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“I’m Not as Gay as Some Other Queer People”: Exploring Bi + Men’s Perceptions of Masculinity and Sexual Identity

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ABSTRACT

Research has highlighted the constraints imposed on bi + people as they navigate sexual and romantic encounters within a society which privileges exclusive attraction to one gender. For bi + men, these expectations are complicated by hegemonic masculine norms which dictate the boundaries of gender expression. This qualitative study explores how bi + men navigate the boundaries of normative gender and sexual expression in constructing a bisexual-masculine identity. Twenty-two cisgender bi + men participated in semi-structured interviews, where they were invited to discuss their beliefs about bisexuality and masculinity. The findings explore the ways that bi + men navigate the borders of hetero- and queer masculinities in constructing a bisexual-masculine identity, identifying traits and characteristics which affirm a sense of masculinity. The findings also identify the barriers bi + men experience in aligning their masculine and bisexual identities, which often led to a feeling of liminality and erasure of their bisexual identity.

KEYWORDS
Bisexuality; masculinity; identity; heteronormativity; queer

Understanding the everyday experiences of bisexual and bi + individuals (i.e., people who hold sexual and romantic attraction to more than one gender) have been the growing focus of research in recent years. According to recent census data in England and Wales, 1.3% of the population described themselves as bisexual, compared to 1.5% who described themselves as gay or lesbian, with LGBTQ+ individuals representing 3.2% of the population overall (ONS 2023). Yet, despite the prevalence of bi + individuals, it is often the case that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer experiences are grouped together in research, obscuring the unique experiences, challenges, and issues faced by those who identify as bisexual/bi+ (Cross et al., 2024). When research has disaggregated the experiences of bi + people, findings have consistently

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highlighted the contested nature of bi + identities and the experience of negativity, discrimination, and erasure faced by bi + people from both mainstream heterosexual groups and gay, lesbian, and other queer communities (Charley et al., 2023; Cross et al., 2024; McInnis et al., 2022). This may contribute to an increased risk of both physical and mental health conditions for bi + individuals, and may explain the non-disclosure of their sexual identity (Anders et al., 2023; Bereket & Brayton, 2008; Duffin, 2016). The everyday lives of bi + individuals, then, are typically tinged by a sense of uncertainty, as they navigate the distinct norms imposed by heterosexual and queer communities, respectively (McInnis et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop of liminality and ambiguity, this research seeks to further understand the experiences of bi + men in constructing their sense of masculine and sexual identity. Social constructions of masculinity are intrinsically tied to sexuality and sexual practices in Western societies (Flood, 2008; Grave et al., 2024; McCormack, 2023; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2018). The negativity and erasure of bisexuality presents significant barriers and boundaries in constructing a viable bisexual-masculine identity, particularly in comparison to the dominance of hetero-masculine norms. Drawing upon accounts of bi + men in the United Kingdom, this research aims to explore the ways that ideals of masculinity and sexuality are navigated, identifying the challenges in constructing a bi + identity in cultural worlds which privilege sexual attraction to the same or other gender. Before these accounts are discussed, it is necessary to provide a review of research literature which investigates the intersection between masculinity and sexual identity, addressing the influence of orthodox, heteronormative expectations alongside newly emerging theories relating to gay and queer masculinities.

Masculinity, sexual identity, and sexual practices

Conceptualisations and understandings of gender identity are now underpinned by the notion that masculinity—and its associated practices, behaviors, ideals, and expectations—are socially constructed (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connor et al., 2021). While the term ‘masculinity’ may conjure specific traits or characteristics which can be presumed to be “innate” or inherent, studies of masculinity have demonstrated the historical, discursive, and social conceptualisations, presenting masculinities as a fluid and multiple concept (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Connell, 2005; Elliott, 2016). As addressed below, a range of traits, behaviors, and characteristics can be utilized in the construction of masculine identities, shifting across social and cultural contexts and bound by hegemonic processes which privilege specific traits or behaviors, such as physical strength, high status employment, and ostentatious (hetero)sexual prowess (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2019).

Since the emergence of critical masculinities studies in the 1980s, the enduring hegemony of "orthodox" masculine characteristics have been explored in relation to sexual identity, in particular the role of compulsory heterosexuality in maintaining the boundaries of masculine expression (Rich, 1980; Richardson, 2010; Wight, 1994). The term "compulsory heterosexuality" refers to the ways that heterosexuality is enforced as a social institution, imposing strict boundaries for sexual expression which are policed as part of everyday social interactions, such as the use of homophobic "banter" among young men (Clark, 2018; Rich, 1980; Richardson, 2010). As such, heterosexuality is perceived to be a normative feature of masculinity; an inherent trait underpinning the masculine sex role (Pleck et al., 1993). Performances and displays of heterosexuality, including the act of hetero-sex, play a compelling role in the transition and conformation of young men's masculine identities (Clark, 2018; Flood, 2008; Ringrose et al., 2013).

Such heteronormative discourses regarding sexual identity also establish stereotypical perceptions which equate "gay" or "queer" masculinities with femininity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Connell, 2005; Winer, 2024). Yet, as recent research has demonstrated, the construction of masculinity among men who identify as gay or queer is far more nuanced than heteronormative representations. For example, recent research has highlighted the challenges faced by trans men and gay men in presenting a masculinity which is neither hyper-masculinized nor hyper-feminised. In these studies, gay and trans men reflected upon the challenges of performing a "moderate" masculinity, avoiding associations with oppressive or "toxic" forms of masculinity on the one hand, and a marginalized effeminate masculinity on the other (Abelson, 2019; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2019; Winer, 2024). Winer (2024), in particular, highlights some of the complexities in achieving this idealized masculinity, such as curating a physique which is toned but not overly muscular (see also Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017). Winer (2024) also points to cultural elements associated with gay masculinities, with non-heterosexual men scrutinized over their fashion or musical tastes. Participants described how their lack of interest in queer pop culture often served to delegitimise their gay masculine identity by appearing excessively (hetero)masculine and thus "too closeted."

