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Race to the Top: Masculinity, Sociosexual Hierarchy, and the Lives of Gay, Bisexual, Queer (GBQ+) Community in Singapore

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2025-09-20

https://doi.org/10.25595/4379

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Working Paper

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Chong et al., Shao Yuan: *Race to the Top: Masculinity, Sociosexual Hierarchy, and the Lives of Gay, Bisexual, Queer (GBQ+) Community in Singapore*. Göttingen: Rainbow+, 2025-09-20. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/4379.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.47952/gro-publ-273

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New Perspectives in Gender Research

Working Paper Series 2025, Volume 2

Shao Yuan Chong, Shawn Van, Chenwei Hu, Yong Han Ng, Seng Wee Toh, Ye Xuan Wee, Daniel Weng Siong Ho, Muhammad Hafiz bin Jamal, Rayner Kay Jin Tan, Rainbow+

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Mit einem Kommentar von Philipp Hofstetter

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New Perspectives in Gender Research
Working Paper Series

(ISSN 2509-8179)

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Suggested Citation
Shao Yuan Chong et al. (2025). Race to the top: Masculinity, Sociosexual Hierarchy, and the Lives of Gay, Bisexual, Queer (GBQ+) Community in Singapore; Gender(ed) Thoughts, Working Paper Series, Vol. 2, p. 1–18. https://doi.org/10.47952/gro-publ-273.

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Race to the Top: Masculinity, Sociosexual Hierarchy, and the Lives of Gay, Bisexual, Queer (GBQ+) Community in Singapore

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Zusammenfassung

Sexuelle Orientierung und geschlechtsspezifische Normen sind eng miteinander verwoben und werden von kulturellen, sozialen und politischen Strukturen beeinflusst. Diese prägen die soziosexuellen Hierarchien, die der Einzelne auf der Grundlage seiner sexuellen und geschlechtlichen Identität von klein auf erfährt, und wirken sich auf die Ergebnisse des Einzelnen in unterschiedlichen kulturellen Kontexten aus. Singapur stellt einen einzigartigen Fall dar, in dem euroamerikanische Ansätze mit seinen asiatischen kulturellen Wurzeln zusammenfließen. Ausgehend von dem Singapurer Fall adressiert diese Studie die bestehende Lücke im Verständnis darüber, wie soziosexuelle Hierarchien die Erfahrungen von schwulen, bisexuellen und queeren (GBQ+) Männern beeinflussen. In dieser umfassenden Studie über die gelebten Erfahrungen von GBQ+-Männern in Singapur, wurden die Interviews von neun Personen systematisch analysiert, um zu verstehen, wie die soziosexuelle Hierarchie in Singapur geschlechtsspezifische Normen beeinflusst und sich auf ihr Leben auswirkt. Ausgehend von der Theorie der prekären Männlichkeit deuten die Ergebnisse darauf hin, dass Männer aus dem gesamten Spektrum der sexuellen Orientierung GBQ+-Männer mit dem Ziel schikanieren, in der soziosexuellen Hierarchie aufzusteigen. Internalisierten Männlichkeitserwartungen führen bei GBQ+ Männern zu Scham und Selbstkontrolle, was sich auf ihre psychische Gesundheit auswirkt. Über die Selbstkontrolle hinaus betreiben GBQ+ Männer auch Community Policing, um andere GBQ+ Männer zu bestrafen, die die Männlichkeitsstandards nicht erfüllen. Trotz der Stigmatisierung widersetzten sich einige GBQ+ Community-Mitglieder der soziosexuellen Hierarchie, um ihr authentisches Selbst zu leben, was ihnen ein Gefühl der Authentizität vermittelte.

Schlagworte

Geschlechtsspezifische Normen, soziosexuelle Hierarchie, Theorie der Prekären Männlichkeit, schwule bisexuelle und queere Männer

Abstract

Sexual orientation and gendered norms are deeply intertwined and influenced by cultural, social, and political structures – these shape the sociosexual hierarchies that one experiences based on their sexual and gender identities from an early age, and impact individuals' outcomes in different cultural contexts. Singapore presents a unique case where it combines Euroamerican approaches with its Asian cultural roots. In Singapore, there remains a gap in the understanding of how sociosexual hierarchies influence the experience of gay, bisexual, and queer (GBQ+) men in Singapore. Derived from a broader study investigating the lived experiences of GBQ+ men, this study thematically analysed the interviews of nine GBQ+ men to understand how Singapore's sociosexual hierarchy influences gendered norms and impacts their lives. Drawing from the lens of the Precarious Manhood theory, the findings suggest that men across the sexual orientation spectrum victimise GBQ+ men with the goal of climbing up the sociosexual hierarchy. Expectations of masculinity created internalised shame and self-policing for GBQ+ men, impacting their mental health outcomes. Beyond the self, GBQ+ men also engage in community policing to punish other GBQ+ men who fail to meet masculinity standards. Despite the stigma, some GBQ+ community members resisted the sociosexual hierarchy to live their authentic selves, which allowed them a sense of authenticity. With a better appreciation of the processes of the sociosexual hierarchy, we recommend adopting strategies that conscientiously promote inclusivity for GBQ+ men in Singapore, and challenge masculinity norms through interventions that reach men across the sexuality spectrum.

