UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF PASSING AND
BODY IMAGE CONCERNS IN GAY MEN

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Abstract

Body image concerns are greater and more severe in gay men (Brown & Graham, 2008; Duggan & McCreary, 2004). Passing refers to the tendency for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals to hide or lessen aspects about themselves to appear more heterosexual (Spradlin, 1998). Passing is regarded as highly distressing among LGBTQ individuals, causing increased feelings of guilt, anxiety, and resentment of their true identity (Fuller, Chang, & Rubin, 2009). Therefore, this qualitative study investigated whether passing contributes to gay males’ body image concerns in order to make the process of passing easier and less stress-inducing. Participants self-identified as male and gay and were recruited primarily through posters around the University of Regina. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed under grounded theory methodology, as designed by Corbin and Strauss (1998) and described by Creswell and Poth (2018). This study found that gay men do not incorporate passing or identity concealment into their body image concerns, but one’s ability to pass is influenced by modifiable characteristics of appearance like clothing and grooming. Self-presentation was identified as the core category of these processes that determined the participants’ choice to either pass or be open about their sexuality. The results of this study could influence methods for assisting gay men who suffer from body image issues and draw attention to passing as an experience that requires further research. Limitations of the research include the small sample size and the absence of validation techniques.

Keywords: passing, body image, identity concealment
Understanding the Experience of Passing and Body Image Concerns in Gay Men

The primary goal of this research was to understand how gay men may incorporate the concept of passing into their body image concerns. Several studies have been conducted which examine factors that influence body image concerns that are specific to gay men, like internalized homophobia or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) status (Brennan, Craig, & Thompson, 2012; Brewster, Sandil, DeBlaere, Breslow, & Eklund, 2017; Tiggemann, Martins, & Kirkbride, 2007); yet, there are currently none that address the effect that passing—attempting to maintain a false heterosexual public identity—may have on body image. Additionally, there have been few qualitative studies on body image in gay males. As such, these topics are relatively unexplored and require further research.

I was inspired to conduct this research by my own experiences as a gay male with desires to improve my physical appearance. As an undergraduate student, I have found that discussions about sexual orientations in the field of psychology are rare and inadequately discussed. I hope to simultaneously advance the research on sexual orientations and expand my own knowledge with this research. There have been relatively few qualitative studies on male body image and passing, so this study contributes detailed information to these research areas. With this research, I am giving back to the gay community which has provided me a considerable amount of support and strength throughout my youth. In the future, I hope to work with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals in a clinical or counseling practice. I believe that the experiences I have shared with my participants will inform my future career and will allow me to address the concerns of the individuals I am assisting with greater understanding. I have also gained a better understanding of issues affecting the gay community through this research,
as I have been exposed to the lived experiences of gay men. I am immensely grateful for the bravery that my participants exhibited in sharing their experiences with me.

**Literature Review**

**Male Body Image**

Body image refers to an individual’s perception and evaluation of their physical appearance with regards to a variety of different factors, including size, shape, and muscularity (Tiggemann et al., 2007). Regardless of their actual appearance, an individual’s perception of their body indicates how they believe their body looks to others. Perceived body image is also evaluated emotionally. Having a negative body image with many concerns about one’s weight or figure can be upsetting and significantly impair an individual’s functioning (Levesque & Vichesky, 2006). It can affect an individual’s self-esteem and lead to depression and harmful dietary or exercise practices (Levesque & Vichesky, 2006; McCreary, Hildebrandt, Heinberg, Boroughs, & Thompson, 2007; McCreary & Sasse, 2000).

Much of the research on male body image derives from prior research on female body image. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) proposed the objectification theory, a framework that describes how objectifying images and cultural standards of attractiveness negatively affect body image and contribute towards harmful dietary practices in women. Specifically, women learn to view their bodies from the perspective of others and judge their bodies based on how they believe others perceive them. Through this perspective, women may feel unhappy about their appearance and proceed to develop issues such as depression, anxiety, and various eating disorders.

Later research has attempted to fit men into the objectification theory framework, with limited results. Schooler and Ward (2006) examined the effect that media has on men’s body
image and found that body image concerns were dependent upon the type of media that men consume. Participants who frequently read pornographic or fitness magazines reported increased body comfort, while participants who commonly watched television or music videos reported decreased body comfort. It appears that for some men, images of highly muscular and toned men have a positively motivating effect that decrease body image concerns when combined with actions that serve to improve one’s own appearance (Duggan & McCreary, 2004; Schooler & Ward, 2006).