This development of masculine identity for non-heterosexual men is further complicated by intersections with sexual identity, specifically sexual role positioning or sexual self-labels. It has been well established in previous research that sexual self-labels are interpreted in line with gendered stereotypes (Johns et al., 2012; Kippax & Smith, 2001; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017, 2018). Men who adopt an insertive, or "top," position in anal sex, are typically perceived to be more controlling and dominant in sexual intercourse and thus more masculine, while a receptive, or "bottom," position is seen as more passive or submissive and is aligned with perceptions of femininity. Such discursive representations are strengthened by perceptions of the physical traits of "top" and "bottom" identifying men. Johns et al. (2012), for example, found that men who were "tops" were typically perceived as strong and muscular, while "bottoms" were presented as embodying smaller, skinnier physiques. Ravenhill and de Visser (2017) identified similar physical characteristics in shaping masculine perceptions, however, while the possession of a smaller physique, a high-pitched voice, and a receptive positioning were seen as *less* masculine, this did not mean that these were regarded as "feminine" traits. In practice, anally receptive men have described how a dominant role in sex can be performed, such as adopting an "active" role by positioning themselves on top of their partner (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2018), or by engaging in sustained periods of anal penetration and controlling their partner's pleasure (Johns et al., 2012; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2018).

It is evident that for heterosexual and gay men, the reflexive construction of masculinity is tied to engagement in specific sexual practices, including initiating sexual encounters, adopting a dominant role, and controlling the pleasure of their partner. While masculine ideals may be mapped across social contexts, there is a clear distinction between heterosexual and queer sexual practices related to idealized and expected masculinity (Anders et al., 2023). While hegemonic processes still play a powerful role in dictating the boundaries of ideal masculine performances, it is evident that within these respective cultural contexts, the development of hetero-masculine, and gay/queer-masculine identities is possible. However, such masculinities are constructed within *monosexual* social conditions, that is, sexual identities are underpinned by an exclusive attraction to either the other or same gender and within binary conceptualisations such as "straight" *or* "gay" (Anders et al., 2023; Bollas, 2023). This poses questions as to the discursive resources available to men who experience sexual or romantic desire for more than one gender (hereby referred to as bi + men) in the reflexive construction of their gender and sexual identity. Exploring these experiences is the central focus of the remainder of this paper.

Constructing a bi+-masculine identity across cultural contexts

In recent years, social scientific research has sought to illustrate the unique challenges faced by bi + individuals in the reflexive construction of their gender and sexual identity (Flanders & Hatfield, 2013; McCormack et al., 2015; McInnis et al., 2022; Steinman, 2000, 2011). Most notably, this research has highlighted the role of binary presumptions of gender and sexuality in structuring the boundaries of identity construction. As noted above, gendered assumptions play a crucial role in shaping sexual identities, with practices traditionally associated with heterosexuality perceived to reflect masculine status (Flood, 2008; Pennington, 2009; Richardson, 2010). Conversely, men who identify as gay or queer are typically perceived as "effeminate" and not representative of orthodox, and hegemonic, masculine traits (Johns et al., 2012; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017; Winer, 2024). As such, labels of sexual identity (e.g., "straight" or "gay") are often utilized as *adverbs* and used as discursive markers in the performance of gender, strengthening the dichotomy between these identities (Flanders & Hatfield, 2013; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2019; Winer, 2024). Monosexist understandings of sexual orientation and attraction, in turn, further amplify the binary distinction between "straight" and "gay" identities, whereby individuals are presumed to hold secure and exclusive attraction to the other- *or* same-sex partners (Anders et al., 2023; Bollas, 2023; McInnis et al., 2022). Consequently, such expectations regarding sexual and romantic desire contribute to misunderstandings of bisexuality, perpetuating bi-negative and bi-phobic presumptions, such as the belief that bi + individuals are hypersexual or prone to infidelity (Charley et al., 2023; Hayfield et al., 2018; Prieto, 2023). Bi + individuals, as such, are perceived as being in an unstable, confused, transitionary, and ultimately *illegitimate* state, and may therefore be presumed to be caught in a transition between heterosexual and gay sexual identities (Charley et al., 2023).

Research with bi + individuals has revealed the enduring and pervasive nature of gender discourses in shaping meanings and perceptions of gendered roles and traits. Anderson and McCormack (2016), for example, explored temporal and generational influences in shaping gendered expressions for bi + men. They found that for participants who were young adults in the 1980s and 1990s, bisexual identities were framed in line with conservative and heterosexist values, such as the avoidance of portraying "camp" or flamboyant personas as a means of navigating potential homophobic stigmatization and marginalization.

Similarly, Pennington (2009) notes how the bisexual men and women in their study categorized gender in "traditional" terms, associating masculinity with strength and dominance, and femininity with emotion and nurturing attitudes. Although participants generally felt that such notions were out-dated, they often aligned themselves with stereotypical gendered performances due to the influence of hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality. This was perhaps most pervasive in terms of performing gender as part of mixed-sex relationships, with male participants describing taking on dominant, protective, and breadwinning roles in their relationships with women (Pennington, 2009).

Given the cultural prevalence of heteronormative ideologies, it is understandable how bisexual identifying men may adopt conventional gendered patterns in mixed-sex relationships; however, such conventions typically contribute to an erasure of bisexuality within relationships and as part reflexive constructions of identity (Anders et al., 2023; Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Charley et al., 2023; Pennington, 2009). When establishing new romantic relationships, for example, bi + individuals describe the challenges associated with disclosing their sexuality to their partners, as they are often met with bi-phobic presumptions, most predominantly the belief that they will cheat on their partners (Anders et al., 2023; Charley et al., 2023). Bisexuality, then, is often downplayed as part of disclosures, and is erased within everyday practices of romantic relationships (Charley et al., 2023; McCormack, 2023). As such, a common theme among bi + men is the feeling that a key part of their identity is invalidated as part of mixed-sex relationships as what is presented to others reflects a conventional, heterosexual relationship dynamic (Anders et al., 2023; McCormack, 2023). Moreover, the presence of bisexual signifiers, such as the expression of attraction to same- or opposite-sex individuals, can serve to reinforce biphobic stereotypes e.g., that bisexuality is a "phase" before identifying as straight or gay (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Steinman, 2011).

