

2015

What Makes a Man: Physical Attraction Among Young Homosexuals

Aaron McCauley

University of Nebraska at Kearney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/undergraduate-research-journal>



Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McCauley, Aaron (2015) "What Makes a Man: Physical Attraction Among Young Homosexuals," *Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 19, Article 3.

Available at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/undergraduate-research-journal/vol19/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Undergraduate Research & Creative Activity at OpenSPACES@UNK: Scholarship, Preservation, and Creative Endeavors. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research Journal by an authorized editor of OpenSPACES@UNK: Scholarship, Preservation, and Creative Endeavors. For more information, please contact weissell@unk.edu.

What Makes a Man: Physical Attraction Among Young Homosexuals

Aaron McCauley

ABSTRACT

Little research is available when examining homosexual attraction, particularly physical attraction. Existing research approaches the topic through a heterosexual bias or an evolutionary stance. This study was designed to provide a base for further research. Five participants completed the interview process of the research design. The interviews consisted of open-ended, opinion style questions and with participants rating the attractiveness of a series of photos to further explore homosexual physical attraction. The results suggest that homosexual attraction may be based both in evolutionary processes and societal factors. More research is needed, however, for a better understanding of physical characteristics within homosexual attraction.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, recognition of and attempts to understand homosexuality has become more important to the scientific community. While psychologists and family scientists search for an understanding of homosexuality, little research has actually been done regarding this population. To begin to understand homosexual behaviors, baseline studies are needed to provide answers to more specific questions regarding sexual orientation. One such area of any sexual orientation is attraction to potential partners. This study focuses on physical attraction and the role it plays in mate selection among young homosexual males.

Physical attraction is frequently addressed when examining heterosexual relationships. Numerous articles on the topic of male/female attraction exist. If one desires a more specified approach to attraction, even more articles on fetishes and behaviors are available. However, upon searching for information regarding homosexual male attraction, it soon becomes evident there is a large deficit in the area. Very few articles are available in the area of homosexuality, and even fewer are present when dealing with physical attraction. The review of literature on this topic gleaned primarily dated research from decades past. It is from this lack of research on homosexuality and attraction that these questions arose: What makes a man desirable to another homosexual man? What physical characteristics do homosexual males find most appealing or attractive in a potential partner?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

When examining Western influences on attraction, physical appearances are considered a very important factor in partner selection (Bordo, 1993). Many previous studies that have centered around male attraction have focused solely on how women rate men (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). When viewing articles on heterosexual attraction, an evolutionary theoretical approach is often used. By taking the evolutionary stance, the articles argue that attraction is an evolved trait that promotes mating with a partner that will yield a better chance of reproduction than randomly mating (Hönekopp, Rudolph, Beier, Liebert, & Müller, 2007). Hönekopp et. al. (2007) also suggests that because of the need to mate with a partner of “high mate value,” physical fitness in

men is a biological part of attraction. Although Varangis, Lanzieri, Hildebrandt, and Feldman's (2012) study found similar relationship contexts between heterosexuals and homosexuals, the question of long-term relationship significance arose (Varangis, Lanzieri, Hildebrandt, & Feldman, 2012). While the evolutionary approach may explain heterosexual attraction and the desire to positively transfer genetics on to the next generation, it does not explain why homosexuals experience similar preferences in attraction, as they are unable to produce offspring. Perhaps homosexual attraction is not based within evolutionary complexes but rather is subject to societal pressures.