Keywords

Gendered norms, sociosexual hierarchy, Precarious Manhood Theory, gay bisexual and queer men, Singapore

1. Stereotypical gendered norms associated with sexual orientation in LGBTQIA+

Sexual orientation and gender relations are intricately connected and governed through structures of society, influencing social, relational, and psychological outcomes for individuals (Bohan and Halpern 1997; Tskhay and Rule 2015). For men, expectations of 'doing' gender according to hegemonic masculinity – to expressly present traits of "a) anti-femininity, b) status and achievement, c) inexpressiveness and independence, and d) adventurousness and aggressiveness (Kilmartin 2010: 7)" as part of cisheterosexual masculinity – begin even since childhood given the pressures from one's social ecology (Herek 1986; Butler 2007; Kane 2006; Ricciardelli et al. 2015; West and Zimmerman 1987). Failing to express in line with traits of heterosexual masculinity generates negativity from other male community members, regardless of one's actual sexual orientation (Herek 2002; Nierman et al. 2007; Sinacore et al. 2017; Vandello et al. 2008; Whitley Jr. 2001). For Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and other non-cisheterosexual (LGBTQIA+) communities, these same expectations apply where the ability to conform to gendered norms facilitates greater acceptability and assimilation of LGBTQIA+ individuals into mainstream society (Carballo-Dieugez et al. 2004; Mittleman 2023; West and Zimmerman 1987). Given the advantages offered, LGBTQIA+ men modify their behaviours to ensure they conform to gender scripts (including presenting as cisheterosexual), even if it comes at the cost of their health (Dillion et al. 2019; Parent et al. 2012).

Gendered norms significantly influence the lives of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Singapore. In Singapore, hegemonic masculine norms are defined by one's ability to provide for the family, to be a gentleman, to remain emotionally tough, to avoid inferiority to women, and to avoid femininity (Wong et al. 2016). These gendered norms are further instilled into Singaporean men through state policies: mandatory conscription in Singapore has become a rite of passage into 'manhood,' during which traits of hegemonic masculinity are reinforced (Lowe 2019).

Stereotypes continue to perpetuate the understanding that gender expression/identity is a necessarily accurate indicator of whether one could be queer sexually (Devan 2021; Tan 2012). For example, the Singaporean conscription system also automatically lumps homosexuality and transgender identities together, gauging one's level of 'homosexuality' based on gendered understanding (whether one was a 'male' or 'female' in a relationship) — these assumptions are then used to determine an individual's 'fit' for roles in the military (Leong 2008; Tan 2012).

The stereotypical association of gendered norms being tied to one's LGBTQIA+ sexual orientation means that in cisheteronormative Singapore, non-conforming gendered bodies and LGBTQIA+ sexual identities are both policed and punished across the social ecology (Chua 2014; Yue and Zubillaga-Pow 2012). Non-conforming bodies (gender and sexuality) are surveilled and punished (e.g., through harassment) within the family, community, or in other spaces (Tan 2014). Words such as 'ah kua'/'bapok'/'pondan' are derogatorily used to concurrently refer to effeminate men as well as LGBTQIA+ men (Leow 2011; Sew 2017). Even within the state system, policies and programs are built to celebrate cisheteronormative masculinity and to exclude or punish non-conforming bodies. When running sex education for state educational institutions, pro-family religious organisations continue to adopt heterosexist and gender-offensive materials, resulting in the erasure and/or stigmatisation of individuals who may present as non-conforming in terms of their gender and/or sexuality (Tang 2016). Sayoni's (2018) report highlighted that gender non-conforming individuals face restrictions in their behaviours or presentation arising from the lack of anti-discrimination laws and policies. To deflect the social stigma they face, LGBTQIA+ men in Singapore may choose to perform other areas of masculinity to invite greater acceptance and better assimilation into society (Tan 2022).

2. Thinking from the perspective of the Sociosexual Hierarchy

One way to understand the motivations for LGBTQIA+ and cisheterosexual populations to conform to gendered norms is through the sociosexual hierarchy. Situated within broader discussions of hegemonic masculinities (Connell 1987; 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), the sociosexual hierarchy suggests that there is a rigid structure in which masculinities operate, whereby certain characteristics are deemed as superior to others (Lucy 2024). In this article, we argue that the sociosexual hierarchy is but a perceived social order that drives one's behaviour, rather than one that naturally exists within society. In discussions surrounding sociosexual hierarchies, there remains a heavy emphasis on how displays of masculinities – marked by perceived sexual and romantic attractiveness towards women – allow for one to be determined to be on the superior ranks of masculinities (Botto and Gottzén 2024; Ging 2019; Lucy 2024). Contemporary discussions of sociosexual hierarchies have revolved around literature discussing involuntary celibate (incels) men (e.g., Botto and Gottzén 2024; Ging 2019; Lucy 2024), with a heavy focus on comparison amongst men and their different forms of masculinities (conceptualised as 'alpha', 'beta', 'omega' and 'zeta' masculinities). Scholarly discourse also considers how the perceived sociosexual hierarchy requires men to adopt an antifeminist, misogynous stance, with some resorting to oppression and violence against others to climb the hierarchy (from 'zeta' – the lowest rank – to 'alpha' – the highest rank of masculinity) (Ging 2019; Lucy 2024; Thorburn et al. 2022).