In some cases, bisexual desires and practices are framed in ways that hide or conceal bisexuality, enabling men to present what appears to be a heterosexual masculine identity. In his research with Black men who have sex with men (MSM) in the USA, for example, Duffin (2016) notes how his participants sought to distinguish between sexual *practices* and sexual *identity*, drawing upon intersections of gender and masculinity to distance themselves from bisexual or gay identities. Sex with men was presented as simply a physical act, devoid of intimacy, emotion, or even attraction to their same-sex partner, with their sexual identity determined by their desire for mixed-sex relationships and physical attraction to women (Duffin 2016). Similarly, Bereket and Brayton (2008) note how for Turkish MSM, sexual practices were framed in ways that concealed both gender and sexuality. In this case, the act of penetration, with either male or female partners, was perceived as exclusively masculine and reflected values of dominance and power (Bereket & Brayton, 2008). Unlike anally-receptive gay men (Johns et al., 2012; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2018), then, it would appear that for some bi + men, cultural parameters regarding receptive sexual positioning restrict masculine identifications. Echoing the findings of Ravenhill and de Visser (2017), for example, Pereira (2021) found that bottom-identifying bisexual men rated themselves as being less masculine than top or versatile bisexual men.

Across broader cultural contexts and spaces, bi + men report further complexities in constructing a bi+-masculine identity as they navigate rigid heteronormative and queer social "norms." Anders et al. (2023), for example, point to the complexities surrounding language and discourse in expressing masculinity and bisexuality. Participants described difficulties in negotiating the language which best captured an "authentic" bisexual-masculine identity, in particular, defining and expressing the "flexibility" of bi + attraction (see also McCormack, 2023). Again, the lack of viable bisexual signifiers is evident here (Bollas, 2023). However, in terms of expressing masculinity, bisexual men have described a greater degree of agency beyond orthodox and hegemonic expectations, but still express a sense of liminality between heterosexual and queer cultural expectations (Anders et al., 2023; Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Charley et al., 2023; Greco & Stenner, 2017; Pennington, 2009). In general, bisexual men have described a sense of being caught betwixt and between these ideals, feeling they are either "not straight enough" or "not queer enough," and thus develop a bricolage identity which can be adapted to relevant social dynamics (Anders et al., 2023; Domínguez et al., 2017; Magrath, 2022). Navigating sexual and romantic encounters can thus be a site of ambiguity and uncertainty for bi + men, as they make calculated choices regarding what elements of their bisexual identity they can reveal or disclose to potential partners without risking discrimination or prejudice. The construction of a bi+-masculine identity is fraught with compromise as bi + men negotiate the social norms of heterosexual and gay/queer relationship dynamics.

The present study

Following Anders and colleagues' (2023) call for further qualitative research exploring the reflexive construction of bisexual-masculine identities, this paper seeks to understand the experiences of bi + men as they navigate gendered and monosexual informed contexts and explores how bisexual and masculine identities are negotiated across a range of social spaces. In particular, this paper seeks to explore the sense of liminality experienced by bi + men at the intersection of gender and sexuality, contributing new perspectives which, until recently, have been under researched (Anders et al., 2023; McInnis et al., 2022). Similar themes have previously been explored by the authors in the context of bisexual men's sexual encounters and practices with men and women (Ravenhill et al., 2024); this paper seeks to extend these findings through an understanding of experiences encountered in the everyday, such as social interactions within heterosexual/normative and queer contexts.

Methods

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 min were conducted with 22 cisgender bisexual men by two members of the research team, one who identified as gay, and one who identified as straight. Participants were interviewed online ($n = 20$) or in-person ($n = 2$). The semi-structured interviews were designed to enable participants to describe their perceptions and experiences regarding masculinity, sexuality, and sexual practices and encounters with men and women (see Appendix A). Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. This paper presents findings regarding the masculinity; findings relating to the sexual practices and experiences of bisexual men have been presented elsewhere (Ravenhill et al., 2024).

Participants

Participants were recruited through advertisements on social media (Facebook, Twitter/X, Grindr) which invited people to share their "experiences of masculinity and sexuality." The eligibility criteria stipulated in the recruitment materials were to be 18+ years old and currently residing in the UK. Experiences of sexual encounters with men and women was not considered an inclusion criterion as the aim was to recruit men who identified as bisexual, notwithstanding their sexual experience. The people who responded to the recruitment advertisements and met the eligibility criteria were sent a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and consent form, alongside a list of indicative questions. Interviews were then arranged with men who agreed to take part, following an initial meeting to build rapport and address any concerns or questions. The final sample comprised 22 UK-based bisexual men aged between 21 and 53 years (median = 33).

Ethical approval was obtained via the University of Brighton Research Ethics Application Manager (BREAM). Participants provided informed consent. The PIS advised that people likely to feel uncomfortable or distressed at reflecting on their sexual experiences should not take part. Participants were told in the PIS and before, during, and after their interview that they could withdraw from the study, and withdraw their data, up to a specified point post-interview. No participants withdrew; no data were withdrawn. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used throughout. Details of support groups for gay/bisexual/queer/questioning men were provided on the PIS. Participants were provided with a £15 retail voucher to acknowledge their time.

Data analysis

A critical realist perspective was adopted for the data analysis, which allowed for participant responses to be seen as representations or reflections of tangible experiences, while also acknowledging the role of social and cultural norms, values, and beliefs in constructing these accounts (Anderson & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis was deployed, an approach which involves identifying patterns of meaning, and wherein the role of the researcher is explicitly acknowledged as part of this process (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach was appropriate because it allowed for a combination of a deductive (theory-informed) and inductive (exploratory) approach that is sensitive to social context and subjective positionality.

