evidence that hegemonic sexuality guides men’s behaviors in the workplace, reinforcing a hierarchy of performances indicating gay identities. Men describe wearing certain clothes, in particular colors or styles, and monitoring their body language while interacting with others so that they present a “professional” demeanor. Men’s accounts of their workplace identity management strategies help outline that what is considered professional is also consistent with straight, masculine performances. Indeed, men in this study often fear diverging from the heteronormative expectations of the workplace. They worry that by doing so, they would be risking differential treatment from employers or coworkers. Men spoke of concern that they would be passed up for promotion, or lose their jobs altogether.

The data presented in this paper suggests that performances of masculinity and straightness are always valued more than performances of femininity or gayness. I have made the case that gay men who are labeled “too gay” are viewed as somehow undesirable by some straight and gay audiences. However, since I focus specifically on the workplace as a social context, it should not be ruled out that one might be labeled as “not gay enough” in other contexts. Ultimately, this was David Halperin’s (2012) concern – that he somehow failed as a gay man. In his case however, Halperin worried that he would be unable to connect with other gay men in order to participate in gay culture and be included among his gay peers. Thus, it is conceivable to be “too gay” or “not gay enough” depending on the social environment.

This research only begins to explore the possible ways that hegemonic sexuality might explain the relationships between gay men. In this paper, I focus primarily on the workplace as a location for gender and sexuality performance. Even in the workplace, however, men’s identity management strategies varies. While it was clear the in the workplace, men’s management

of gender and sexuality *did* matter to men in their relationships with their colleagues, bosses, clients, etc., it was also clear that these performances were highly contextual. The type of workplace for instance, may change the “rules” of expected behavior. Thus, future research should include more concerted analysis of occupation and social class. Additionally, in this paper I have not described how men perform gender and sexuality in their private lives differently from their professional lives. In their homes, at the gym, and with friends, men tailor their performances for the occasion. I suggest that hegemonic sexuality might also include other social variables (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, ability status, political identity, HIV serostatus) as part of the requirements for the ideal version of gayness. Future research might also address these variables more closely.

Connell’s (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity helps to explain that performances of masculinity are valued over performances of femininity. This study emphasizes that because gender and sexuality are performed simultaneously, we need additional theoretical tools to help explain the ways that some gay men are marginalized more than other gay men. Hegemonic sexuality focuses on performances of gayness (guided in part by performances of gender) and draws our attention to the ways that some performances of gay identities are considered acceptable, while others are not. In the workplace, these acceptable gay identities are characterized as being “professional,” reinforcing the heteronormative ideals of many straight, masculine, workplace cultures. Performances that are deemed to be “too gay,” by bosses, managers, or coworkers, are viewed as somehow inappropriate for workplaces. Hegemonic sexuality then, can explain why some gay men are marginalized more than others, on the basis of their performed sexual and gender identity in the workplace. I suggest that hegemonic sexuality can also be used to better understand men’s identity management strategies in all kinds of social environments. The consequences for both desirable and undesirable performances of gender and sexuality change when men are in their homes, with friends or family members, at the gym, etc. Navigating a set of continually changing set of expectations can best be understood with a flexible theoretical tool. Hegemonic sexuality can adapt to these various social contexts, enabling us to make sense of the differences between the “okay gay guys” and those that are “too gay” (and why these categories exist in the first place). Perhaps by understanding the structural relationships between these categories, we will be better prepared to dismantle them.

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