



# Have a Woman's Heart but a Man's Face: Perceptions of Gay Relationships in Greek Gay Men

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## Abstract

In this qualitative study, we build upon the findings of previous research by investigating the perceptions and attitudes of 10 self-identified gay men in Greece, toward gay relationships, the influence of Greek society upon them, masculinity, partner preferences, and self-disclosure. A critical thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed that most participants held negative views regarding same-sex relationships among gay men possibly due to internalizing the homonegativity of Greek society which was consistently acknowledged. They further expressed preference for masculine partners and tended to avoid feminine gay men, preferring to befriend them rather than pursue a romantic relationship with them. Although many participants described masculine gay men as reserved, distant, and emotionally restricted, they still preferred them as partners. Furthermore, most participants expressed negative opinions about self-disclosure, possibly due to the identity confusion caused by the rejection for their sexual orientation Greek social environment. Similarly, when it came to LGBTIQ+ rights activism, participants were opposed, contending that it caused more confusion and discord within the younger generation of gays rather than fostered positive change. This research makes a unique contribution by presenting a realistic account of gay men's contradicting views of their selfhood, a disbelief in gay relationships, an outright preference for masculinity in partnerships, a disdain for gay rights activism, and fear of self-disclosure. These perceptions and attitudes appear to be due to the long history of societal marginalization and rejection and may be subject to change as Greece moves toward a more accepting environment for LGBTIQ+ rights.

**Keywords** Perceptions · Gay relationships · Masculinity ideology · Critical thematic analysis · Greek gay men

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## Introduction

The rapid societal changes that have occurred since the mid-twentieth and into the twenty-first century have significantly altered the roles traditionally associated with males and females, particularly in Western societies. As far back as the 1980s, Rossi (1988) proposed that society should redefine what is considered masculine and feminine for both men and women to encourage the development of positive gender traits while extending and modifying the traditional—often restrictive—gender roles (Stewart et al., 2021). However, it is worth noting that even though straight men may appear to adhere more rigidly to traditional male gender roles (O’Neil, 2015), gay men are also often subject to expectations related to such roles, especially in south-eastern Europe (Ateljevic & Hall, 2007).

Historically, it has been hypothesized that the two distinct socialized gender roles of male and female could be justified from an evolutionary perspective, particularly in the context of traditional heterosexual relationships (Hawkins, 1992). In the past, men’s and women’s personalities, interpersonal skills, and family roles were seen as complementary to each other (Buss & Schmitt, 2011; Zhu & Chang, 2019). However, even today, the subjective perception of deviating from the traditional male gender role may have a detrimental effect on men’s relationship satisfaction and quality for both heterosexual (Vink et al., 2023) and gay relationships (Daoutzis & Kordoutis, 2023a).

Most features related to masculinity and femininity are socially constructed, attributed to each gender by dominant social groups (Connell, 2005), and influenced by historical and social contexts (Wicker & Cunningham, 2023). While there may be biological factors that contribute to the development of masculinity and femininity in children, the social environment is the primary influence (Leszczynski & Strough, 2008). Gender role socialization begins even before childhood. Boys and girls grow up in a predetermined gendered social environment that dictates, formulates, and rewards behaviors and perceptions categorized under the male and female label (Martin & Ruble, 2010). For boys, competition and success in sports are highly praised and rewarded; when boys voice their emotions, they are often faced with criticism (Eccles et al., 2000). This highly rigid process of gender role socialization confines young boys and men to the development and expression of a limited set of behaviors distinct from those associated with women, resulting, in the long run, in the formation of masculinity ideology (Thompson & Bennett, 2017).

Masculinity ideology refers to the importance of men’s adherence to these socially and culturally defined patterns of male behavior. Men are expected to accept and internalize the male gender value system, which constitutes the essence of traditional masculinity (Pleck, 1995). David et al., (1976) proposed that masculinity ideology is primarily based on four patterns, confirmed by current research (Logoz et al., 2023): men should (a) command respect and admiration, (b) avoid being perceived as feminine, (c) refrain from expressing fear, and (d) exhibit adventurous and risky behaviors. These traditional ideals about masculinity continue to strongly influence contemporary society, giving rise to

psychosocial phenomena such as gender role conflict (GRC) (O’Neil, 2015). Men in general who exhibit GRC tend to conform to rigid male gender roles lest they appear feminine. Furthermore, the existing literature provides support for an indirect association between subjective deviance from traditional male gender roles and negative consequences in men’s close relationships. More specifically, GRC has been found to predict psychological well-being, relationship satisfaction (Pourshahbaz, 2020; Rochlen & Mahalik, 2004), and overall interpersonal functioning (Breiding et al., 2008). It also correlates with self-esteem (Mahalik et al., 2001), personality (Schwartz et al., 2004), coping and problem-solving strategies (Szymanski & Carr, 2008), body image, and muscularity (Gattario et al., 2015; Hobza & Rochlen, 2009; Manley et al., 2007; McCreary et al., 2005; Mejias, 2010; Murray & Lewis, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2010; Shepherd & Rickard, 2012; Schwartz & Tylka, 2008). Conclusively, excessive fear of not conforming to traditional masculinity ideals, leading to GRC, may compel straight and gay men to conform to and emphasize traditional masculinity behavioral patterns. Hence, their expectations about romantic relationships, their self-presentation, and the characteristics of their desirable partner are influenced accordingly.

Relevant literature illustrates how masculinity ideology and minority stress impact specifically gay men in their interpersonal relationships. Levels of intimacy and tenderness in gay relationships are negatively influenced by sexual orientation, as gay people often voice discontentment with deviations from traditional norms (Formby, 2022; Lu et al., 2019). The need to conform to traditional masculinity ideals while also desiring warm and intimate relationships can lead to straining and stressful situations, such as GRC (Cole et al., 2019). Sánchez and his colleagues (2010) have demonstrated that on average, gay men wish to embody and present themselves as masculine even though they harbor negative sentiments about their homosexual identity. In the same study, nearly one-fifth of the participants expressed concerns about their masculine appearance in public.