Six stages of the reflexive thematic analysis process were carried out, with all members of the research team involved in the first three stages. An inductive analysis approach was initially adopted for the first three stages, with members of the research team reading and re-reading allocated transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data before coding. Codes consisted of initial impressions related to areas of interest, such as the participants' beliefs about masculinity or their experiences in sexual encounters with men and women. These codes were then transferred to a master spreadsheet. Third, initial themes were generated by organizing related codes, which were compiled within the master spreadsheet. While this initial theme development was data-driven, it is important to also acknowledge the role of the researchers' positionality in this process (discussed further below), specifically the researchers' academic knowledge of gender and sexuality when interpreting themes and patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) The fourth and fifth stages involved reviewing and developing these themes, before defining and labeling these themes. Finally, the sixth stage involved writing up the data, whereby some of the themes were iteratively adapted.

Research reflexivity

The data collection and analysis conducted as part of this research are informed by the life experiences and perspectives of the research team, alongside our expertise as masculinities and sexualities scholars. As part of reflexive practice, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which our lived experiences can both resonate with the participants perspectives but also deviate or differ in unique ways; for example, all the members of the research team identified as men, with two members identifying as heterosexual and two members identifying as gay. So, while there was a significant degree of resonance in terms of our experiences with masculinity, our experiences of sexuality, at least in the broadest sense, derived from distinct perspectives.

A key aim as part of the data collection and analysis process, as such, was to use our unique perspectives to find commonalities with the experiences discussed by the participants; while not identical, we sought to base our understandings of bisexuality and masculinity in relation to our own lived experiences alongside our academic knowledge. For example, I (the first author) sought to use my positionality to establish shared experiences with the participants to build rapport during the semi-structured interviews, such as discussions regarding the experiences of long-term romantic relationships. Additionally, such distinctions in experiences of sexuality enabled the participants to adopt a role of expert by experience within interviews, describing and detailing the uniqueness of their perspectives. Our approach in this sense aims to find both resonance and difference to inform our understanding, identifying our expectations, assumptions, and biases, while also amplifying participants' accounts and experiences.

Results

Participants described a broad range of traits and characteristics when discussing masculine identities. There was a consensus among the participants that "orthodox" masculinities were the most culturally idealized, underpinned by notions of competitiveness, perseverance, and resilience, alongside embodied traits such as large or toned muscles, height and bodily hair. Yet, there was also a belief shared between participants that definitions of masculinity were broader than this, and could incorporate caring, compassionate, or empathetic traits. Masculinity could be constructed and interpreted in many ways, with idealized behaviors and expressions fluctuating across different spaces and contexts. Two major themes were identified. The first theme—"I'm a man's man, but yes I am very gay as well": Navigating the borders of hetero- and queer-masculinities—addressed the nuanced ways masculinity was interpreted and performed within heterosexual and queer cultural spaces. The second theme—"I feel like I am exposing myself as somehow a bit less of a man": Barriers in aligning bisexual and masculine identities—addressed the challenges participants encountered when aligning their bisexual and masculine identities. It highlighted the impact of underlying biphobic attitudes and the monosexual presumptions which underpin gendered and sexual identities.

"I'm a man's man, but yes I am very gay as well": navigating the borders of hetero- and queer-masculinities

When discussing understandings of their masculine identities, participants described a sense of shifting between orthodox traits typically aligned with heterosexual masculinities, and more expressive characteristics which were associated with gay or queer conceptualisations of masculinity. In this sense, participants articulated their gender and sexual identities in terms of a duality or multiplicity grounded in a range of social and cultural spaces. For example, participants identified distinct "sides" to their identity, reflecting "conflicting" masculine ideals:

> I might fulfil some of the criteria that might make people go 'oh yeah, that's traditionally masculine' so I'll do bits on the car, changing the car light bulb … or going on a cross-country hike with a friend which is outdoorsy rugged stuff … [but] I'm very happy to jump on a dance stage or start singing and doing some karaoke or something … I'm fully aware that I have softer edges and I'm happy with that (Ritchie)

> [When] playing sport I guess … and people are kind of going, 'oh come on lads, let's get' like, I kind of am into that a little bit … as well as liking sports I do like to read as well, I guess that again, that kind of makes me less traditionally masculine (Francis)

> I perceive myself as a strong male, play sports to a very high level, but part of me wants to be penetrated by a male, so there's the very masculine strong side, versus the passive sort of, you know, wants to be penetrated by a male, so there's two conflicting things … I am quite masculine … and sometimes I am camp, and that's me … I'm very masculine, I'm a man's man, but yes I am very gay as well (Russell)

Here, the differing "sides" of masculinity are described as pulling the participants between heterosexual and gay/queer ideals. As previous research has demonstrated, this navigation of masculine identity is common for men irrespective of sexual identity (Gater, 2024; Grave et al., 2024), however, for the bi + men in this study, these "sides" of masculine identity were tied to the plurality of their sexual practices in ways not typically experienced by heterosexual men. As Russell explained, while his sporting ability enabled him to identify as a "man"s man', his stake in this context was seemingly undermined by his sexual desires and his bottom identity. Reflecting on his stake in heterosexual communities, Russell alluded to internalized homo- and bi-phobic discourses as underpinning the legitimacy of his (hetero)masculinity:

> If you met someone else now, like a heterosexual guy [I'd] be very interested to see what he felt about what masculinity is, because he might turn around to me and say well 'you're bisexual mate, sometimes you like to have a penis inserted into you, you ain't masculine' (Russell)

What is notable here is the enduring hegemonic status of particular sexual practices, specifically the stigma and discrimination aligned with receptive sexual positioning among heterosexual communities (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Connell, 2005; Duffin, 2016). While the nuances in constructions of masculinity for anally-receptive gay men have been identified previously (e.g., Ravenhill & de Visser, 2018), masculine status in mixed-gender sexual practices continues to be defined within heteronormative discourses, with an "insertive" role taking prevalence in shaping masculine identities (Ravenhill et al., 2024).