In the context of sexuality and sexual orientation, scholars highlight that power relations defer cisheterosexuality as the superior sexual orientation which places a man on a higher status on the sociosexual hierarchy (Odenbring 2021). Butler (2007) specifically highlights that "to characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (Butler 2007: 208). Despite the prioritisation of cisheterosexuality within the sociosexual hierarchy, attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community developed in a complex fashion. Ging (2019) suggests that supporting LGBTQIA+ individuals is not necessarily perceived as contradictory to one's goals of climbing up the hierarchy; in fact, some LGBTQIA+ community members even support and reinforce the notion of hegemonic masculinities, participating in the antifeminist, misogynistic attitudes that reinforce the perceived sociosexual hierarchies that exist within a society.

Nonetheless, how do individuals determine what actions to adopt to boost their social status within the sociosexual hierarchy? We suggest that the precarious manhood theory helps elucidate the decision-making process on behaviours and actions individuals adopt to climb the sociosexual hierarchy.

3. Understanding the Sociosexual Hierarchy through the lens of the Precarious Manhood Theory

Precarious Manhood Theory defines masculinity as a social status that has to be achieved and protected (Vandello et al. 2008). Thus, one has to continuously perform masculine traits to enjoy the advantages conferred by masculinity. As masculinity is socially constructed, what is deemed masculine varies across contexts; the effort to pursue masculinity and its downstream impact on GBQ+ men similarly shift according to contexts.

As discussed, past literature cites "a) anti-femininity, b) status and achievement, c) inexpressiveness and independence, and d) adventurousness and aggressiveness" as traits of cisheterosexual masculinity (Kilmartin 2010: 7). These same features are found amongst GBQ+ men: studies suggested that some gay men also associate masculinity with the characteristics of being "tough, strong, and sexually adventurous"

(Sánchez et al. 2009: 3). Within Asian contexts, masculinity ideals within the GBQ+ community also included "greater sexual exposure and pleasure, more open relationship possibilities, and greater chance of upward social mobility" (Kong 2020: 1016). Singapore's masculine norms also include one's ability to provide for the family (Wong et al. 2016).

Successfully pursuing these context-specific masculinity ideals enables GBQ+ men to assimilate into the larger society and be deemed as attractive by other GBQ+ men (Sánchez et al. 2009). Conversely, having gender-nonconforming traits is associated with self-esteem issues and poorer mental health outcomes (Szymanski and Carr 2008). These findings support the claims of sociosexual hierarchy where those who successfully climb up the hierarchy, through performing and consistently maintaining traits of masculinity, enjoy greater social advantages, while those who fail to do so remain at the bottom and are punished.

The Precarious Manhood theory helps provide an understanding of how individuals take actions to climb up the perceived sociosexual hierarchy. However, most related literature continues discussing this research in the contexts of Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich et al. 2010). There remains limited research looking into how much this same phenomenon exists in non-WEIRD societies. Singapore presents a unique case: as a global entrepôt, it adopts many Euroamerican approaches towards its operations while insisting on its Asian cultural roots (Ang and Stratton 2018). Limited scholarship has provided an explicit, detailed discussion addressing how gender expression and beliefs of masculinities in the context of sociosexual hierarchies relate to experiences surrounding non-conforming sexual orientation in Singapore, particularly for LGBTQIA+ men. Drawing on research on the lived experiences of gay, bisexual, and queer (GBQ+) men, this study seeks to fill the gap, and answer the following question: how do gendered norms and internalised sociosexual hierarchies influence the beliefs, behaviours, and experiences of GBQ+ men in Singapore?

4. Methods

4.1 Study Design and Procedure

This study was conducted as part of the author's broader study investigating the lived experiences of Singaporean gay, bisexual, and queer men before and after the COVID-19 pandemics started. The broader study received approval from the National University of Singapore Institutional Review Board (NUS-IRB-2022-356). A semi-structured interview-based qualitative study was determined to be best suited for this study as it provides space for the respondents to discuss how their identities interact to create their unique experiential outcomes, rather than potentially falling into the trap of employing an additive approach when accounting for intersectionality (Bowleg 2008). As an exploratory, qualitative study, this study used semi-structured biographical-narrative interviews with no a priori hypothesis set to prevent researcher bias. Biographical-narrative interviews allow researchers to derive a rich, comprehensive account of the participants' experience within their social ecology (Barabasch and Merrill 2014; Rosenthal 2004). The five senior researchers conducted the interviews (Chong, Wee, Jamal, Ho and R. Tan) before the team collectively analysed the data. Interviewees were asked questions surrounding topics relating to the interviewee's experiences surrounding their social identities, especially as they related to their LGBTQIA+ identities. After completing all the interviews, this author thematically analysed the data based on Terry and colleagues' guidelines. Data were coded semantically and inductively; after the initial themes were identified, they were reviewed and refined through rereading (Terry et al. 2017).