In addition to formal studies, personal ads posted online or elsewhere seeking casual sexual or romantic partners tend to uphold the “masculine ideals” of gay men (Gerrard et al., 2023; Phua, 2002; Sánchez et al., 2009a, 2009b). Many of these ads prioritize a “masculine” appearance, including characteristics such as a well-toned physique and facial and body hair. Interests like sports or going to the gym are also commonly highlighted, both by gay men placing the ads and their potential partners. This reflects the influence of masculinity ideology, often referred to as “exclusive masculinity” (Wellard, 2002). The preference for masculine attributes can even impact the sexual practices of gay men, leading to riskier behaviors such as chemsex, i.e., the voluntary use of drugs during sexual intercourse (Javaid, 2018) and unprotected anal intercourse (Halkitis et al., 2004). In contrast, personal ads that refer to behaviors and interests associated with femininity are generally considered unattractive (Clarkson, 2007; Gerrard et al., 2023). Consequently, it appears that masculinity ideology significantly shapes both gay men’s self-perception and their preferences for potential partners.

On the other hand, it appears that, generally speaking, traditional femininity plays a crucial role in marital and relationship satisfaction. In recent studies (Azmoode et al., 2016; Ta, 2017; Wood et al., 2015) investigating relationship satisfaction in

straight married couples, it was found that behaviors traditionally defined as feminine were associated with higher levels of satisfaction, as opposed to masculine behaviors. Couples in which both partners scored high in femininity characteristics reported higher satisfaction, in contrast to couples where even one partner scored low in femininity. These studies also revealed that masculinity and femininity are not necessarily complementary in partner selection and relationship satisfaction. Couples in which one or both partners exhibited characteristics of femininity or androgyny, i.e., having both positive masculine and feminine qualities in one's self-concept (Korlat et al., 2022), reported higher relationship quality, while couples in which one or both partners displayed typical masculine behaviors or exhibited no gender-specific (undifferentiated) behaviors had the lowest satisfaction levels. These findings were also supported in same-sex relationships, suggesting that masculinity, in contrast to femininity, tends to result in decreased relationship satisfaction (Daoultzis & Kordoutis, 2023b).

Gay men who grapple with masculinity ideology often hesitate to come out to avoid discrimination and harassment (Mishna et al., 2008). Anderson (2011), in his study on openly gay athletes, found that only a few were open about their sexual orientation. Connell (1992), after analyzing the life stories of Australian gay men, concluded that masculinity plays a significant role in shaping the personalities of gay men. Akin to male-dominated sports, in modern societies where masculinity ideology still holds sway for men, regardless of their sexual orientation, effeminate behaviors run counter to traditional masculinity and, as a result, are often met with cruel responses such as bullying (Daley et al., 2007).

## The Current Study

In line with the intersectionality theory (Bauer et al., 2021), individuals' experiences are shaped by the intersection of multiple social identities, including sexual orientation, cultural background, and gender identity. By focusing on Greek gay men, this study acknowledges the complex interplay between cultural norms, masculinity constructs, and relationship dynamics within a specific cultural context. Additionally, it draws on social constructionist perspectives, which emphasize the role of culture and society in shaping individuals' understandings of gender, sexuality, and intimate relationships. Through this qualitative inquiry, we tend to uncover the nuanced meanings and interpretations that Greek gay men ascribe to masculinity, relationship quality, and partner ideals, providing deeper insights into the social construction of these concepts within this cultural context, which is considered rather conservative and nationalist, governed by the influence of the Greek Orthodox Christian Church (Mavrogordatos, 2003).

In this study, we build upon previous research by examining the attitudes toward relationship quality, masculinity, and partner ideals among Greek gay men. We also assess their relationship satisfaction through semi-structured interviews. Based on the relevant literature, gay men are expected to demonstrate a preference for masculine behaviors in both their own self-presentation and their potential partners' behavior. They will also be likely to report low relationship

satisfaction and eschew coming out, influenced by societal beliefs about traditional masculinity and the non-feasibility of romantic relationships among men in Greece. Hence, the research questions were as follows:

- RQ1: How do masculinity ideology and Greek society shape gay men's perception of their intimate relationships and partner ideals?
- RQ2: In what way does Greek society influence self-perception of being gay and the coming out processes?

## Method

### Participants

Ten participants, self-identified as gay, were recruited by snowball sampling (see “[Procedure](#)”). This sample is considered adequate for saturation in qualitative research ( $\geq 9$  interviews; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Average participants' age was 37.90 (SD = 12.93, range 26 to 59) years old. Inclusion criteria for participation were as follows: (i) participants had to be at least 18 years old, (ii) men and (iii) gay by self-identification, (iv) permanent residents of Greece, and (v) either currently in a relationship or having had a terminated relationships within the past 12 months. Most participants (6 out of 10) referred to a terminated relationship at the time of their participation in the study. Half of the participants held a Bachelor's degree, two had a Master's degree, one had a Ph.D., and two were undergraduate students. Mean relationship duration was 71.90 (SD = 92.45) months and most of the participants identified their partner as a gay, two as a bisexual, and one as a straight man.

### Interview Questions

The interview commenced with basic demographic and relationship questions, such as gender, age, education, residence, relationship status, and duration. A set of seven open-ended interview questions followed to elicit responses to RQ1 and RQ2. These seven questions were designed partly based on Sánchez et al., (2009a, 2009b). Participants were asked how they would describe (1) gay men's relationships and (2) a masculine and a feminine gay man. They were also asked (3) whether they consider a masculine or a feminine gay man attractive, (4) to what extent the self-image of gay men is influenced by Greek society's perception of male gender roles, (5) whether Greek society's perception of male gender roles affects gay men's romantic relationships, and (6) to what extent the acceptance of homosexual identity affects gay men's relationships. Lastly, participants were asked (7) whether they think that coming out as a gay man affects their same-sex romantic relationships. All participants answered all seven questions.

## Procedure

Snowball sampling was used for this study. A call for participant recruitment was disseminated on the University's Moodle platform. Participants indicated their willingness to participate by contacting the researchers via email. Subsequently, a date convenient for the participant was arranged. Face-to-face, one-to-one interviews, lasting approximately 45 min, were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, from February to March 2022. All interviews took place at the University's Psychology lab. Most of the participants offered perspectives from their own life experiences. Interviews were conducted and analyzed in a recursive process, and informants were asked to comment on emerging themes (Willig, 2013). All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymized, and certain demographic details were redacted to protect participants' anonymity. Data were analyzed using critical thematic analysis.