When looking at heterosexual cultures and homosexual cultures, it has been suggested that gay males value physical appearances more than their heterosexual male counterparts (Silberstein, Mishkind, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin, 1989). Individuals, including homosexual men themselves, support the notion that gay men tend to be more concerned with their appearances than straight men would be (Gettelman & Thompson, 1993). As Feingold (1990) suggests, this focus on physical appearances may be derived from the need to attract other males, who tend to be more focused on appearances than a woman would be. A recent study found that when it comes to muscles, gay men express preference for more muscular bodies when judging other males' attractiveness. The study also showed that a smaller WCR (waist-to-chest ratio) was more attractive to gay males, indicating a desire for upper body muscularity (Swami & Tovee, 2008). The desire for a "mesomorphic" body shape (a larger chest, smaller waist) can be seen throughout history (Luciano, 2007); however, it wasn't until later in the 20th century that the media began promoting an ideal for men's physiques and the V-shaped standard of the male body (Petrie, et al., 1996). This certainly falls in line with the Objectification theory, which declares that:

...individuals who are consistently exposed to sexually objectifying images will progressively adopt an observer's perspective, thereby forming judgments about their own bodies and sense of self on the extent to which they emulate the sexualized cultural images. (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997)

This belief that a partner will care more about physical appearances than moral substance may lead gay men to pursue partners who are equally concerned or occupied with physical appearances (Siever, 1994). As a result of such pursuits, gay men may also be more attracted to other men who are similar to their own muscular physique, as it shows an interest in one's appearance (Varangis, Lanzieri, Hildebrandt, & Feldman, 2012). Swami and Tovee's study produced a reinforcing result regarding this idea of physical attraction. The study (which compared attractive ratings between heterosexual and homosexual males) found that gay males have similar ideals for an overall body weight as their heterosexual counterparts. While the gay subjects did indicate a preference for a more muscular physique, both heterosexual and homosexual men selected body types that fell within the "normal" BMI range (18.5-24.9), indicating that muscularity is more important than actual body weight when viewing homosexual body preferences (Swami & Tovee, 2008).

To help provide possible answers to what influences physical attraction among homosexuals and what features gay males seek in potential partners, it was decided upon to create a simple, focus group/interview-based qualitative study. By allowing participants to answer open-ended questions freely, we believed we would see honest and detailed responses on physical preferences for potential partners. Based on aforementioned findings and theories, we hypothesized that: (1) Homosexual males will indicate a preference for physically fit/muscular men; (2) Homosexual males will emphasize bodily features (torso, legs, genital region) as more important/attractive than facial features (eyes, smile, hair); and (3) homosexual males will not value the same features that heterosexual women would, given the freedom to construct an “ideal partner” themselves.

METHODS

Participants

Following the IRB approval process, a total of 5 self-identified homosexual males voluntarily took part in our interviews. The participants were recruited using the University’s email system and through fliers displayed in/around the campus. Participants did not have a “test” or “standard” they had to complete in order to be eligible to participate; however, the email/fliers specified that males’ ages must be between 19-25, and they identify their sexual orientation as “homosexual.”

Procedure

Interviews were guided by the research questions with enough flexibility to allow for the discovery of new ideas (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). All interviews conducted were audio recorded and then transcribed for the investigators’ use. Upon arriving for the interview process, participants were asked to complete a simple demographic form [Figure 1]. The form asked for the identification of sex, age (as of the day of the interview), educational level (ranging from high school diploma to graduate degree), race/ethnicity, and relationship status. The participants were also given several options to choose from to identify their sexuality. Of course, as specified with the recruiting tools, the participants had to indicate “gay” in order to participate. All of the participants self-identified as “gay.” After the subjects completed the form, they were given the option to select a pseudonym or number by which they would be identified during the interview to protect their identities. Once the subjects had completed the demographics form, the consent form was read and discussed with them, per IRB requirements.

Demographics:

Sex: Male Female

Sexual Orientation: Gay Bisexual Straight

Age (as of today): _____

Educational Level: High School
 Some College
 Associate's Degree
 Bachelor's Degree
 Graduate level (MA/PhD)

Race/Ethnicity: Caucasian African American Hispanic/Latino
 Pacific Islander Asian Native American Prefer not to say

Relationship Status: Single In a Committed Relationship
 In an Open Relationship

Figure 1: Demographics form all participants completed

To begin the study, the subjects were asked six open-ended questions. They were told to be as forthcoming and open as they wished to provide a better understanding of attraction. The six questions were as follows:

1. Describe, from the head down, what your ideal partner's physical characteristics would be.
2. What body shape is most appealing to you? Using typical "gay terms" such as: twink, bear, jock, etc.
3. What age range would you consider for a possible partner?
4. When reflecting on a past or possible partner, what is your favorite physical characteristic?
5. In terms of a partner's height as compared to yours, what is the ideal height? (Taller? Shorter? Same height?)
6. What are unacceptable physical characteristics for possible partners [to have]?