When describing their experiences of romantic encounters with other men, the bi + men in this study also recounted the ways in which their masculine identity was affirmed. For example, bodily characteristics, such as an athletic or muscular body, were highlighted as underpinning idealized masculinity:

> I've been told my hair, like especially my facial hair and my chest hair because like people point at it and they're like… I think like in Grindr or like in social settings they're like, 'oh that's very manly, oh you have a beard and oh look at that hairy chest, like so manly' (Alfie)

> How I look, right, I have this long beard, I really like it, I like my beard, I work out, I'm a bit bulky, so I think that they are classic masculinity attributes that I like, and I push myself in this way. I feel somehow attracted to it as well, like in men (Marco)

Here, both Alfie and Marco refer to key markers of the most idealized and desired "manly" traits within gay or queer contexts, with body or facial hair, toned muscles, and a large physical stature portraying "classic masculinity." This framing of masculinity, Winer (2024) argues, ultimately reflects the underlying hegemonic masculine discourses which influence male attractiveness and desirability within the gay community. Gay male desire for "masc" over "fem" identifying men, in this case, contributes to a reification of embodied masculine traits, setting the "standard" by which masculine identities are determined for gay and bisexual men.

Yet, while such masculine traits may be valued in some gay or queer contexts, the participants in this study described how in heteronormative spaces, impressions of masculinity were determined by distinctly heterosexist masculine expectations (Anderson & McCormack, 2016). Here, non-masculine embodiments, movements, and mannerisms were seemingly identified due to the contrast with perceptions of traditional hetero-masculine traits:

> Around heterosexuals I'm perceived to be gay, I'm perceived to be feminine, so … I would cross my legs and a lot of people would think that, "Oh that's something a woman would do" … so they would like make me feel conscious … even though that's what I'm most comfortable with (Alfie)

> My voice isn't very masculine … I think my behaviours around like the public at my work as well it's not as masculine as men usually are, I usually go like, when I talk to people my voice just goes high-pitched as well or I'm like quite energetic when I'm dealing with people, so I think that's a negative against the masculinity (Finn)

The persistence of heterosexist perspectives in shaping expectations of gendered behaviors is evident here, constructing rigid boundaries in which non-masculine expressions, such as sitting with crossed legs or speaking with a high-pitched voice, are aligned with stereotypical perceptions of gay or queer sexual identities (Anderson & McCormack, 2016). There is, as such, a clear distinction in the framing of masculinity across heterosexual and queer cultural contexts. Alfie, in particular, described feeling caught between these contrasting expectations when aligning his gender and sexual identity:

> So like growing up I was always perceived to be feminine, so I just accepted I was feminine. But when I came to [city] and I started meeting gay people and queer people, they were surprised when I identified myself as someone who was feminine, they would say, "Oh really, you seem quite masculine", as like straight passing, and I was very surprised by that because that's definitely not the case when I'm around straight people. I don't pass as straight, so I felt like I didn't fit in in these two groups, where with straight people I'm seen as gay and then with gay people I'm seen as straight. (Alfie)

Here, Alfie alludes to a sense of liminality when interacting with gay and straight cultural groups, feeling that the perceptions of his gender identity by others means that he does not quite "fit in" with either group. There is, in this sense, a misalignment between Alfie's own idealized sense of gender identity and the cultural expectations which are seemingly cast upon him. For Alfie, this association with certain identities, in particular stereotypical macho personas, was something that made him feel uneasy or uncomfortable due to his perceived negative connotations: "I'm not like some jock, I'm not like a dickhead that's like insensitive to other people's feelings."

Similarly, Hank described a feeling of "dissonance" in relation to his performances of stereotypical masculine traits:

> [B]ecause I'm a leader, I'm a senior manager in [workplace] you end up with a lot of responsibility and you end up having to take quite bold decisions so … there's almost an implied sense of leadership, masculinity that go together … that masculine performance has always been a, something I've struggled with because it's … not something natural, there's a dissonance between my internal feelings and the external performance (Hank)

Like Alfie and Hank, many of the participants shared this negative perception of "hyper-masculine" norms, referring to a greater sense of pressure to present their masculinity in more traditional or orthodox ways, particularly in what might be perceived as hetero-masculine contexts:

> I'm quite a sporty person, so I was in a lot in football teams and cricket teams and stuff … and in changing room like there's … kind of locker room chat … like people talking about girls or whatever, or the kind of nights out or whatever … I'd often try and make … an overly masculine comment, even if I don't believe it in myself, just to fit in. (Francis)

> I feel like that's also a lot of the times also lot to do with just environment. As I said, I grew up in [location] and from a Caribbean background, and that the expectations of being masculine are there … and if you don't appear to be masculine you then are going to find yourself challenged more often (Jeremiah)

Both Francis' and Jeremiah's accounts demonstrate the enduring role of misogynist or aggressive traits to enhance masculine status and appearance (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Richardson, 2010). Francis, for example, alludes to using sexist or misogynistic language as part of "locker room banter," while Jeremiah refers to social and cultural expectations to appear physically strong and intimidating. The sense of compulsion which underpins hyper-masculine performances is evident here, with such behaviors enacted so as to avoid social repercussions (i.e., not "fitting in" or being "challenged" by others).

This navigation of hyper-masculine expectations discussed by the bi + men in this study was a common trend, reflecting the experiences identified by heterosexual, gay, and trans* men of aligning, avoiding, or challenging orthodox masculine ideals (Abelson, 2019; Gater, 2024; Winer, 2024). Across these studies, cis and trans* men discuss how a range of practices are performed in constructing a masculine identity, reflecting both traditionally orthodox expectations and contemporary "softer" ideals. As demonstrated above, such polarisations of masculine identity reflect the experiences of the participants in this study, however, an important nuance in shaping the experiences of bi + men in particular is the association of these polarisations with sexual identity, such as the alignment of hyper-masculinity with heterosexual contexts and "softer" more "flamboyant" masculinity with gay or queer spaces. As such, masculine identity for bi + men is navigated *between* these polarisations, both reproducing the "gay/straight" binary, while erasing or obscuring discursive space for bi + masculinities to develop.