## Critical Thematic Analysis

Critical thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019) was used to analyze participants' interviews. This method is an extension of Owen's (1984) thematic analysis, and it is divided into two stages: in open coding, participants' narrative segments that have a cohesive meaning are considered, based on their recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness, forming codes, categories, and themes according to thematic analysis; in closed coding, the prominence of ideologies, power relations, and status-based hierarchies is considered. As expected, in closed coding, the prominent ideology that emerged from participants' interviews was fear of femininity, masculinity ideology, and intolerance to LGBTIQ+ identities in Greek society.

## Ethics

The researchers made sure the study followed ethical guidelines. A committee at the University reviewed and approved the study. All participants signed a consent form explaining their rights and that they could withdraw at any moment. The participants consented to the recording of interviews, which were subsequently anonymized and transcribed. These recordings were stored securely on a password-protected computer.

## Analysis

First, we applied the open-coding procedure on the linguistic material yielded during the interviews. We identified responses which were frequently repeated, recurred in different forms, and/or were verbally and contextually emphasized. We then organized these responses in the following basic themes: (1) quality and dynamics of gay relationships which included negative emotions and discourse describing

them as unrealistic, unfeasible, and interpersonally maladjusted; (2) masculinity ideology and fear of femininity, which referred to concerns about own masculinity, the outright preference for masculine looking partners, the avoidance of feminine looking ones, and the ideal characteristics in a partner; (3) influence of Greek society on LGBTIQ+ that emphasized the hostility of the heterosexual majority toward LGBTIQ+ people and the unacceptable social status of gay relationships; and (4) self-disclosure which referred to the fear and other mixed feelings about coming out as well as the personal and social consequences of disclosing own gay identity. See Graph 1 for details on how we identified main codes, categories, and themes during the first stage of analysis (open coding).

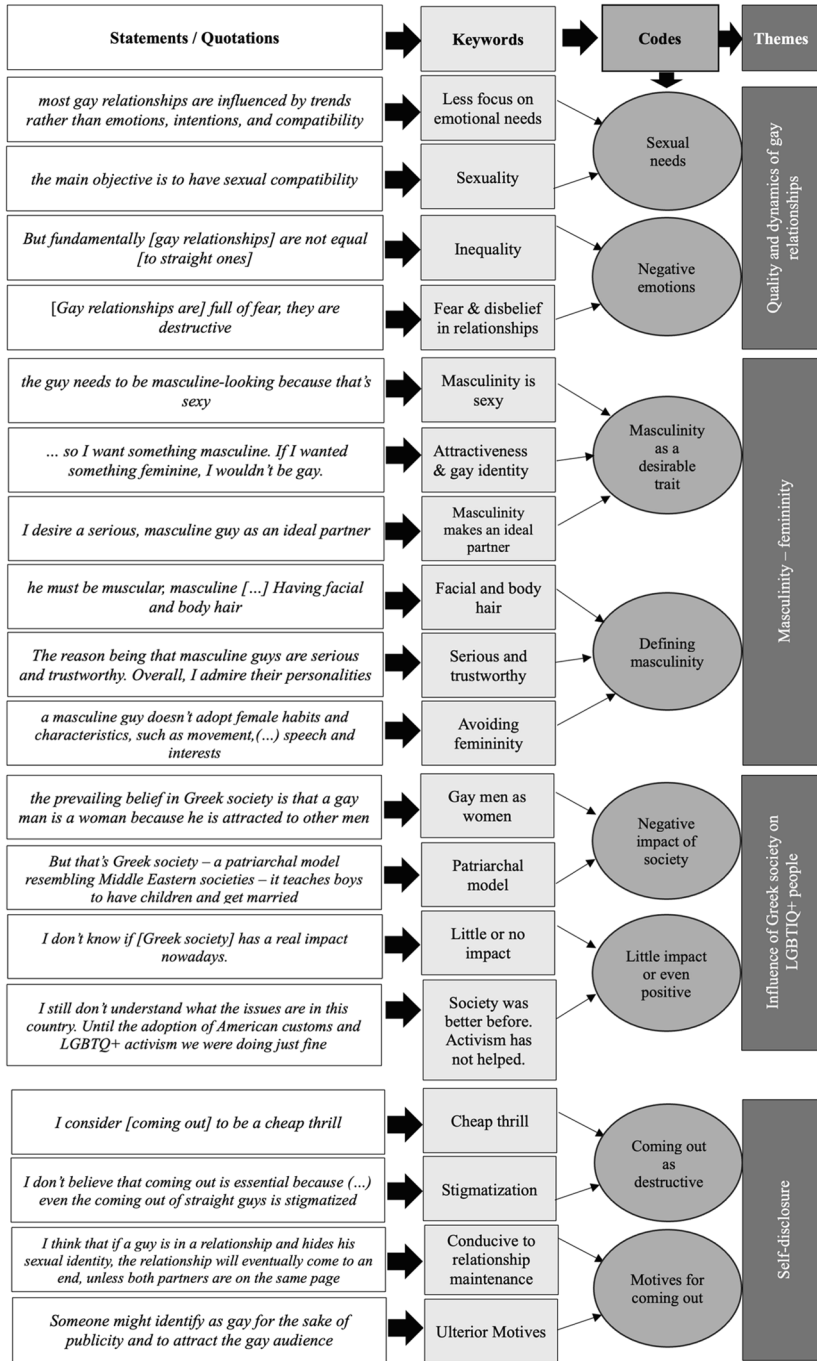
Applying closed coding on the above four semantic themes, we came up with conceptual communalities or commonly repeated themes such as references to ideologies, positions of power, or status hierarchies: “Masculinity ideology and fear of femininity,” “Internalized homonegativity and heterosexism,” and “Stigmatization reflecting intolerance of LGBTIQ+ identities in Greek society.” These conceptual communalities (closed coding) that run through all the above four semantic categories are presented in Table 1 along with the basic themes (open coding).