Subjects were free to share as much as they felt comfortable, and various questions arose when going through the interview. Some specific items within those discussions pertained to: genital size, tattoos/piercings, facial hair, and physical abnormalities/disabilities.

After the subjects were finished answering questions, they were asked to complete a second part of the interview. Participants were shown six photographs of well-known celebrities, three of which identify as heterosexual and three of which identify as homosexual [Figure 2]. The celebrities (in order of numbered photographs) were:

1. Channing Tatum
2. Ryan Gosling
3. Neil Patrick Harris
4. Jesse Tyler Ferguson
5. Zac Efron
6. Matt Bomer

Subjects were asked to arrange the photos in order of most attractive to least attractive, and be able to explain why they arranged them in such an order. After the subjects explained why they selected the order of men that they did, it was revealed to them which celebrities identify as heterosexual and homosexual. This portion sought to have the subjects use and explain their preferences further by providing real-life examples of men that could be clearly rated and allow for a selection of attractive features.

**All celebrities were selected at random, but based on popular culture and the likelihood of participants' knowledge of the celebrities. However, these celebrities could easily be changed for other studies while maintaining the basic premise of attraction and selection.*



Figure 2: Photos 1-3 on top, and 4-6 on bottom (as numbered during interviews)

RESULTS

All subjects were very forthcoming with information, and provided many detailed, thorough responses. While many answers were varied due to personal opinion, several themes were common amongst all participants. Taking the most common answers and comparing them could construct an “ideal man.” The male would be between 5’10” and 6’4”. He would have short to medium length blonde or brown hair. His eyes would be a bright blue or green. He would have a strong, sharp jaw line, and short stubble. His smile, though not necessarily perfect, would have to be clean and well cared for. His body structure would be an athletic one, with strong/toned arms, pectoral muscles, and abdominal muscles. His genitals would be an average size (5-8”), and pubic hair would be groomed and cared for. As for the buttocks, they would be

toned and athletic. When it comes to body hair, the male would have a small to medium amount of hair on his body. However, the man would not have any back hair. He would maintain a groomed appearance of his body hair. The male would have no piercings or simple ear piercings. As for tattoos, the same applies: no tattoos or one to two smaller, meaningful tattoos. He would have a natural tan to him; not too dark, not pale, and certainly not a tanning bed tan. To complete the “ideal” man, he would be between the ages of 20-28. He would appear very masculine and have a confident look (whether or not that confidence was real).

**The above constructed male mixes together the most common answers, however, there were varying preferences in several areas. Answers had to be found in 3/5 of participants to be included in the construction of the “ideal man.”*

It became apparent through the interviews that many themes were very important in the gay community when it comes to physical attraction. Possibly the most heavily stressed factor was the appearance of masculinity. What subjects defined as masculine tended to include phrases such as: “strong jaw line,” “athletic build,” and “tall frame.”

When it came to the pictures, four out of the five participants selected photograph #1 (Channing Tatum) as their number one choice. Many of the participants who selected photo #1 as their top choice expressed his jaw line as the reason why they were instantly drawn to the individual. They also (from outside knowledge) stated that the figure’s body shape was an ideal one: an athletic build that is not completely “ripped” or “toned” but is obviously in shape and strong. The word “masculine” consistently arose when discussing the photograph. Participants were attracted to the apparent masculinity/manliness that Channing Tatum seems to have, not only in the photo but in real life as well.