"I feel like I am exposing myself as somehow a bit less of a man": barriers in aligning bisexual and masculine identities

When discussing their sense of masculine identity, participants often alluded to binary lenses through which their masculinity was defined, such as "masculine/feminine," "straight/gay," or "hetero/homo." Masculinity, then, was perceived as fluctuating across these binaries, with participants policing their identities in line with idealized traits across heterosexual and queer contexts (Anders et al., 2023; Charley et al., 2023; Prieto, 2023). What was notably absent, as such, was the participants' sexual identity in shaping idealized presentations of selfhood; in other words, their *bi*sexuality was erased in predominantly *mono*sexual contexts (Bollas, 2023).

For some of the participants, identifying as bisexual was perceived to disrupt the normative scripts of romantic and sexual encounters, contributing to a sense of confusion and liminality—a feeling of not quite fitting in (Greco and Stenner, 2017). When describing a romantic encounter with a male partner, for example, Ivo alluded to feelings of vulnerability and a lack of confidence due to his perceived inexperience in sexual encounters with men:

> Being with [men] who are more experienced than me … I find it sort of intimidating in some way or I find it, I find I'm worried that I'm going to do something wrong or I'm, you know, this is, I don't know, something… I think there's that sense of like feeling new to this or feeling sort of because I'm bisexual and not gay it means I'm not really, you know … I'm not a real, you know, queer person or something. (Ivo)

By distinguishing between his partner's gay sexual identity and his own bisexuality, Ivo implies that his status as a "queer person" is questionable. His perceived lack of experience and concerns about doing "something wrong" ultimately contribute to questions about the legitimacy of his sexual identity. Connor described similar tensions in intimate relationships with other queer people:

> I have recently come towards an unfortunate end of a same sex relationship and the person who I was dating identified as non-binary and often resented quite a lot of my heteronormative characteristics, sort of, you know, "we'll make an LGBT out of you yet", type thing. So I always felt like a little bit of an imposter in those settings (Connor)

Connor's experiences arguably reflect the gatekeeping practices that can be employed to deny bi+individuals the ability to identify as queer. Here, Connor suggests that his association with "heteronormative characteristics"—such as engaging in mixed-sex relationships which give the *appearance* of heterosexuality—enables a sense of privilege that is inaccessible to other queer individuals, and thus serves as a barrier to a legitimate queer identity. For Connor, such barriers ultimately served to seemingly erase his own struggles: "how dare I in any way have a life story given how the people that I was encountering would always have bigger struggles than what I did?"

Similar experiences of bi-negativity were recounted by the bi+men in this study, and occurred in relationships with both men and women. Hugo, for example, described the strains placed upon his relationships by unsubstantiated presumptions about bisexuality:

> I think, for me … a big part of that was about gay guys … not finding me gay enough or … bi is not a thing … and at the same time … straight women [saying] 'oh, you're just going to cheat on me', you know, 'you're just going to want to sleep with guys', blah, blah, blah, and that was a really difficult time for me because I'd only just started to come to terms with my own sexuality (Hugo)

For Hugo, such presumptions about his character and behavior contributed to a sense of confusion and liminality regarding his sexual identity, with the legitimate status of bisexuality denied by bi-phobic attitudes (e.g., “bi is not a thing”).

This sense of uncertainty and potential hostility meant that, for many participants, disclosures of their bisexuality were done cautiously or avoided entirely. Returning to Ivo, such concerns about the attitudes of others and his own insecurities resulted in feelings of shame or embarrassment regarding his sexual identity:

> I feel like trying to talk about my sexuality with people, you know, I rarely tell other men about it, and I think that there's a sense of shame there, less so in the sex but more in when I'm maybe discussing it and it's like, it's a feeling of like, I don't know, sort of, maybe kind of shame that I'm not like completely confident in my sexuality and, you know, in the way that sort of people who have quite kind of binary sexual orientations are or feel like they are. And also, I don't know, sort of maybe there's a sort of sense of heteronormativity like it just feels embarrassing not being entirely straight or even entirely gay and knowing that I'm not part of this, you know, or feeling not part of this, I don't know. (Ivo)

Ivo aligned his bi-sexual desire with a sense of “shame” and “embarrassment,” implying that his attraction to more than one gender reflects a lack of confidence or certainty in his sexual identity. What is notable here is the seeming prevalence of monosexual norms in shaping perceptions of legitimate sexual identities. For Ivo, bi-sexual desire is regarded not only as a barrier to a congruent sexual identity, but his lack of confidence or assertiveness in his sexuality is also seen as negatively impacting his masculine status. Specifically, Ivo described how a sexual encounter with a man engendered feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, and uncertainty which did not feel masculine: “I felt like I was allowing him to do things to me which in some way felt like I was being less masculine.”

Across the participants' accounts was a sense of being betwixt and between the conflicting worlds of mixed and same gender relationships. Navigating this ambiguity often meant devising compromises, such as curating specific identities in order to fit in. This was evident in Alfie's discussion of his experiences with online dating:

> I just say that I'm chill, I like to explore and try different things, I say I like music, comedy and food. I was a bit hesitant to put like music into this because I was like, ‘oh does that mean … they think I'm like not straight?’ But yeah, it's just pictures of me with my friends … I did like post a video of me doing axe throwing. (Alfie)

Adapting to new dynamics of romantic relationships, such as the curation of online dating profiles, has become a focus of masculinities research in recent years (Haywood, 2018; O'Neill, 2018). Of particular interest, have been the various ways that straight, gay, and bi+men manage their profiles to fulfill idealized expectations of masculinity to meet the perceived criteria of what is deemed attractive to potential partners (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Portolan & McAlister, 2024). As noted by Alfie, online dating profiles are adorned with carefully selected images or videos to emphasize perceived masculine features, such as strength or athleticism. However, Alfie reflected that when online dating with women, he felt the need to purposefully present what he perceived as heteronormative, masculine traits and characteristics for him to appear straight and thus sexually desirable:

> … straight women don't feel comfortable dating bisexual men … I like even changed my whole profile to like hide anything that's like bi or anything that like suggest anything about LGBTQ+ in my profile, so I would like take out that I watch … animated shows, [in case] they think like that's not a straight thing to do (Alfie)

Unlike straight or gay men, bi + men like Alfie may not only feel compelled to present their profile to meet masculinized norms, but also that they must obscure or erase their *bi*-sexuality when curating their identity online. Evident here are the ways in which gendered behaviors are intricately tied with presumptions regarding sexual identity, particularly compulsory heterosexuality (Anderson & McCormack, 2016).