### **Basic Semantic Category 1: Quality and Dynamics of Gay Relationships**

Out of the ten participants, the majority (7 out of 10) characterized gay relationships as challenging, complex, and, in some cases, destructive. Two participants, however, described them as normal and even liberating, while one participant maintained a neutral attitude, not clearly expressing his stance. He stated: “I believe that you can find relationships that vary from very intimate to more casual and relaxed ones. Some are built on deep emotions and mutual communication – and are considered serious—while others can be quite superficial.”

Among the seven participants with negative opinions about gay relationships, most (4 out of 7) drew from personal life incidents to support their views. Notably, four of these seven participants had never been in a gay relationship. The remaining three participants had varying levels of experience, with one maintaining a long-term relationship of 11 years, another a 3-year relationship, and the third having limited experience as a gay man. The participant with the longest relationship remarked, “How can you be deeply committed to someone when you are 20? Or 25? Or even 30? Age plays a crucial role in forming relationships. But, in general, I would say that most relationships are influenced by trends rather than emotions, intentions, and compatibility. It’s just a matter of following a trend.”

Three participants expressed positive opinions about gay relationships, equating them to heterosexual relationships. However, two out of these three pointed out the lack of freedom for public expression in gay relationships. The second participant initially described gay relationships as equal to heterosexual ones but later clarified: “But fundamentally [gay relationships] are not equal [to straight ones]. When the majority considers your actions abnormal and criticizes you, it can’t be equal. We can’t have children; these are not typical things – the kind of opinions we hear all the time. Gays themselves evidently view their relationships as inferior; otherwise,



**Graph 1** Thematic approach (open coding phase) used in this study



**Table 1** The two-step coding process of the present study

Coding phase	Open coding: basic themes	Closed coding: conceptual communalities
Findings/interpretation	<p data-bbox="562 878 579 1395">What was repeated, recurrent, and forceful in the interviews?</p> <ol data-bbox="589 1012 683 1395" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="589 1012 606 1395">1. Quality and dynamics of gay relationships</li> <li data-bbox="612 1171 630 1395">2. Masculinity–femininity</li> <li data-bbox="636 959 653 1395">3. Influence of Greek society on LGBTIQ + people</li> <li data-bbox="659 1241 677 1395">4. Self-disclosure</li> </ol>	<p data-bbox="562 234 606 857">What ideologies, positions of power, or status hierarchies were recurring, repeated, and forceful?</p> <ul data-bbox="612 181 683 857" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="612 465 630 857">● Fear of femininity and masculinity ideology</li> <li data-bbox="636 483 653 857">● Internalized homonegativity/heterosexism</li> <li data-bbox="659 181 677 857">● Stigmatization reflecting intolerance of LGBTIQ + identities in Greek society</li> </ul>

we wouldn't have gay pride events and similar celebrations. We don't have the same rights as heterosexuals, so our relationships aren't equal either. This is not just my opinion; it's a commonly held belief – personally, I don't share that belief." In summary, while two participants expressed positive opinions about gay relationships, one participant's view became less positive over time.

Among the remaining seven participants, most held negative opinions, often raising concerns about self-acceptance and an excessive focus of relationships on fulfilling only sexual needs. Ultimately, participants described gay close relationships as a poor imitation of straight ones: "[Gay relationships are] full of fear, they are destructive, and they imitate straight relationships to a certain extent... All of this happens because [gay men] have not fully accepted themselves, and they are primarily concerned with satisfying their sexual needs. This relates to self-acceptance. [Gay and straight relationships] share some similarities, but gays are trying to mimic straights in an unconventional way. They aim to satisfy only their sexual needs, while neglecting the other, more critical needs—emotional, relational, and human—they don't even consider those. [Gay guys] are poor imitators."

Although none of the questions explicitly inquired about participants' partner ideals, many opinions regarding this were expressed throughout the interviews. These opinions were often identified through participants' views on gay relationships, their attitudes toward masculinity/femininity, or in cases where participants spontaneously mentioned their expectations from a potential partner. One participant made it explicitly clear: "I believe that the most important aspect of gay relationships is sex. Everything starts there, and then everything else follows. Instead of beginning with proper communication, shared interests, our potential partner's personality, or their way of thinking, the main objective is to have sexual compatibility. The ultimate goal is sex." Emotional connection and deep communication seem to be key aspects in many participants' ideal partners. One participant expressed it as, "Even if a person lives in the closet, everyone ultimately desires intimacy."

## **Basic Semantic Category 2: Masculinity Ideology and Fear of Femininity**

Masculinity ideology and fear of femininity were evident in participants' interviews. Through closed coding, it became apparent that all participants clearly expressed a preference for masculine men, while the fear of avoiding anything feminine was prominent. One participant's response explicitly illustrates this: "I don't like a feminine guy. Of course, I wouldn't want to have any kind of sexual relationship with him. I wouldn't mind being friends because friendship involves different factors. Friendship is about the mind. But concerning sex, I'm certain; the guy needs to be masculine-looking because that's sexy." This participant distinctly separated sex from friendship, associating masculinity with the former and femininity with the latter. In further support of this, another participant stated, "I'm definitely more attracted to masculine guys. As for the reason... Look, because I think when you're in the phase of admitting you're gay, you can still behave like the alpha males we see in natural settings... Even though they are brutal and not very intelligent..."

Of particular note is the analogy provided by the same participant, comparing masculinity to a disease: “Think of certain diseases—such as thalassemia; 100 different people will have 100 different mutations and will likely exhibit 100 different phenotypes, which is the manifestation of the disease: one can have all the symptoms, while another has no symptoms... so it is with masculinity in gay men.”

Participants also defined masculinity primarily based on appearance and contrasting it to their perception of femininity. One participant stated, “How would I describe one [masculine guy]? Based on clichés: he must be muscular, masculine (pause), and he must take care of his appearance, but not too much, as he might be seen as feminine. This goes beyond just appearance... Shaping his eyebrows, wearing makeup, and painting his nails—why? I saw someone painting their nails and getting a manicure. I don’t consider these behaviours masculine. Or walking like female models or swaying their hips and waist all the time. Not being like Britney Spears. Having facial and body hair—this is what it is nowadays.”