4.2 Participants

Participants had to be between 18 and 64, be Singapore Citizens/Permanent Residents, read and speak English, and have lived in Singapore for at least ten years. Participants must also identify as gay, bisexual, and queer (GBQ+) men. For qual-

itative studies, sample plans should be determined based on the scope of the topic, the contact time spent per respondent, and the homogeneity of the population studied (Boddy, 2016). This study used biographical interviews planned for approximately two to three hours each to provide an exploratory understanding of the experience of Singaporean gay, bisexual, and queer men.

Between September 2022 and December 2022, participants were recruited via social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit, through groups created under the social messaging platforms Discord and Telegram, and through RainbowAsia's internal network. Purposive sampling was used on social media platforms given the niche demographics that this study was targeting; after the initial recruitment, the snowball sampling method was used to increase the sample size, given that snowball sampling is effective in locating difficult-to-access populations (Rubin and Babbie 2009). Forty-four participants who met the eligibility criteria were invited to participate in the study. The interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 4 hours 34 minutes. For this specific study, we selected nine interviewees' responses as a subsample to investigate their gendered presentation and experiences across their lifespan. Adhering to Terry and colleagues' guidelines, a sample size of nine was deemed sufficient to provide an initial but in-depth understanding of the experiences of this community (Terry et al. 2017). The participants' age, gender, racial identity, self-identified sexual identity, and occupation are included in Table 1.

Table 1
Please consult the Appendix A

5. Results

5.1 Gendered Norms Governing Singapore's Male Community

Across the interviews, participants highlighted that binary cisheteronormative gendered norms continued governing everyday experiences in cisheteronormative Singapore. Such binary cisheteronormative norms expected men to be masculine and women to be feminine, and feminine men are still considered inferior. The expectation for GBQ+ men to adhere to the prescribed gendered norms has been seeded in the community's consciousness since young:

> *Raj: Yah. And it's a very like, so like, you know, "you have to act like a man", you know,* ***this, this sentence has been like, repeated throughout, like, when I was growing up****, well, "you have to act like a man a little…".*

As an extension to such binary beliefs, participants reflected that being a "man" entailed holding a deep interest in sports given the masculine association of playing sports. These associations of what it meant to be an ideal man created confusion for GBQ+ men as the traditional approach to interpreting gender roles and characteristics prohibited self-expression and created expectations on what they are meant to like and what they were not meant to like, some expectations of which these men did not adhere to.

> *Aloysius: […] People associate, I don't know, being gay with being more effeminate. And I think naturally, when I was younger, I wasn't very sporty. I'm not very interested[...]* ***So I think that made people think that I was gay because I wasn't interested in sports. And that was a stigma that people had of me.*** *And I feel like that in itself may have further fortified my own misunderstanding of what it means to be gay. But I think as I grew older and come to meet different people and come to understand myself better, I realized that all these things don't matter [...] I've learned to be less judgmental of people simply because I've learned to love diversity.*

5.2 Gendered Norms and their Influence on GBQ+ Men's Experience: Direct Influences on Enacted Stigma

Given the close association between gendered presentation and sexual orientation, looks, behaviours, and interests that do not conform to gender stereotypes often piqued the interest of non-LGBTQIA+ individuals, who associated

GBQ+ men with nonconforming genders alongside their sexualities. Myths and beliefs regarding GBQ+'s gender and sexuality non-conformity were often attached to negative sentiments and associations amongst non-LGBTQIA+ individuals. This translated to GBQ+ men having to correct non-LGBTQIA+ individuals on their misconceptions or tolerate them whenever stereotypes and stigma arise from misconceptions.

> *Curtis: [My mum] would always tell me, you shouldn't, you better not be gay when you grow up, or you will end up like this. So, she was quite taken aback when I came out to her [...] So at that point, she was blaming herself, was it the divorce? She was just up all night for six months. I would talk to her every night. She would ask me when I want to transition, because she thinks that's what it is. Then she'd ask about HIV, AIDS. She didn't know the difference between those… my mom, you know, who thought I was going to transition. I think it meant I will go under the knife and I was like, well, you know, we're not there yet.*

With the negative beliefs associated with nonconforming gendered presentations, individuals who may not conform to such gendered expectations were punished through interpersonal bullying and institutional discrimination.

