

COMMENTARY

# Twinks, jocks, and bears—oh my! The stereotype content model extended to gay men and weight at work

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Adopting an intersectional lens, we extend the *Best Practices for Weight-Based Research in Organizational Studies* (Lemmon et al., 2024) to research on gay men using the stereotype content model (Clausell & Fiske, 2005). Gay men account for 4% of working adults internationally and, in Western countries, their workforce participation rates (64%) are higher than those of heterosexual men (50%; Carpini, Cox, et al., 2023). Although some have argued sexual orientation is concealable, research suggests others can accurately identify the sexual orientation of a person in just 50 milliseconds (Rule & Ambady, 2008). In addition to the stereotypes associated with sexual orientation, gay men may be stigmatized and marginalized based on their weight because of increased scrutiny to their appearance (Austen et al., 2020). This possibility is supported by research showing that gay men feel more judged based on their weight than their heterosexual counterparts (Fogarty & Walker, 2022). As such, gay men may experience a “double whammy,” wherein they are stereotyped and discriminated against based on both their sexual orientation and weight. In this commentary, we will discuss how the intersectionality of sexual orientation and weight will make theoretical contributions with implications for gay men’s interpersonal experiences at work. In doing so, we integrate the stereotype content model (warmth and competence) with gay stereotypes based on an expanded understanding of weight that differentiates body compositions across two dimensions—thinness and muscularity—to elaborate theory about four gay archetypes (twinks, jocks, bears, and muscle bears).

## Body ideals and gay subgroups

Industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists have studied gay men as a homogenous group. An analysis of indexed articles published in seven leading I-O psychology journals (see Appendix for search details) suggests none of the 38 identified articles (of 25,297, or 0.002% total publications) considered weight heterogeneity within the gay community in their theorizing or analyses. Furthermore, in contrast to Lemmon et al.’s focal article that used weight and “fatness” synonymously, we adopt a nuanced perspective on weight (Baker & Florack, 2021; Lemmon et al.) that differentiates two predominant body ideals among gay men: thinness and muscular ideals (Doyle & Engeln, 2014). The thinness ideal reflects a desire for slenderness or a low body fat percentage and is most akin to the primary subject of discussion in Lemmon et al.’s (i.e., “fatness”) focal article. Yet, the muscular ideal corresponds to a desire to appear muscular with a higher muscle mass index. Thinness and muscularity are particularly pertinent to the gay community due to the 1980s AIDS epidemic. A physiological symptom of AIDS is weight loss and muscle wasting, which made thinness and muscularity salient physical characteristics for gay men. During the AIDS epidemic, low body fat percentages were normalized and greater muscle mass

was desirable as indicators of perceived health (Austen et al., 2022; Fogarty & Walker, 2022). Thinness and muscularity ideals are related to the body mass index, reflecting a weight to height proportion; yet the ideals are distinct because they emphasize striving toward a physical appearance of “either a slim and youthful body ideal or a heavier, hyper-masculine body ideal” (Doyle & Engeln, 2014, p. 280).

Although the majority of research considers the two ideals separately (Fogarty & Walker, 2022), we contend research on gay men can be advanced by simultaneously examining the two ideals in a  $2 \times 2$  matrix (thinness vs muscularity: higher/lower). Consistent with this notion, some research examining various gay subcultural identities has pointed to four archetypes—twinks, jocks, bears, and muscle bears—corresponding to the various combination of thinness and muscularity ideals (Doyle & Engeln, 2014). “Twinks” are characterized by being high on thinness and low on muscularity. “Jocks” are defined by their high level of both thinness and muscularity (Fogarty & Walker, 2022). There are two types of “bears” that become relevant to the distinction of body composition as a function of physical ideals (McGrady, 2016). A “bear” is low both on thinness and muscularity; whereas a “muscle bear” is low on thinness and high on muscularity (Franklin et al., 2022).

### Integrating gay body ideals and the stereotype content model

Building on and extending our consideration of gay body ideals and their corresponding subcultural groups, we now turn to the implications of subgroup membership on perceptions of competence and warmth (Fiske et al., 2002). Competence reflects the extent to which individuals are perceived to be strong, independent, and assertive, qualities generally considered more masculine than feminine. Conversely, warmth captures interpersonal qualities such as kindness, supportiveness, and cooperativeness, and are perceived to be more feminine than masculine (Luksyte et al., 2018). Consistent with research on in- and outgroup bias, gay men are excluded from the optimal high–high (e.g., high competence–high warmth) classification (Claussell & Fiske, 2005). Such bias is important because perceptions of competence and warmth account for up to 80% of the variance in perceivers’ impressions of others (Carpini, Cox, et al., 2023), contributing to both valuable work (e.g., favorable performance appraisal) and interpersonal outcomes (e.g., social inclusion; Carpini et al., 2023). Specifically, perceived lack of competence is related to direct discrimination such as unequal access to promotion, pay, and hiring; whereas perceived lack of warmth is more strongly related to interpersonal discrimination such as incivility, micro-aggressions, and hostility (Morgan et al., 2013).

We argue integrating the dimensions of competence and warmth with the gay body ideals of thinness and muscularity will provide insight into differential experiences of gay men at work. With respect to thinness, previous research suggests overweight individuals are often penalized with lower ratings of competence and warmth due to attributions of laziness and lack of control over one’s dietary preferences (Lemmon et al.). Conversely, underweight men also receive lower ratings of competence but benefit from higher ratings of warmth due to this body composition being positively associated with perceived agreeableness and energy (Baker & Florack, 2021). Research also suggests muscularity may have important implications for perceptions of competence and warmth. Specifically, high muscularity is positively related to indicators of competence such as being tough and disciplined while attracting lower ratings of warmth (Baker & Florack, 2021).