Internalized homonegativity/heterosexism was manifested when comparing gay to straight men: “A masculine gay man is like a ‘normal’ straight man. A man who doesn’t lose his true nature and doesn’t adopt female habits and characteristics, such as movement, speech, habits, and interests... not imitating feminine behaviours.” Another participant stated, “A masculine gay guy imitates a masculine straight guy – straight men serve as role models... they watch football matches, speak using slang, swear, hide their emotions, and don’t disclose... In contrast, the effeminate guys talk about themselves, are interested in music, focus on fashion, have many female friends – all of these reflect a female psyche.”

However, despite the expressed need for intimacy and profound relationships, mentioned in the previous semantic category, participants still desire relationships with specific types of gay men, confirming the significant influence of masculinity ideology on their attitudes. One participant remarked, “If you delve deeper, ultimately, you want someone who resembles you. Everyone does that. I may think I’m a masculine guy, or perhaps I’m not. But as I envision it, I want a man who is like me – meaning, almost exclusively masculine. Now, beyond that, this may sound biased, but for me, it’s true: ‘I’m a gay man attracted to men – men’s attitudes, men’s hormones, and so on, so I want something masculine. If I wanted something feminine, I wouldn’t be gay.’”

For other participants, an ideal partner’s masculinity seems to be a key indicator of their reliability as partners: “I would definitely choose a masculine guy [as a partner]. Absolutely. The reason being that masculine guys are serious and trustworthy. Overall, I admire their personalities.” Another participant mentioned that masculine men have a limited range of behaviors, even though they are more desirable: “So far, my choices in sexual partners have been people who exhibited more ‘masculine’ behaviours... even though they lacked emotional expressiveness.” In a similar way, another participant, while describing masculinity, mentioned that “masculine guys are inexpressive and distant,” yet expressed a need for emotional connection: “[Desiring a masculine guy] is a matter of attraction. Based on physical appearance, I still prefer masculine guys. Although it may sound stereotypical, I would choose them nonetheless... But again, masculinity is a matter of perspective. Alongside this axis of masculinity and femininity, communication in a relationship is also crucial,

as well as the partner's behaviour. He must also be emotional and communicative. Some of these traits are perceived as more masculine, while others are seen as more feminine. I don't know whether I would choose one over the other. I would say the ideal partner lies somewhere in between." Finally, even though masculine guys are often seen as more focused on sex or are treated as sexual objects, they are still preferred as potential partners: "Sexual attraction is important, but there comes an age when the need for a serious relationship arises. I hope this applies to most gay people – it's certainly true for me. I desire a serious, masculine guy as an ideal partner."

### **Basic Semantic Category 3: Influence of Greek Society on LGBTIQ+ People**

Controversial answers regarding partner ideals appear to be linked to participants' unfettered fear of anything considered feminine. This association may be dictated by masculinity ideology and the intolerance of LGBTIQ+ identities in Greek society. Most participants feared and eschewed the social visibility of LGBTIQ+ identities. Half of the participants also believed that Greek society significantly influenced self-acceptance of gay individuals, as apparent in excerpts like the following: "Greek society holds the opinion that gay men are –I'll use the term– sissies, men who behave like women, women who aim to seduce other men into becoming gay. Society believes that all gay men are engaged in the arts or work in television... and I believe that gay individuals are greatly affected [by these beliefs] ... In essence, the prevailing belief in Greek society is that a gay man is a woman because he is attracted to other men."

Another participant explicitly mentioned family as one of the foremost and most potent socialization factors in a gay man's life: "How many fathers are ashamed of their children? Or how many of them try to conceal the fact that their son, at over 30, has no relationship with a woman? So, gay men in a typical Greek family feel oppressed. Because, in many cases (e.g., family gatherings), a man cannot openly express himself and, ultimately, he restrains himself... But that's Greek society – a patriarchal model resembling Middle Eastern societies – it teaches boys to have children and get married. That's the ideal scenario for all parents."

Participants also indicated that Greek society affects gay men's interpersonal relationships through stigmatization and self-stigmatization. Albeit it is argued that the impact of Greek society is stronger on self-acceptance rather than on interpersonal relationships: "[Gay relationships] are similar to what used to be practised in the US Army: 'Don't ask, don't tell.' Because [gay men] fear disrespectful comments, that is being labelled as feminine, and other types of harassment... nevertheless, I believe this negative societal attitude only exists in the minds of gay individuals. They are somewhat excessive about it. Yes, there are still people who mock and make negative comments... but, in the end, most people say: 'So what?'" In line with this, another participant added: "You see, because I'm part of a small, close-knit community, I think [gay relationships] are quite influenced... Look, Greek society, now, imitating Western societies, wants men to be metrosexual; from this perspective, both straight and gay men are influenced, perhaps in different ways. Society leaves no one untouched." This participant, even though self-identifying as

gay, seemed to separate himself from the rest of the LGBTIQ+ community, using his personal experience about how one's personal social network protects him from being exposed to people that disapprove of gay identity. This, so to speak, protection by one's network requires that the gay person does not openly violate general societal norms; he stated: "Look, there are some individuals who are generally excessively provocative, whether heterosexual or homosexual, who... have this way of life. If you select the people you associate with and thus delimit your social life to those who silently accept you, then you no longer have a problem in today's Greece. Unless you live in a very small village, where you might encounter problems."

On the other hand, some participants reported that the influence of Greek society has diminished: "I don't know if [Greek society] has a real impact nowadays. Maybe in past decades, but now, everyone does as they please. We live in a free society, more liberal than ever. You see young men behaving as they wish, dressing as they like, and socializing with whomever they prefer, without being significantly affected by others' opinions." Others believe that societal impact is completely absent: "I think it depends on the couple [of gay men] – what kind of people they are – whether they allow society to influence their relationship. But I believe that society's impact on gay relationships is also tied to comparisons with straight couples."