> *Raj: I got bullied a lot in secondary school, mainly because [...] I was very flamboyant. And I was very out there. I was very, what people might call sissy.*

Another precipitating factor for the overwhelming need to conform to masculine norms was because of the mandatory two years of National Service (NS; military conscription). In the hypermasculine space that NS offers, topics such as gender and sexuality were usually shunned or frowned upon, and there was a strict binary of male and female genders. Deviation from the prevailing gendered norms was tantamount to inferiority. This caused GBQ+ men to keep their sexuality all to themselves, as any explicit expression would be socially disadvantageous.

> *Darius: [...] when you declare on the form that you are a male [homosexual] NSF [Full-Time National Serviceman], and when you get admitted or enlisted into conscript service [...] I've heard [...]* ***that you will be ostracized together with a group of fellow gay male NSFs within the same bunk and you'll not be allowed to interact or intermingle with any of the other company mates or platoon mates or battalion mates at large*** *[...] even if you have a proven track record of physical fitness and impeccable standards and whatnot,* ***as long as you declare on the form that you are gay or, you know, you're not within the male or the female gender, or even if you prefer not to say your gender, automatically your physical employability status will be downgraded from, let's say, an A or a B to even an E****, where they give you a clerical position [...]*

> *Raj: And I think one big experience of fighting the stigma was National Service when I first enlisted two years ago [...]* ***it was a very hyper-masculine environment*** *[...] I didn't act differently [...] I didn't try to masculinise myself [...] I stayed true to myself, you know, I was the same outgoing, happy, flamboyant person [...] I felt this need to prove people wrong to like break away from like that stigma [...] Because I did get bullied for a bit. And just a little bit like "oh my god, he's an ahkwa bla bla bla.*

5.3 Indirect Influences on Social Support System

Beyond immediate decisions and perceptions, indirectly, nonconforming identities also impacted friendship development amongst GBQ+ men. GBQ+ individuals reported feeling that because of their identity, they felt it was unnatural to maintain friendships with other cisheterosexual men.

> *Brett: I used to think that I wasn't able to make friends with guys. Because you know, I'm attracted to them. Which, I don't know, where that logic came about, but [laughs] I, you, it limited my limited my outreach, my friends, scope, and stuff. And I wasn't very comfortable with, er, being friends with guys, because I thought, you know, being in this sexuality means you can't be friends. But in actual fact, it's not true lah. Like completely not true. In fact, I [now have] like, a lot of guy friends also [laughs]. I put that behind me.*

Contrastingly, many GBQ+ men also reported developing stronger peer relationships with women.

Curtis: Especially amongst my female peers, it's rare for them to have like a guy hang out with them and they can talk to them about anything. So I felt especially appreciated. Yeah, and then they would just like hug [...] 勾你的手 (hook their hands around yours), you know [...] And then go out with you or go to the next lecture. It's a very cute thing, you know, and not a lot of people have that privilege to be in that position [...] So then they would tell me about their things, what happens in their relationship, their families.

Family and traditional values were additional venues through which masculinity norms were enforced. This created additional tension for gender-nonconforming GBQ+ men when interacting and seeking support from family members.

Raj: one thing that did affect, um, my whole journey and finding myself, and like, discovering sexuality [...] has a lot to do with tradition [...] ***traditional values of like being in an Asian household****, more specifically an Indian household, you know, the family name is very important.* ***So you have to be a certain way…you need to be like a super smart student, you have to be a super masculine guy****, you know, and meeting everybody, like a house gathering for like, Deepavali and then we see all your, like, masculine cousins like: "oh man did you see the soccer match yesterday? oh bro it's so cool [laughs]" [...] I knew I wasn't what they want me to be. I knew I wasn't this [...] masculine, following-the-rules kind of person [...]* ***I just went against it because I knew that wasn't me.***

5.4 Gendered Norms and their Influence on GBQ+ Actions

Beyond affecting how GBQ+ men interact with the larger Singapore society, rigid, binary gendered norms also influenced how GBQ+ men behaved and how they interacted with others within the LGBTQIA+ community.

Participants reported a high level of self-monitoring among GBQ+ men, with one having to over-conform to masculinity ideas in public while maintaining a separate identity in LGBTQIA+ spaces. Such actions included pursuing a muscular body type, exercising regularly, and pursuing high-prestige careers. This was effective in avoiding being associated with feminine traits and LGBTQiA+ community.

Darius: (My cousin) ***was an alpha male****, typically like any of us,* ***alpha male****, neurotypical, you know,* ***smart, brainy, a doctor wannabe*** *[...] buff, gym addict, pumping iron and whatnot [...]* ***very masculine on the outside but I did not realize that on the weekends, he was going out to [...] gay bars and gay pubs and gay parties and all that*** *and [...] advocating a lot for affordable medical health care for the LGBTQ community, especially amongst LGBTQ males…*

Participants reported that successfully attaining masculinity ideals is believed to confer advantages over a number of domains for GBQ+ men, including relationships, happiness, and worthiness. Specifically, maintaining a muscular body was idealised and exercise was the primary mode by which GBQ+ men performed masculinity.