Three out of five of the participants selected photograph #6 (Matt Bomer) as their second most attractive. Again, when asked why, participants responded with a strong jaw line and apparent masculinity as the top reasons. Along with the strong jaw line, subjects were very intrigued and attracted to the individual’s “piercing” blue eyes. The participants also noted that the subtle stubble was an attractive feature, showing that the celebrity was (once again) a masculine man who looks handsome with facial hair.

The other common rating came with photograph #4 (Jesse Tyler Ferguson). Three out of five of the participants placed this celebrity in last place. When asked why, many subjects expressed the red hair as a main factor. While several of the subjects had mentioned finding red heads “intriguing” or “attractive,” they did not find this particular red head attractive. It also was mentioned that the individual’s facial structure was too round, indicating more feminine features. The subjects had consistently stated a desire for masculine, strong features, so an individual with a rounder, softer face was not as desirable as the more masculine celebrities. Age was also a concern here, as subjects agreed that Jesse Tyler Ferguson appears to “show his age.” While Mr. Ferguson is only a few years older than Channing Tatum and Matt Bomer, this slight visual difference in age weighed on his placement amongst the celebrities.

DISCUSSION

When reviewing the results, many of the answers reflected previous research. The homosexual males interviewed in this research expressed desire for a partner with an athletic/larger build. More than one-half drew attention to the fact that arm, chest, and abdominal muscles were attractive features on a potential partner. This reiterates Swami & Tovee's (2008) notion that gay males prefer muscularity to any other body shape. It also leaned toward the "mesomorphic" or V-shaped body ideal that Petrie et al. (1996) expressed was present in societal influences. It was also discussed that a partner should care for his health, i.e. not be too skinny yet not obese either. An interesting component that arose when answering questions was the participants' ability to easily describe how an ideal torso would appear. However, when asked to elaborate on the legs and buttocks, many participants could only say "I don't know..." or "Just toned/athletic." This ability to easily identify upper body preferences but struggle to identify lower body preferences also supports Swami & Tovee's (2008) research. From these answers, it can be derived that the construct stating, "Homosexual males will indicate a preference for physically fit/muscular men," is an accurate statement of physical attraction among young homosexual males.

In terms of the second construct, "Homosexual males will emphasize bodily features (torso, legs, genital region) as more important/attractive than facial features (eyes, smile, hair)," the results actually provided contrasting results. While participants did express descriptive preferences for bodily features and physiques, the subjects were more selective and thoughtful when choosing facial features they found most attractive in a potential partner. The most prominent results from the open-ended questions dealt with facial features. Participants consistently expressed desire for certain eye colors, a strong jaw line, and preferences in hairstyles, including facial hair. When arranging the photos in order of attractiveness, the photos were of the celebrity's face but participants also mentioned knowledge of physical shape. However, the strongest factors that weighed on attractiveness tended to be eyes, jaw line, and hair, all of which were declared as "masculine" and "strong" by subjects. These findings support the idea that homosexual men prefer masculinity even more than heterosexual women (Bailey, Kim, Hills, & Linsenmeier, 1997). From these findings, it is now suggested that the second construct is incorrect, and homosexual males are drawn to facial features more than bodily features.

The third and final construct stated that "homosexual males will not value the same features that heterosexual women would, given the freedom to construct an 'ideal partner' themselves." As previous research on heterosexual women has shown, women prefer a male body with a low body mass index, a broad chest, and a small waist (Maisey, Vale, Cornelissen, & Tovee, 1999). Women also respond best to faces with a high rating of masculinity (Cunningham, Barbee, & Pike, 1990). As a masculine face may indicate high levels of testosterone (Johnston, 2006) and testosterone leads to muscle growth (Bhasin, Woodhouse, & Storer, 2001), Hönekopp, Rudolph, Beier, Liebert, and Müller (2007) suggest that these preferences of masculine faces indicate a desire for physically fit/muscular men (Hönekopp,

Rudolph, Beier, Liebert, & Müller, 2007). When comparing these findings with the results from this study, there is almost a direct crossover in answers. The males in this study expressed identical responses, indicating that homosexual males actually do prefer the same ideals as heterosexual women. The prominence of masculine features and physical fitness as important attraction indicators for both sexual orientations disproves the original hypothesis. From this study, it is believed that homosexual males prefer similar features as heterosexual women when pursuing a potential male partner. These results show that the third hypothesis was incorrect.