Lastly, one participant was pleased with the traditional norms of Greek society and against efforts to claim LGBTIQ+ rights, possibly illustrating a high level of internalized homonegativity/heterosexism: "I still don't understand what the issues are in this country. Until the adoption of American customs and LGBTQ+ activism, we were doing just fine. Before all this gay nonsense, these trends from Western societies, we had a great time in this country. Younger individuals don't know what they've missed. They no longer live in hypocrisy, or so they say. The foolishness and confusion of young gay people began – their eyes filled with confusion and melancholy – as soon as they started supposedly fighting for their legal rights and freedom. This is so fake, so wrong... What was initially promoted as gay freedom turned into a form of slavery. I wonder if young people understand that. They are completely enslaved. They follow foreign role models, fashion, and behaviour – so-called 'gay behaviour'. We've become obsessed with labelling: I have to go to the gay bar, the gay beach, the gay shop, socialize with gay people... and I have to say that this 'gay' labelling irks me so much and I find it so offensive to any human being. I wouldn't want to be gay; I don't identify as gay... That doesn't necessarily mean that I'm a happy person. It's just a label for sissies."

#### **Basic Semantic Category 4: Self-Disclosure**

Internal homonegativity might be also reflected in participants' views regarding coming out. Most participants disagreed with coming out and some preferred passive disclosure. Only one participant came out to his family but regretted it: "In my case... (laughs). I would say no [to coming out]. If I could turn back time, I would have never mentioned it. I think I would have kept it to myself and let the mystery persist." One participant stated, "I consider [coming out] to be a cheap thrill, something imposed by the Americans. I don't think it helps anyone gain rights or

anything. You're not obligated to explicitly state what you are. You don't have to say exactly what you are—while still not hiding. Do 'regular' guys need to say, 'Hi, I'm straight?' I don't understand such statements; they're too authoritarian."

Although none but one participant had not actively come out, they did identify self-disclosure as a positive reinforcement of their gay identity, emphasizing the fact that one does not need to hide anymore. One participant described coming out either as a violation of privacy or a means for promoting self-interest: "I don't believe that coming out is essential because I think even the coming out of straight guys is stigmatized. There is massive discrimination observed in these cases. No one should come out, I have to say! Nobody truly cares! Coming out is so American at its core. It's like a keyhole in one's private life... I can also say that coming out depends on one's profession. Someone might identify as gay for the sake of publicity and to attract the gay audience. For example, a singer might have a reason to come out and exploit it to his advantage, but what about a plumber?"

Internal homonegativity and/or heterosexism were also manifested in stating that self-disclosure of one's gay identity is likely to affect the maintenance of gay relationships: "I think that if a guy is in a relationship and hides his sexual identity, the relationship will eventually come to an end, unless both partners are on the same page; if both are in the closet – both hiding their relationship – each projecting the image (long pause) of a straight guy, then the relationship can endure."

## Discussion

The present study aimed to expand upon previous research by examining participants' perceptions of quality and dynamics of gay relationships, their attitudes toward masculinity and femininity, their perceived influence of Greek society on gay relationships, and their views on self-disclosure.

### Quality and Dynamics of Gay Relationships

Results highlighted that most participants expressed negative views about romantic relationships between men, characterizing them as challenging, complex, and even destructive with primary focus on fulfilling sexual needs. Participants' negative views of gay men's romantic relationships can be attributed to internalized homonegativity, minority stress, and heterosexism.

The role of homonegativity is central to psychological well-being and satisfaction in gay relationships. Thies and his colleagues (2016) conducted bootstrap mediation analyses that demonstrated a direct association between internalized homonegativity and increased symptoms of anxiety and depression. Furthermore, internalized homonegativity was indirectly linked to lower relationship satisfaction and emotional closeness, as individuals with more depressive symptoms experienced reduced relational satisfaction, lower quality of communication between partners, and fewer shared activities. Frost and Meyer (2009) reported that these negative emotions arising from homonegativity (and directed at oneself due to sexual

orientation) lead individuals to avoid lasting and meaningful relationships with other LGBTIQ+ individuals and seek ways of sexual expression without emotional closeness. In this context, individuals may prefer effeminate gay men as friends rather than partners, because this kind of friendship provides them with more meaningful social support in coping with minority stress and in upholding their minority identity (Detrie & Lease, 2007; Gillespie et al., 2015; Ueno, 2005). In contrast, shared experiences and sexual activity with an effeminate partner function as constant reminders of one's sexual orientation and are consequently avoided. In this way, internalized homonegativity can lead to issues manifested as feelings of ambivalence, interpersonal conflicts, misunderstandings, and conflicting goals between partners (Mohr & Fassinger, 2006). All these factors may have contributed to negative opinions toward gay relationships and may have led to an overemphasis on relationships and contacts that satisfy almost exclusively sexual needs.

In fact, this overemphasis on the sexual aspects of relationship among gay men may be indirectly dictated by the Greek heterosexist environment, which encourages gay men, in general, toward sensation seeking and frequent partner changes. Gay men relegated by heterosexist norms to the margins of society, not allowed to maintain visible long-term relationships, are more likely to engage in the hedonistic pursuit of alternating sexual contacts and relationships and actually enjoy them. Research suggests that gay men have more lifetime sex partners than straight men (e.g., Howard & Perilloux, 2017) and report greater sexual and emotional satisfaction from casual sex compared to straight men and women (Mark et al., 2015). Such positive experiences with frequent casual encounters may enhance their desire for even more uncommitted sexual relationships. Additionally, research demonstrates that gay men scoring high on masculinity measures tend to have more positive attitudes toward casual sex compared to men with higher femininity scores or straight women (Waldis et al., 2021), resembling the attitudes of straight men toward casual sex. Therefore, masculinity, shaped by growing up in a heterosexist environment, seems to be closely associated with internalized homonegativity, influencing both relationship satisfaction and how gay men view and commit to relationships in general.