Curtis: They feel like ***a six-pack is a must*** *[...] And they kind of think that once you've attained a certain body, all your problems will go away [...] they go to the gym to kind of work out, like five days a week just to get over,* ***just to escape that issue****. So I think it's terrible because* ***they're not tackling the main problem****. And it becomes a bit of a delusion for them to think that once they have that body, good things will come their way [...]* ***I think having your body tied to your self-worth is one of the most pressing issues. You don't deserve love, you don't deserve to look for a relationship, you don't deserve an ideal, happy life because you don't look a certain way.*** *I've seen friends who are very hard on themselves for this. But they don't realize it's actually not it.*

When GBQ+ men were unable and/or unwilling to adhere to masculinity standards, they were punished and discriminated against. Some reported adopting strategies to minimise stigma and maintain a positive self-image: performing above and beyond in other areas of life to prove their worth to themselves and others. These represented efforts to maintain agency and control

in an environment that was hostile to gender and sexual minorities.

> *Raj: And* ***I felt the need to be better than everyone****, weirdly enough, because I wanted to prove that, that, I can just, I can do things just as good as you are. Right? Like, doesn't matter if I'm gay or not [...]* ***And it was what spurred me to, like, do things like extra, do things tenfold?*** *Like work hard for, like, something?* ***I felt this need to prove people wrong*** *to, like, break away from, like, that stigma.*

> *Faisal:* ***Yes, people call me names, people label me, people ostracise me. But it is something that I cannot go and tell that person to stop, you know, the more I tell them to stop****, the more they will be doing.* ***So, I think the only thing to move forward is to focus on what can I do well, what can I show people that I am capable of doing?*** *[...] So yeah, that has* ***built my resilience****. And I think at work itself, I think the resilient is [...] knowing what is your role in that institution or in that organisation, execute it well, and* ***prove to people that, that, that, you know, with my identity and my orientation, I'm able to actually do better than, the other people.***

Stigma and discrimination greatly influence one's gender expression. Specifically, stigma and expectations created an internalised sense of shame and self-policing towards the self for GBQ+ men. Some participants indicated that they embraced their nonconforming gender expression to live their authentic selves, thereby building resilience in the process.

> *Raj: I knew I wasn't what they want me to be. I knew I wasn't this masculine, following-the-rules kind of person [...]* ***I just went against it because I knew that wasn't me. So, it did help me and shape me into like, discovering myself and making me more comfortable in my own skin*** *[…] one big experience of fighting the stigma was National Service when I first enlisted two years ago [...] it was a very hyper-masculine environment. But [...]* ***I didn't act differently. I didn't try to. I didn't try to masculinize myself [...] I stayed true to myself, you know, I was the same outgoing, happy, flamboyant person.***

5.5 Beyond the Self: GBQ+ Community Policing Arising from Gender Norms

Gender norms influenced how GBQ+ men interacted with one another. Masculine beauty standards continued to be imposed on and by GBQ+ men, where attractiveness was defined primarily by masculinity. Many respondents highlighted the strong desire – and expectations – to achieve a muscular body through regular exercise. Those who were successful in doing so achieved the admiration of other GBQ+ members. Not conforming to these masculine standards could also predispose one to poorer self-esteem, shame, and self-loathing arising from the stigma.

> *Darius: I would say as part of the community,* ***I think every gay man or every alpha male in Singapore wants to look like David Beckham or Cristiano Ronaldo.*** *So I guess that's probably the expectation, of course.*

> *Raj: I feel like the ideal category that everybody idolizes,* ***everybody loves is the "twunk" category, so you're like, you're slim. But like, you, you're also packed in when it comes to muscles.*** *[…] I think that's the ideal one that everybody looks up to, and everybody wants to be* ***[…] where being a masculine, muscular guy, heart to soul, you know, and all that is, like, put on a pedestal.*** *[Laughs] And then that's when* ***I feel like a shame because […] I feel like I'm not all that.***

Beyond traits of masculinity that defined if one could thrive in the GBQ+ community, subgroups within the LGBTQIA+ community that were further minoritised often face stigma and discrimination by the GBQ+ community itself. For example, respondents highlighted how trans community members faced rejection even within the LGBTQIA+ community because of their gender identities.

> *Alex: I think even among the GBQ+ communities, the trans community is looked down upon […]* ***how difficult it was, or nearly impossible […]***

to get any matches or […] knowing anybody who is interested to form a relationship *[…] being in the smaller minority.*

5. Discussion

Given the close relationships between gender relations and sexual orientation (Bohan and Halpern 1997; Tskhay and Rule 2015), this study aimed to explore the impact of gendered norms, specifically masculinity, on the experiences of GBQ+ men within the cultural, social and political landscapes of Singapore. Aligning with past research, the findings suggest that masculinity expectations influence the way in which GBQ+ are treated; significantly, these experiences impact the attitudes of GBQ+ men as well as how they act towards themselves and other GBQ+ community members around them.

