Short Communication

Young gay men's sexism predict their male facial masculinity preference in China

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have indicated that sexism is related to romantic partner preference in heterosexual men and women. We examined the association between sexism and preference for male facial masculinity among 185 gay men in China. Hostile sexism (HS; hostility toward women who oppose traditional roles) was positively correlated with facial masculinity preference. Protective paternalism, a component of benevolent sexism (BS; ideation of women who conform to traditional gender roles) was negatively correlated with facial masculinity preference. These findings indicated that sexism was related to male facial masculinity preferences in gay men. Thus, regardless of sexual orientation, men high on HS tend to prefer sex-typicality in potential partners.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Preferences for facial masculinity

According to the immunocompetence handicap hypothesis, exaggerated secondary sexual cues may be signs of good genes and health and are regarded as more attractive (Folstad & Karter, 1992). Men's facial masculinity characteristics (e.g., pronounced brow and large jaws) are generally considered to serve as secondary sexual cues for immunocompetence in mate choice (Rhodes, 2006; Thornhill & Gangestad, 2006). Studies have documented that male facial masculinity characteristics are positively related to circulating testosterone levels (Roney, Hanson, Durante, & Maestripieri, 2006) and may signal good health to potential partners (Thornhill & Gangestad, 2006).

However, studies on the relationship between masculinity and attractiveness in men have had inconsistent results. Among heterosexual samples, some studies have shown that women generally prefer feminine male faces (Grammer & Thornhill, 1994), while others have shown that women generally prefer masculine male faces (Little & Perrett, 2002; Perrett et al., 1998). This suggests that there are individual variations in women's preferences for masculine men. Recently, research has further explored these individual differences in male facial preference (e.g., Jones, Little, Watkins, Welling, & DeBruine, 2011).

1.2. Facial masculinity preferences in gay men

In contrast to studies on women, only a few studies have examined facial masculinity preference in gay men. Although generally homosexual men appear to demonstrate stronger facial masculinity preferences than do heterosexual men (Glassenberg, Feinberg, Jones, Little, & DeBruine, 2010), they still show individual differences in this preference. Researchers have shown that sexual self-labels relate to male facial masculinity preference in gay men (Zheng, Hart, & Zheng, 2013): "tops" (i.e., men who prefer the anal penetrative role) preferred more feminized male faces than did "bottoms" (i.e., men who prefer the anal receptive role). Two subsequent studies, however, found no overriding preference among homosexual males for either masculine or feminine facial features when evaluating both manipulated and non-manipulated portraits (Valentová, Roberts, & Havlíček, 2013; Welling, Singh, Puts, Jones, & Burriss, 2013). Currently, this issue remains unresolved.

1.3. Sexism and partner preference

Glick and Fiske's (1996) ambivalent sexism theory describes two types of sexist attitudes that justify and maintain gender inequality. *Hostile sexism* (HS) refers to "hostility toward women who challenge male power, whether directly (e.g., feminists) or through 'feminine wiles'" (Glick et al., 2004). *Benevolent sexism* (BS) differs in tone, and is defined as attitudes toward women that are "subjectively benevolent but patronizing, casting women as wonderful but fragile creatures who ought to be protected and provided for by men" (Glick et al., 2004). The constructs that

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characterize BS include protective paternalism (i.e., men ought to protect and provide for the women on whom they depend to support their dominant role), complementary gender differentiation (i.e., women and men are fundamentally very different; women are the "better sex," but only in low-status ways that do not threaten men's power), and heterosexual intimacy (i.e., "heterosexual romantic relationships are essential for true happiness in life for both sexes"; Glick & Fiske, 2001).

BS and HS each influence people's close relationship ideals in both Chinese and American samples (Lee, Fiske, Glick, & Chen, 2010). People with a traditional gender ideology exhibited greater sex-typing of mate preferences (Eastwick et al., 2006). Furthermore, women place greater importance on partner characteristics reflecting status or resources, particularly when they were high in BS. Longitudinal analyses also revealed that, for women, BS predicted increases in status/resources preferences over time (Travaglia, Overall, & Sibley, 2009). Men, in contrast, placed greater importance on attractiveness/vitality characteristics, particularly when they were high in HS (Travaglia et al., 2009). Men's preferences for larger female breasts were significantly associated with a greater tendency to be benevolently sexist and to be hostile towards women (Swami & Tovée, 2013). A meta-analysis of 32 samples indicated that BS in women was associated with greater preferences for high-resource partners, whereas HS in men was associated with stronger preferences for physically attractive partners (Sibley & Overall, 2011).