### **Masculinity Ideology and Fear of Femininity**

The critical thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that all participants demonstrated a preference for masculine partners and tended to avoid feminine ones. As one participant put it, "feminine [gay men] are preferable as friends rather than as sexual partners." Interestingly, even though many participants characterized masculine gay men as inexpressive, aloof, and restricted in emotional expression, they still indicated a preference for them both as partners in casual sex and in long-term relationships (Gerrard et al., 2023; O'Neil, 2015; Sánchez et al., 2009a, 2009b). This strong preference for masculine men and avoidance of feminine ones agrees with Sánchez et al., (2009a, 2009b) and O'Neil (2015). O'Neil in particular has emphasized that the intensity of such preference/avoidance is an indication on internal conflict between realizing own gay male identity and the desirable societal

male characteristics and role. It is worth noting that participants of our study did not recognize that they expressed conflicting beliefs and desires, even though such contradictions were obvious in their discourse. At the beginning of the interviews, they had all stated that they would have liked a “warm caring relationship,” that is, a relationship with a partner who is understanding and affectionate. Later, however, they also stated that would have liked to be almost exclusively in a relationship with masculine men (e.g., Lippa et al., 2005) previously described as distant and cold. This strong predilection for masculinity in a partner can be explained by masculinity ideology and a denigrated self-concept. Self-denigration is the outcome of self-stigma or the internalization of negative societal attitudes about one’s minority sexual orientation (Feinstein et al., 2012). According to Campbell (1990), self-concept represents a cognitive schema that organizes and processes information about the self; thus, a healthy self-concept requires addressing self-stigma to abate depressive symptoms and low self-esteem (Szymanski et al., 2008).

Participants’ preoccupation with masculine potential partners can be also seen in the way they presented themselves. This excessive focus might be linked to low self-esteem and a lack of clarity in their self-concept which leads to seeking someone who possesses a stable personality, sexuality, and, ultimately, a well-defined, according to social norms, sense of self. While sexual identity is multidimensional, fluid, and contextual (Larson, 2006), participants may lack coherence in the organization of the self or certain aspects of their sexual identity, a possible indication of identity confusion (Cass, 1979). Hence, they pursue a partner with a twofold objective: (a) he must be socially acceptable by standard gender norms, allowing further concealment of their sexual identity and the reduction of negative psychological and social consequences associated with their personal “questionable” masculinity, and (b) he must have a solid self-concept and predictable behavior. The idea of a stable self-concept and predictable behavior may serve not only as an advantageous quality in a relationship but also as a model for the participants to unconsciously emulate (Karremans & Verwijmeren, 2008; Maister & Tsakiris, 2016).

The above-described process connecting confused sexual identity, masculinity, and unclear self-concept can be viewed through the lens of sexual identity development as proposed by Cass (1979, 1984). The stages of gay identity development are associated with internalized heterosexism, especially at an early phase, when gay individuals may either have doubts about their sexual orientation or are aware of their orientation but still believe it is merely a part of their heterosexual identity (Herek, 2009; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002; Szymanski et al., 2008). We can identify this process in participants’ preference for masculine partners while they simultaneously express their avoidance for anything feminine. In other words, participants seem to attempt, precariously, to maintain own identity integrity by riding two boats, masculinity and femininity, admiring and emulating the first while rejecting the second. Indicative of the identity development process, described by Cass, is probably the avoidance and negation of coming out which suggests that they are not prepared to grapple with self-stigma as internalized homonegativity is still holding strong (Rowen & Malcolm, 2002). The transition from one stage to another is typically achieved through increasing self-acceptance while reducing internalized homonegativity (Camp et al., 2020; Troiden, 1988). Greene and Britton (2012) confirmed



that the average self-stigma decreases significantly as individuals progress from one stage to another. Therefore, it can be concluded that our participants experience an early and underdeveloped homosexual identity stage due to intense internalized homonegativity.

### **Influence of Greek Society on Gay Men**

Excerpts of participants interviews on the influence of Greek society on gay relationships highlight the hostility of the heterosexual majority toward LGBTIQ+ people and the unacceptable social status of gay relationships. Internalized homonegativity and minority stress have detrimental effects on gay men, who feel socially marginalized and must adapt to an unwelcoming social environment dominated by heterosexism (Meyer et al., 2008, 2013; for a more extensive review, see Meyer, 2003). In the heterosexist social environment, stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination against individuals with non-heterosexual sexual orientations are pervasive. Over time, individuals feel threatened and rejected and are led to conceal their sexual orientation to avoid social stigma. As a result, they internalize negative attitudes toward self (homonegativity; Frost & Meyer, 2009).

Indicative of internalized homonegativity are participants' views on the value of self-disclosure and gay rights. Nearly all participants were against advocating for gay rights and opposed to self-disclosure. This stance may be attributed to minority pressure and identity issues. Societal pressure, either blatant prejudice or subtle homonegativity, undermines the centrality of sexual orientation to the self (Shramko et al., 2018) and results in identity confusion, low self-acceptance, and an inability in drawing full benefit in associating with others (Cramer et al., 2018). Thus, internalized homonegativity discourages the development of gay men's sexual identity, possibly interfering with their overall self, and fosters negative attitudes toward coming out and gay rights advocacy.

Greek society and the Greek state per se have historically demonstrated intolerance to LGBTIQ+ civil and human rights (Giannou & Ioakimidis, 2019) and strong pressure to LGBTIQ+ individuals to comply by concealing their identity and living a marginalized life. In the 1980s, extensive reforms of the civil code in accordance with EU requirements provided equal rights to LGBTIQ+ individuals in the workplace, health and public services, and protection against hate speech and harassment. By 2015, the country legally recognized civil partnerships among gay people and recently (Greek Government, 2024) civil marriage and adoption rights. In 2017, legislation had already allowed transgender individuals to affirm their identified gender from the age of 15. Despite these developments that brought about a more positive climate for LGBTIQ+ rights in the Greek society, heteronormative attitudes and minority pressure to the LGBTIQ+ community are still present. Older people, gay or straight, and people living in rural areas where masculinity ideals, traditional family, and religious values prevail still have prejudice against LGBTIQ+ people or hold modern homonegative attitudes, i.e., a nuisance and negative feelings that this minority threatens to strip them of their societal "privileges". It will take time for the Greek society as a whole to fully embrace same-sex couples, married or not, and

for prejudice and homonegativity (including the internalized one by gay people) to be eliminated.