Our findings suggest that the perceived sociosexual hierarchy continues governing the lives of GBQ+ and non-GBQ+ men even in Singapore (Lucy 2024). Specifically, we observe that at schools and workplaces, GBQ+ men continue experiencing bullying and discrimination especially when they express themselves to be more feminine than their peers. These experiences elaborate on existing literature on how LGBTQIA+ individuals face bullying and discrimination daily, especially for those presenting with more effeminate traits (Leow 2011; Oogachaga 2012; Sew 2017).

In Singapore's cultural context, National Service is systematically included as a life stage that all male-at-birth must go through; the hypermasculine environment also translates to an inculcation of the sociosexual hierarchy into the schema of Singaporean men. In the NS context, sexual orientation is still seen as being synonymous with gender, where GBQ+ men are expected to exhibit feminine traits and are deemed as inferior to men who conform to gendered norms (Lowe 2019; Tan 2012). In line with the literature, this study found that GBQ+ men undergoing National Service learn that it is not safe and not in their best interests to disclose their sexuality in lieu of the perceived sociosexual hierarchy at play. As a result, in critical transitional years into adulthood, GBQ+ men living in Singapore are socialised to hide and reject their sexuality to gain acceptance and receive opportunities from society, echoing Tan's (2012) previous ethnographic study on GBQ+ men's experiences during conscription.

Research has suggested that in attempting to climb up the ranks of the sociosexual hierarchy, men have resorted to exhibiting violence and oppression against other men to showcase their own traits of masculinity (Ging 2019; Lucy 2024; Thorburn et al. 2022). Our findings suggest that in the race to the top of the sociosexual hierarchy, GBQ+ and non-GBQ+ men have victimised GBQ+ men in an attempt to display themselves as masculine. Beyond just the GBQ+ community, the pressure to conform to masculinity standards and climb up the sociosexual hierarchy is also heavily evident amongst GBQ+ men in Singapore. Individuals who exhibit more masculinity traits – more athletic, stronger, more muscular – often receive more support, benefits, and opportunities for connection than others, including in dating and social environments. Individuals who are effeminate are discriminated against. This is in line with the precarious manhood theory (Vandello et al. 2008), where participants reported the need to demonstrate manhood through masculine expectations.

Interviewees highlighted that the fear of stigma, discrimination, and bullying has also translated to some resorting to concealment of their gender presentation and sexual orientation in order to remain safe and assimilate into the larger Singapore society. Overall, GBQ+ men who successfully climb up higher in the hierarchy, thereby enjoying the benefits including better peer relations, better ability to form close interpersonal relationships, and better mental health. Those who fail to climb the sociosexual hierarchy reported interpersonal bullying, discrimination from family members, living lives in conflict with traditional Asian values, and experiencing shame. Past research has highlighted that experiences of LGBTQIA+ discrimination create a greater sense of shame and self-policing,

both associated with poorer mental health (Jensen 2013; Lin et al. 2018; Rodriguez 2021; Watson and Dispenza 2015). Our study findings suggested that the policing of masculinity expectations from both within and outside the community has detrimental effects on GBQ+ men's mental health, often in the form of self-stigmatisation, shame, and rejection of their own sexual identity.

Concerningly, past literature has highlighted how GBQ+ men develop body image issues because of such push towards muscularity, with growing internalising and externalising body image concerns that negatively influence mental health outcomes in the longer term (Ho 2020; Mah et al. 2024). Our findings elaborate on these past findings through a gendered perspective: our interviewees reflect that the cultural emphasis on masculine body image also resulted in GBQ+ men facing a stronger likelihood of experiencing body image issues in the effort to climb up the sociosexual hierarchy.

The policing of gendered norms within GBQ+ community also results in discrimination against other LGBTQIA+ individuals — in our example, our participant specifically highlights the transgender community as a target for such discrimination. This study was the first that we know of that specifically found how Singaporean GBQ+ men reinforced internalised masculinity norms, highlighting the cross-cultural applicability of Rodriguez's (2018) findings, which spoke to how Mexican American gay men reinforce internalised norms of masculinity and impose it within the GBQ+ community.

Not all GBQ+ men employ aesthetics and behavioural methods in order to establish their own social positioning amid the sociosexual hierarchy. Instead, our findings suggest that GBQ+ participants sought to prove themselves by overcompensating in other aspects of life that are linked to achievement and hence masculinity. This includes performing above and beyond in schools and workplaces, areas in which GBQ+ men deem that they have more agency. Pursuing achievement-oriented goals as an alternative means to achieve masculinity occurs likely due to Singapore's prevalent ideology of meritocracy, highlighting the relevance of cultural context in determining possible pathways to achieving social status (Teo 2019). Excelling in other areas of life allows these men to prove their worthiness to others and minimise the discrimination they face, even if they do not conform to gendered norms in relation to aesthetics and behavioural presentation.