1.4. The current study

Further studies have indicated that BS and HS are related to preferences for romantic partners, at least in heterosexual couples (Eastwick et al., 2006; Lee et al., 2010; Sibley & Overall, 2011; Travaglia et al., 2009). In terms of masculinity, greater BS and HS in men were associated with more rigid expectations for female partners to be good cooks and housekeepers (Eastwick et al., 2006), suggesting that sexism is related to preferences for a partner's masculinity/femininity. Sexist attitudes are usually operationalized as oppressive gender beliefs (Swami & Tovée, 2013; Swami et al., 2010). Furthermore, research on gender role beliefs and partner preferences has indicated that heterosexual men with strong beliefs in traditional gender roles tend to prefer more feminine (i.e., more sex-typical) partners. This begs the question of whether this effect of gender role beliefs on preferences for sex-typicality would be modulated by the sex of the preferred partner—namely, whether homosexual men high on sexism would prefer more masculine partners. Thus, the aim of this study is to explore the possible relationships between sexism and male facial masculinity preference in gay men.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

The initial sample included 206 self-reported gay men, with a mean age of 23.7 years (SD = 5.9; range: 18–50 years). Only 10% of participants were older than 30 years old. Thus, we exclude participants older than 30 years from subsequent analysis. The final sample included 185 gay men, with a mean age of 22.0 years (SD = 2.9; range: 18–30 years). Sixty-five percent were students, 29% were employed, 5% were waiting for employment, and 4% selected "other" for employment.

The study was conducted online via a Chinese survey website (www.sojump.com). Participants were recruited from a number of Chinese websites catering to gay individuals, including gay forums and QQ (a famous chat tool in China) groups. First, partici-

pants provided demographic information, and completed questionnaires assessing sexism. Second, each participant was shown 10 pairs of faces sequentially, with each pair consisting of a masculinized and feminized version of the same base face. For each pair, participants were asked to choose the image that they found more attractive. The order of masculinized and feminized faces was presented randomly for each item.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Facial masculinity preferences

We used the masculinized and feminized faces from a previous study (Zheng et al., 2013). There are 10 pairs of images in total, with each pair consisting of a masculinized and feminized version of the same base face. For each pair of images, participants were asked to choose the image they found most attractive. Figure 1 shows an example of a masculinized and feminized face used in this study. We calculated the proportion of masculine faces chosen as more attractive than feminine faces among the 10 pairs of images.

2.2.2. Ambivalent sexism inventory (ASI)

The ASI (Glick & Fiske, 1996) assesses ambivalent sexism; it contains 22 items rated on 6-point Likert scales, with responses ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The ASI consisted of two subscales: (a) hostile sexism, which assesses sexist antipathy toward women (e.g., "Feminists really want women to have more power than men"); and (b) benevolent sexism, which assesses sexist positivity toward women (e.g., "A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man"). Responses are averaged so that higher scores indicate higher levels of sexism. The Chinese version of the ASI was developed by Zhixia Chen, and its validity has been documented (Chen, Fiske, & Lee, 2009). The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alphas) of the HS and BS subscales were .79 and .67, respectively.

3. Results

The mean score of facial masculinity preference was 57.6% (SD = .25). One-sample *t*-tests (compared with 50%) demonstrated that participants preferred masculinized faces over feminized faces, M = 57.6%, SD = .25, SEM = .018, t(184) = 4.23, p < .001.

HS was positively correlated with facial masculinity preference (r = .19, p < .01). Participants with a hostile sexist attitude towards women preferred male faces that are more masculine. BS was not correlated with facial masculinity preference, r = −.11, p = .13. However, the protective paternalism component of BS was significantly negatively correlated with facial masculinity preference, r = −.17, p < .05.

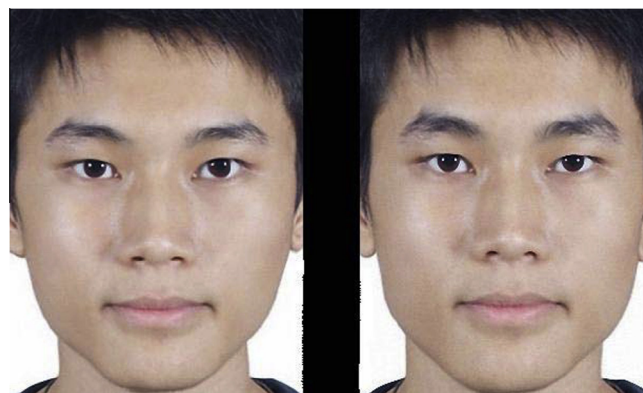**Fig. 1.** Examples of feminized (left) and masculinized (right) versions of a male face image used in this study.