## Self-Disclosure

Participants expressed a range of emotions, including fear and uncertainty, about self-disclosure of sexual orientation or coming out and the potential personal and social consequences of revealing their gay identity. Some viewed coming out as a crucial factor for maintaining healthy relationships, while others struggled with negativity toward homosexuality. Only one participant was in favor of self-disclosure, while all others were not, characterizing coming out either as an unnecessary violation of privacy or as a tool for attracting the attention of target groups for professional reasons. It could be suggested that underlying this reasoning is the notion that coming out is a privilege for people that have already attained societal recognition and wealth. Finally, regarding various actions and events for LGBTIQ+rights (e.g., Pride) in Greece, participants believed that they are pointless societal interventions that did more harm than good, causing confusion to the younger generation of gay people and misleading them about LGBTIQ+ identity.

The reluctance to disclose one's sexual orientation, as seen among participants in this research, is another expression of homonegativity. Coming out as gay is a challenging and complex process that involves embracing a non-traditional sexual identity, restructuring one's self-concept, and navigating societal reactions (e.g., Ridge et al., 2006). This can lead to individuals hiding their true selves behind a "straight guy" facade, often harboring negative feelings about their own identity. Internalized homonegativity can significantly hinder not only the coming-out process but also the full realization of selfhood. Many who identify as gay often experience a series of stages (Cass, 1984), including (but not limited to) (a) initial awareness of being different, (b) a period of questioning and exploration, (c) feelings of inner conflict and confusion, and (d) ultimately, the establishment of a stable and accepted sexual minority identity. Lingering for a long time to a stage without the prospect of progressing to a full accepted self (stage d) can have a significant detrimental impact on romantic and other long-term relationships. It is very likely that our participants have been fixated to a stage dominated by feelings of internal conflict and confusion (stage c).

## Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This research was exploratory, and its conclusions should be interpreted cautiously. The face-to-face semi-structured interviews might have caused some participants to feel apprehensive due to the researcher's presence (Dennis, 2014; Friesen et al., 2020). Even after lengthy introductory discussions exceeding 20 min in some cases, discomfort might have persisted. Additionally, the qualitative approach could have introduced researcher bias in both sample selection and data interpretation (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010).

Additionally, the convenience sampling technique employed led to a sample predominantly composed of Caucasian, middle-class individuals over 35 years old. It should be noted, however, that these demographics may align with other studies involving gay men (e.g., Halkitis et al., 2004); future research investigating the impact of the identified phenomena (masculinity ideology, heterosexism/ homonegativity, and self-stigma) should utilize different sampling techniques, so that individuals under 30 could be also included. In addition, utilizing online platforms could offer a more diverse sample (Szymanski & Carr, 2008) and potentially alleviate participant anxiety associated with facing and responding to a researcher in vivo. Online responses could also potentially encourage more candid insights.

While this exploratory approach yielded intriguing themes, richer data might be gleaned from alternative research methods. For instance, one could employ more traditional qualitative approaches, like those utilized by Sánchez et al., (2009a, 2009b), or incorporate quantitative measures. Additionally, although the critical thematic analysis revealed interesting concepts pertinent to the adherence to traditional male gender roles, the theme of masculinity merits further exploration. Perhaps employing a cross-sectional comparison of participants of different generations could provide us with insights on the shift from traditional moralistic prejudice to modern homonegativity attitudes (Morrison et al., 2005) and internalized homonegativity in response to different time and social context. Although difficult to pursue, a longitudinal approach could also track how attitudes and perceptions toward gay relationships evolve over time. Furthermore, while participants primarily reported the negative impact of traditional masculinity and the analysis leaned on these findings, there might also be positive aspects of masculinity that benefit gay men and their intimate relationships, warranting exploration in future research. Finally, utilizing cross-cultural comparative analysis could provide a nuanced understanding of how culture influences perceptions and attitudes toward gay relationships.

## **Practical Implications and Conclusion**

Some of the practical implications include promoting self-reflection and personal growth. The study provided insights into how oppressive societal norms shape gay men's partner ideals and self-concept. Understanding the potential link between minority stress, self-stigma, confused self-concept, and the desire for masculine partners could inform the development of mental health interventions tailored to the specific needs of gay men struggling with these issues. Apart from that, the study could inform the creation of educational resources that raise awareness about the impact of oppressive societal norms on gay men's choices and overall well-being. This could benefit both gay men and the broader community by promoting understanding and inclusivity. At community and societal level, this study provided evidence to support efforts to challenge and dismantle oppressive norms surrounding masculinity and sexuality in Greek society. At the personal level, this could involve psychoeducational programs working with identity development and self-acceptance and at the community level, advocacy campaigns, educational initiatives, and policy changes. Lastly, the findings could improve the cultural competence of mental health

professionals working with LGBTIQ+ individuals in Greece, allowing them to better understand and address the specific challenges they face.

In conclusion, this qualitative study employed critical thematic analysis to delve into the attitudes and perspectives of Greek gay men; it provided valuable insights into the impact of masculinity ideology, heterosexism, and self-stigma on gay men's attitudes toward their own intimate relationships, relationship dynamics, partner preferences, self-disclosure, activism for their rights, and broader societal attitudes. Our findings unveiled a prevailing preference for masculine partner characteristics, negative opinions regarding gay relationships, a confused self-identity, dismissal of self-disclosure, and a general lack of support for LGBTIQ+ rights. This study not only contributes to the understanding of how self-stigma, heterosexism, and internalized homonegativity shape the perspectives of gay men but also underscores the complexity of homosexual identity development and adjustment in the context of Greek society.

Overall, this study sheds light, for the first time, on the challenges and nuances faced by Greek gay men in their pursuit of authentic relationships and equitable rights within the broader LGBTIQ+ community in the adverse context of the Greek society. Indeed, their perceptions and attitudes appear to be due to the long history of the community's societal marginalization, oppression of free sexual expression casting their intimate relationships as unfeasible, unacceptable, and invisible. Although deleterious, this societal minority pressure effect suggests that by shifting attitudes and values, it can be reversed. While the Greek state moves slowly but steadily through legislation and developing social consensus toward a more accepting environment for LGBTIQ+ rights, minority pressure and the associated negative attitudes are likely to be abated, allowing younger generations of gay men to cease internalizing homonegative perspectives about themselves and their relationships.

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**Data Availability** The data used in this article are available from the authors upon request due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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