Challenging existing literature suggesting forced conformity towards the sociosexual hierarchy, our findings suggest that some GBQ+ men actively make decisions to break past masculinity norms and to define their own social experience within the Singapore context. For instance, some GBQ+ men actively embrace their feminine traits ("out and proud") rather than concealing them, allowing them to feel greater freedom for self-exploration. Instead of facing only negative outcomes at the bottom of the perceived sociosexual hierarchy, we argue that efforts to break free from the hierarchy may allow for greater sentiments of liberation that may instead improve individual outcomes: doing so allows one to embrace their authentic self-expression, improving self-esteem, and building resilience in the process.

6. Limitations, Recommendations, and Future Directions

While this study has attempted to provide an in-depth analysis of GBQ+ experiences in Singapore through a case study of eleven samples, the small sample size may have limited the generalisability of the results of this study. Further, the sample's demographics may be less diverse, with participants falling between the ages of 20 to 39 and all speaking from a cis-male perspective. A more significant sample could be included to cover more diverse lived experiences and a broader demographic of participants to ensure that findings are more representative of the Singaporean GBQ+ experiences.

Nonetheless, this study has highlighted clear negative implications of enforcing gendered norms for Singaporean GBQ+ men across the

social ecology. Given our findings, on the individual and community levels, support should be provided to gender-nonconforming individuals to help manage everyday stigma and discrimination. Of specific relevance is the consideration of resilience building: our study suggests the possibility of building resilience within the GBQ+ community through resisting and breaking free from the sociosexual hierarchy. On a systemic level, we recommend local policymakers and educators bring awareness to masculinity expectations imposed upon men across different life stages, to challenge these expectations in their everyday lives.

In line with our recommendations above, future research may take this study's findings one step further by considering how gendered norms can be challenged through intervention research. For example, future studies may consider how best to promote inclusivity for Singaporean GBQ+ men who do not conform in terms of their gender expression and promote resilience and coping amongst gender non-conforming GBQ+ men in Singapore to resist gendered norms and expectations. Evaluating interventions to push against masculinity norms in the broader community could also look into the benefits for GBQ+ men specifically, particularly beyond the confines of WEIRD spaces.

7. Conclusion

In this article, we explored how gay, bisexual, and queer (GBQ+) men experience gender, specifically masculinity in Singapore through the sociosexual hierarchy and precarious manhood theory. This study found that the sociosexual hierarchy and precarious manhood theory suitably applies to Singapore's GBQ+ context: rigid, binary norms are instilled in GBQ+ men's experience from an early age through state policy, mandatory conscription, family teachings, traditional cultural values, interpersonal bullying, and self-stigmatization. Not only does the larger Singapore society subject GBQ+ men to masculinity ideals, GBQ+ men themselves perpetuate these masculinity ideals on themselves and the GBQ+ community. By performing gender, these men strive to climb up the sociosexual hierarchy to be accepted by society and other GBQ+ men, and to avoid gender-based stigma and discrimination. Conversely, gender-nonconforming individuals are punished for failing to live up to masculinity standards, resulting in poorer relationship and mental health outcomes. Our findings suggest that the pursuit of masculinity ideals harms men across sexual orientations, specifically in increasing the risk for body image issues. Despite the pressure to conform to sociosexual hierarchical norms, evidence suggests that there are GBQ+ men who are able to break away from the sociosexual hierarchy and embrace their authentic expressions and identities. These individuals reported doing so allowed them to build resilience and form close support networks with female friends, challenging the notion that failure to conform necessitates poorer outcomes.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Subsample participants' demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Self-identified racial Identity	Self-identified Sexual Identity	Industry
Curtis	33	Cis Male	Chinese	Gay	Self-employed
Darius	24	Cis Male	Indian	Gay	Education
Faisal	39	Cis Male	Malay	Gay	Education
Alex	28	Cis Male	Chinese	Queer	Social Services/NGO
Raj	22	Cis Male	Indian	Gay	National Serviceman
Brett	21	Cis Male	Malay	Bisexual	National Serviceman
Akash	35	Cis Male	Tamil	Bisexual	Engineering/Technical Consulting
Aloysius	26	Cis Male	Indian	Gay	Student
Xiaoming	20	Cis Male	Chinese	Queer	Student

Kommentar

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Sociosexual Hierarchies constitute a social order with a strong impact on GBQ+ men's lives. In an Asian context, Singapore is of special interest as it combines various Asian roots, such as a Chinese, Malay, or Indian backgrounds with Euro-American culture. This study confirms for the first time in the case of Singapore a decisive influence of masculinity conceptualizations, based to an analysis of a series of biographical-narrative interviews conducted with GBQ+ men. Gendered norms have an impact on the psychological state and behavior of GBQ+ men.

A prominent example is the recruitment experience of the mandatory National Service, where masculinity standards dominate and are internalized by the individuals interviewed. It is difficult to break free from these norms; instead, they perpetuate themselves within the GBQ+ community, for instance, through the ideal of a muscular body or the suppression of effeminate behavior. On a systemic level, the authors identify a lack of awareness regarding unquestioned masculinity expectations, even though these are evidently present in the Singaporean society.