Adopting an intersectional lens that accounts for both body ideals and sexual orientation simultaneously, we posit *bears* will experience the most negative evaluations with both competence and warmth being rated as lower, even compared to heterosexual men of the same body composition. We expect this effect as it will represent a double jeopardy of being both perceived as overweight and an outgroup member. As such, bears may experience both direct and

interpersonal discrimination such as being denied promotion and experiencing heightened incivility from others. *Twinks*, as a function of their very high thinness and low muscularity, are likely to be perceived as moderately warm and lower on competence. We expect twinks to be evaluated lower on competence than equally thin heterosexual men yet higher on warmth because their body type is more feminine, corresponding to their sexual orientation (Clausell & Fiske, 2005). Accordingly, twinks may experience more direct discrimination and less interpersonal mistreatment.

We expect *muscle bears* to be perceived as being moderately competent yet lower on warmth. Such expectations are likely to stem from the compensatory effect of mixed signals from being gay while also being high on muscularity and low on thinness. All of these mixed messages may cancel out negative evaluations associated with being overweight (Lemmon et al.; McGrady, 2016). As such, muscle bears may not be discriminated in terms of promotion opportunities, yet, they may become targets of interpersonal mistreatment. Finally, *jocks* are likely to be perceived as moderately high on both warmth and competence. We posit jocks will have the most positive evaluations of the gay archetypes because they will benefit from their muscularity to reinforce masculinity and competence, whereas their thinness and gay identity will lend itself to higher evaluations of warmth. We expect jocks to be evaluated less positively than “hunks,” the heterosexual equivalent, because jocks maintain their outgroup status as a sexual minority (Fogarty & Walker, 2022). Hence, out of all other types, jocks are less likely to experience either direct or interpersonal discrimination.

### Starting the gay-weight research agenda

Our analysis provides opportunities for future research on gay men, a sizeable working population, yet whose experiences at work are still understudied (Franklin et al., 2022). Using an intersectional lens, we provide a nuanced yet powerful perspective on the experiences of gay men at work by incorporating thinness and muscularity ideals with the stereotype content model. With this said, our analysis is far from complete and future research can take it further. First, our extension only considered gay men from a Western perspective and as such future researcher could examine non-Western gay subgroups. For example, bears of an Asian decent may be described as *panda bears*, which denotes both their weight/body composition (bear) and broad ethnic group (Asian), reflecting an additional dimension of diversity. Second, there are subcultural appearance stereotypes among gay men that intersect not only with body composition but also with age. For example, twinks are most frequently associated with being slender and younger (Fogarty & Walker, 2022); whereas *polar bears* are stereotypically older (McGrady, 2016). Third, research has highlighted the perceived fit between occupations and employee gay identity (Rule et al., 2016). This research suggests some jobs are considered “gayer” (e.g., flight attendant, hairdresser) than others (e.g., engineer); and thus, gay men may experience more positive outcomes in occupations that are perceived to “fit” their sexual orientation (e.g., nursing, teaching humanities subjects) as opposed to occupations that are perceived to be a misfit (e.g., teaching STEM subjects, construction). Extending this line of research, how might twinks, jocks, bears, and muscle bears fare within different occupations that may or may not conform with occupational stereotypes? For example, will twinks experience less formal and interpersonal discrimination in jobs that are consistent with their body composition such as retail, as opposed to manual labor jobs that may be perceived as a misfit? Will bears experience the least formal and interpersonal discrimination in more masculine jobs like automotive repair and manual labor? Last, scholars should consider the experience of gay men across time as they may transition from one subcultural grouping to another. For example, how might the experience of twinks change as a function of increased muscle mass, thus occupying a new subcultural identity as a jock? How

might the interpersonal experiences of a bear change as a function of a change in thinness (i.e., weight loss; Lemmon et al., 2024)?

### Spilling the tea—beyond the gays

Our extension of weight research at work to gay men could also function as the basis for research on other identities associated with different sexual orientations. First, gay men represent only one category of individuals within the broader LGBTQAI+ umbrella. For example, scholars could apply our theorizing to lesbian subgroups such as those identifying as “butch” (stereotypically portrayed as high (low) in agentic (feminine) terms such as strong, opinionated, abrasive) or “fem” (described in prototypical feminine adjectives including sensitive, nurturing, accommodating). Butch lesbians are stereotypically portrayed similarly to bears because they tend to be low on both thinness and muscularity. Despite these similarities, research suggests theoretical insights are not readily generalizable across gays and lesbians offering opportunities for nuanced theoretical development (Carpini, Cox, et al., 2023). Second, scholars can extend our consideration of gay body composition subgroups beyond the rainbow community to heterosexuals. For example, thinness and muscularity are also prominent features of heterosexual men as evident in terms like “hunk” and “dad bod” (representing a combination of low muscle mass and moderate body fat percentage). Is it possible heterosexual men with dad bods may be perceived as most competent and warm (Carpini et al., 2023)? What are the interpersonal work outcomes for heterosexual men with dad bods and how might they differ from other body compositions?

### Appendix—search strategy

Search terms: “gay\*” OR “homosexual\*” OR “sexual minorit\*” in titles, abstracts, heading words, key words. Journals included in our search: *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Personnel Psychology*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, and *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. Journals selected based on quality ratings (see Carpini et al., 2017). We omitted five entries due to not being related to gay men (e.g., only discussed lesbians). We performed search on 23/08/2023 using *PsycInfo* database.

**Data availability and deposit statement.** All data used is publicly available using the instructions provided in the Appendix.

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