Limitations

This study did include several limitations. Firstly, participants were only recruited using the University of Nebraska at Kearney email system and fliers hung around the campus. Conducted during summer months greatly reduced the available population for the study, as this study was conducted in person. Secondly, the photographs of celebrities used were simple Internet image search results that, according to the investigators, best showed similar areas of the faces. No body pictures were used, which could have altered results. And lastly, as this study was designed to be a base study for other research, the questions were very broad and open-ended. Such broad questions may have caused some participants to divulge only what they felt comfortable sharing to avoid embarrassment or shame. Future research is needed to further formulate theories on homosexual attraction. The next step in this research to further develop the scientific study of physical attraction among young homosexual males would be to construct a questionnaire for a larger scale survey that could be distributed and completed nationwide in order to examine a greater cross-section of regions, communities, populations, etc.

REFERENCES

- Bailey, J., Kim, P. Y., Hills, A., & Linsenmeier, J. W. (1997). Butch, femme, or straight acting? Partner preferences of gay men and lesbians. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *73*, 960-973.
- Bhasin, S., Woodhouse, L., & Storer, T. W. (2001). Hormones and sport. Proof of the effect of testosterone on skeletal muscle. *Journal of Endocrinology*, *170*, 27-38.
- Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, western culture, and the body*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. (1993). Sexual strategies theory: An evolutionary perspective on human mating. *Psychology Review*, *100*, 204-232.
- Cunningham, M. R., Barbee, A. P., & Pike, C. L. (1990). What do women want? Facialmetric assessment of multiple motives in the perception of male facial physical attractiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *59*, 61-72.
- Feingold, A. (1990). Gender differences in effect of physical attractiveness on romantic attraction: A comparison across five research paradigms. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *59*, 981-993.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. (1997). Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *21*, 173-206.
- Gettelman, T. E., & Thompson, J. K. (1993). Actual differences and stereotypical perceptions in body image and eating disturbance: A comparison of male and female heterosexual and homosexual samples. *Sex Roles*, *29*, 545-562.
- Hönekopp, J., Rudolph, U., Beier, L., Liebert, A., & Müller, C. (2007). Physical attractiveness of face and body as indicators of physical fitness in men. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, *28*, 106-111.
- Johnston, V. S. (2006). Mate choice decisions: The role of facial beauty. *Trends in Cognitive Science*, *10*, 9-13.
- Luciano, L. (2007). Muscularity and masculinity in America: A historical review. In J.K. Thompson & G. Cafri, (Eds), *The muscular ideal: Psychological, social and medical perspectives*. 265-294.
- Maisey, D. S., Vale, E. E., Cornelissen, P. L., & Tovee, M. J. (1999). Characteristics of male attractiveness for women. *The Lancet*, *353*, 1500.
- Petrie, T. A., Austin, L. J., Crowley, B. J., Helmcamp, A., Johnson, C. E., & Lester, R. (1996). Sociocultural expectations of attractiveness for males. *Sex Roles*, *35*, 581-602.
- Siever, M. D. (1994). Sexual orientation and gender as factors in socioculturally acquired vulnerability to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. *Journal of Counseling and Clinical Psychology*, *62*, 252-260.
- Silberstein, L. R., Mishkind, M. E., Striegel-Moore, R. H., Timko, C., & Rodin, J. (1989). Men and their bodies: A comparison of homosexual and heterosexual men. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, *51*, 337-346.
- Swami, V., & Tovee, M. J. (2008). The muscular male: A comparison of the physical attractiveness preferences of gay and heterosexual men. *International Journal of Men's Health*, *7*(1), 59-71.
- Varangis, E., Lanzieri, N., Hildebrandt, T., & Feldman, M. (2012). Gay male attraction toward muscular men: Does mating context matter? *Body Image*, *9*, 270-278.