In this sense, the participants referred to the limited discursive and embodied space to construct their bisexual identities between these polarizing representations of gender and sexuality, alluding to notions of bi-phobia or erasure, not typically experienced by straight or gay men (McInnis et al., 2022; Prieto, 2023). Simon, for example, described navigating his bisexuality "on the fringes," while Rick felt that bisexual identities lacked an "established community":

> How I feel in terms of like the LGBT community … how much I feel integrated into that community, yeah, and to that I would answer like still very much on the fringes, you know, how still like, like I wouldn't say that I feel that part of it, there were sort of instances of biphobia that I had during my time on specific apps and when searching for male partners (Simon)

> Bisexuality I think doesn't have much of an established community or identity and I will not jump into one of my rants but effectively bisexual communities exist in little pockets (Rick)

Participants described the implications of this isolation and exclusion on their sense of self-esteem and wellbeing:

> [B]eing a bisexual man or feeling bisexual … there is an element I think in saying it out loud and telling people that I feel like I am exposing myself … as somehow a bit less of a man […] it just feels embarrassing not being entirely straight or even entirely gay and knowing that I'm not part of this, you know, or feeling not part of [a community] (Ivo)

Broadly, the participants all in some way described similar feelings of shame, embarrassment, and vulnerability as Ivo, highlighting the perversive and internalizing power of biphobic and bi-negative discourses (Bollas, 2023). Yet, as Ivo alludes to above, ideals of masculinity were also seen as a barrier to expressing not only their sexuality, but also acknowledging the mental trauma associated with biphobic attitudes:

> I had a bad split up with my wife. It was learning that I could talk to people, that crying wasn't a bad thing. So it's, it's all been a learning experience for me, to learn that I can do these things without being judged … I've learnt that crying in front of people or talking to people about my feelings isn't a bad thing and it isn't a [threat to] my masculinity (Carl)

Russell also described similar difficulties when making sense of his bisexual identity, alluding to the role of hegemonic masculinity and internalized homophobia as barriers to his understanding of his bisexuality:

> I had thoughts in my mind that I'd rather be dead than gay … I have to be honest, you know, it's taken me a long time to accept myself, there was many years that I was against myself because I couldn't intellectualise it, I couldn't, you know, there was things obviously like for many gay and bisexual men, things like getting your head around sort of things like … how you feel about yourself as a man (Russell)

For Russell, understanding and disclosing his sexual identity and desires was impeded by the sense that this conflicted with idealized or hegemonic expectations of masculinity; that being bisexual was in some way incompatible with being typically masculine. Predominantly, then, the bisexual men in this study outlined a sense of uncertainty, conflict, and tension, when constructing and navigating a bisexual-masculine identity, adapting to the perceived expectations of the heterosexual and queer cultural spaces they encountered.

Discussion

A key focus of sexualities research in recent years has been to locate bi + selfhoods across the lexicon of sexual identities (Hayfield et al., 2014; McInnis et al., 2022; Steinman, 2011). Historically, sexual orientation, attraction, and desire have been theorized on a scale or spectrum—such as the Kinsey scale (Weinrich, 2014)—ranging from exclusive opposite-sex desire to exclusive same-sex desire (Bollas, 2023). The position of bisexuality in the middle of this continuum has contributed to many of the social misconceptions regarding bisexuality, such as bisexual desire as fluid or shifting over time, and bisexuality as a phase (Charley et al., 2023; Hayfield et al., 2018; Pollitt & Roberts, 2021). Bi + identities, then, are often perceived as unstable, fluctuating, or confused, which question their legitimacy and viability as sexual identities, with *exclusive* heterosexual or homosexual desire privileged in Western cultures. This "hegemonic monosexuality," as termed by Bollas (2023), serves to obscure, restrict, and erase the possibility of a viable bisexual identity (Anders et al., 2023; Charley et al., 2023). As part of the reflexive construction of selfhood and identity, then, bisexual-identifying individuals must navigate a complex landscape within which they are consistently reminded that they do not "belong" (McInnis et al., 2022). For bi + men, in particular, the intersection of gender and sexuality is further complicated by hegemonic masculine expectations which dictate the boundaries of plausible gender and sexual expression (Connell, 2005; Flood, 2008; Richardson, 2010).

Echoing the findings of previous studies of bisexuality and masculinity (Anders et al., 2023; Magrath, 2022; Pennington, 2009), participants in this study presented their experiences of sexual identity construction as occurring between dichotomous cultural spaces, underpinned by normative expectations of hetero- and gay-masculinities. When discussing heteronormative cultural spaces, such as pubs, gyms, or sporting environments, the participants alluded to the enduring hegemony of orthodox masculine values in shaping behaviors, particularly in interactions with other men. Appearing physically and mentally tough underpinned many of these interactions, particularly when responding to or initiating weaponised humor or "banter" in social environments (Anders et al., 2023). What was interesting here was the compelling nature of such expressions; while not identified as personally idealized traits, many participants felt the need to engage in such behaviors in order to "fit in" and avoid exclusion or ridicule from social or friendship groups. Such code switching—performing masculinity to align with the perceived gendered norms of cultural spaces—was thus presented as a discursive resource for maintaining (hetero)masculine status; however, this was often at the expense of participants' identification and expression of bisexual desire. Disclosing their bisexuality was presented as a risk to their masculine stake in such contexts, contributing to a sense of dissonance or liminality between their gender and sexual identity (Greco & Stenner, 2017; McInnis et al., 2022; Prieto, 2023).

The impact of gender modality is also a key factor to consider in relation to this sense of liminality between the participants' gender and sexual identities. All the participants in this study identified with their gender assigned at birth; the ways in which bi + men establish their "queer" status warrants further investigation, particularly in light of recent research relating to plurisexual identities in which traditional gender binaries are challenged or resisted (Cipriano et al., 2022; Galupo et al., 2017; Hayfield & Křížová, 2021; Maliepaard, 2021).

When describing how heterosexual/normative and queer spaces were navigated, the participants described the multiple ways in which their identities were curated or policed in light of concerns regarding bi-negativity or biphobia. In particular, the participants' accounts illuminated some of the contemporary spaces in which this occurred, such as when using online dating apps, providing original perspectives on these contexts. Interviewees' accounts demonstrated the ways in which masculine traits are pulled between heterosexual and queer cultural contexts, constructing the boundaries of acceptable and desirable masculine sexualities (Anders et al., 2023; Charley et al., 2023). Key here is the underlying dichotomy between these contexts, with expressions of masculinity and sexuality divided between heteronormative and homonormative expectations; what is missing is a viable discursive and embodied space in which bisexuality is recognized and legitimated (Bollas, 2023).

This sense of illegitimacy or dissonance associated with bisexuality is a key area of concern for sexualities scholars owing to the detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of bi + individuals, experiencing higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation when compared to heterosexual or gay men (Anders et al., 2023; Cross et al., 2024; Dodge et al., 2016). This is particularly pertinent given the hegemonic masculine expectation that men must present a resilient and stoic persona (Connell, 2005). The findings in this study offer novel perspectives regarding bi + men's experiences of mental health trauma by illuminating the sense of exclusion, isolation, and liminality encountered. Bisexuality was described as being navigated on the "fringes" of cultural worlds and underpinned by a feeling of uncertainty and ambiguity- of being "not quite straight and not quite gay." Social and family support has previously been identified by research as a key factor in negotiating bi-negativity, bi-phobia, and bi-erasure, however, future research must focus on the ways in which bisexual communities and bisexual signifiers can be recognized and normalized across cultural spaces (Bollas, 2023).

Conclusion

The first of the two overarching themes identified and interpreted indicated that bisexual masculine identities are constructed across two distinct and dichotomous cultural "worlds," ranging from heteronormative informed contexts on the one hand, and gay/queer spaces on the other. Throughout these accounts, selfhoods were demonstrated as being interpreted, curated, and policed within the confines of heteronormative and homonormative discourses and expectations. The second theme highlighted the cultural barriers that restrict bisexual expressions, illustrating the various ways in which the expression of bisexuality is ignored or erased. The consequences of bi-negativity and bi-erasure is an increased likelihood of social isolation for bisexual men, and a sense of dissonance between gendered and sexual selves. It is thus important for future research to explore the potential pathways for the recognition of bisexuality as a viable and legitimate sexual identity, challenging the hegemony of monosexual discourses which dictate understandings of sexual desires, and inhibit the development of congruent gender and sexual identities.

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Appendix A: Interview schedule

Beliefs about masculinity

- What sort of words or images does the word "masculinity" bring up for you?
- In what ways are you masculine?
- In what ways are you not masculine?
- How important is it for men to be masculine?
- How important is it for you to feel masculine?
- How important is it for you that other people perceive you as masculine?

Behaviors in sexual encounters

Thinking of occasions when you've had a sexual encounter with a female partner, if relevant…

- How masculine do you feel when you have sex with a female partner?
- What aspects of the sexual encounter make you feel more masculine? This might include things like the type of sex and the sexual practices you engage in, characteristics of your partner etc.)
- What aspects of the sexual encounter make you feel less masculine?
- Would you say that when you have sex with a female partner you are aware of safer sex practices?
- What sort of safer sex practices have you engaged in, in sex with a female partner?
- How did those safer sex practices come about? I.e., who initiated them? What were the influences on why you engaged in them?

NB: *Ask these questions hypothetically if the participant has not had any sexual encounters with female partners*

Thinking of occasions when you've had a sexual encounter with a male partner, if relevant…

- How masculine do you feel when you have sex with a male partner?
- What aspects of the sexual encounter make you feel more masculine?
- What aspects of the sexual encounter make you feel less masculine?
- If you have anal sex with men, how would you describe the position you prefer to adopt? For example, perhaps you prefer being a top, a bottom, a power bottom etc.
- Why is this your preferred position?
- If you have anal sex with men, how would you describe the position you usually adopt?
- Why do you usually end up taking this position?
- In relevant: When you have anal sex with men, how do you determine who will take which position?
- How masculine do you feel when you have anal sex with men?
- How is your feeling of masculinity related to being a top (bottom etc.) position?
- Can you describe a time when you had a sex with a man who you felt was more masculine than you? And a time when the man who you felt was less masculine? What happened in that occasion? What sort of sex did you have?

- Would you say that when you have sex with a male partner you are aware of safer sex practices?
- What sort of safer sex practices have you engaged in, in sex with a male partner?
- How did those safer sex practices come about? I.e., who initiated them? What were the influences on why you engaged in them?
- Some gay and bisexual men have a "tribe" identity. Do you have a tribe identity? For example, do you identify as a "twink," "bear," "cub," "otter" etc.? If so, what influence does this have on the type of sex you have? What influence does this tribe identity have on your feelings of masculinity?

Reflection

- Is there anything you'd like to add at this point?
- Are there any questions that you expected me to ask, that I haven't?
- Were there any questions that you weren't expecting me to ask?
- How have you found taking part in this interview?
- Would you like to ask me any questions about any aspect of the interview, or what I will do with the answers you've provided?