Men also do not appear to fit into the traditional objectification theory framework in the exact same way that women do. From a structural standpoint, both men and women appear to be affected by objectification in similar ways. Davis, Karvinen, and McCreary (2005) have found that there are few differences between body-focused men and women in terms of their personalities. Both groups show high levels of perfectionism, body anxiety, and behaviours related to body modification. However, the key difference between men and women is that they appear to have different drives for their body image. Research suggests that men’s body image concerns are largely dependent on muscularity (McCreary et al., 2007; McCreary & Sasse, 2000; McCreary, Saucier, & Courtenay, 2005), as opposed to concerns over weight in women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). These differences have been identified as the drive for muscularity and the drive for thinness, respectively (McCreary & Sasse, 2000). While both drives function similarly because they are partially driven by media images, it appears that men and women do not view their bodies in the same way and do not share the same body image concerns (McCreary & Sasse, 2000).
Gay Male Body Image

The body image ideals of gay men are, in fact, largely similar to heterosexual men. Across sexualities, men consistently show a desire to increase muscle mass and definition and decrease adiposity for a more lean and toned figure (Duggan & McCreary, 2004; Tiggemann et al., 2007). There is also no difference in the amount of anxiety men feel about their bodies when in the presence of others (Duggan & McCreary, 2004). Gay men’s body image concerns do differ from heterosexual men in more subtle ways, such as the type, intensity, and frequency of body image concerns (Brewster et al., 2017; Tiggemann et al., 2007). Though most men show a desire to increase musculature and decrease body fat to appear leaner and toned, gay men show a greater desire to be thinner compared to heterosexual men (Duggan & McCreary, 2004). Furthermore, gay men also report more instances of behaviours to lose weight and greater concerns over gaining weight (Duggan & McCreary, 2004). This disproportionate representation extends to serious and maladaptive behaviours such as eating disorders and use of performance-enhancing drugs in gay men (Brewster et al., 2017; McCreary et al., 2007). These findings suggest that gay men experience significantly more external pressure to be thin than heterosexual men. Research also suggests that gay men experience higher levels of body image dissatisfaction than heterosexual men (Brown & Graham, 2008; Michaels, Parent, & Moradi, 2013). Gay men appear to value actions that improve appearance more than heterosexual men, like weightlifting or dieting (Brown & Graham, 2008). Internalized homophobia—the tendency for gay males to hold homophobic beliefs—is an issue unique for gay males that has been shown to be a significant predictor of body dissatisfaction (Brennan et al., 2012; Brewster et al., 2017).

It has been theorized that, much like heterosexual women, gay men also fall victim to a social pressure known as the male gaze (Wood, 2004). The male gaze is an external, social view
of one’s own body that is centered around appearing desirable to a dominant male society (Wood, 2004). The reasoning behind this idea is that because heterosexual women and gay men are attracted to men, they both fall victim to the male gaze that permeates patriarchal societies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Wood, 2004). However, this manifests slightly differently in gay men. The most desirable body shape chosen by fellow gay men is one that is athletically slim and muscular (Levesque & Vichesky, 2006), while the shape most coveted by heterosexual women is thin and lithe (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Other research from Brown and Graham (2008) suggests that femininity as a trait may also be a significant factor towards body dissatisfaction. Gay male participants in their study exhibited more feminine behaviour, which led to greater body dissatisfaction.

Lack of muscularity may be perceived by other gay men as a potential indicator of HIV status, as the gay community is largely affected by this disease. HIV can cause weight loss, muscular atrophy, and decreased appetite (Halkitis, Green, & Wilton, 2004). These factors all contribute to a decrease in overall muscularity, which intensifies body image concerns and depressive symptoms (Blashill, Goshe, Robbins, Mayer, & Safren, 2014). Socially, HIV-positive gay men associate “looking good” and “feeling strong” with increased muscularity and attractiveness (Halkitis et al., 2004), while those who do not show these characteristics are viewed as unmasculine and sexually undesirable. Therefore, HIV-positive status may be an important risk factor for body image issues in the gay male population.

Several studies suggest that men who experience difficulties building muscularity are more likely to do dangerous behaviours like using anabolic-androgenic steroids or compulsive exercise to achieve their desired appearance (Brewster et al., 2017; McCreary et al., 2007). As described by Brewster et al. (2017), this effect is much stronger for gay males. Levesque and
Vichesky (2006) also note that gay males perceive their bodies as less muscular while judging more muscular bodies as more attractive, compared to heterosexual men. The combination of this false belief and increased standard of beauty may be a cause for the greater drive for muscularity in gay men, which may then cause greater steroid use and compulsive exercise (Brewster et al., 2017).

There is a lack of research that compares the body images of bisexual men to those of gay and heterosexual men. Filiault, Drummond, and Anderson (2014) investigated the experiences of bisexual men’s body image. While they did not compare different sexualities, they found that bisexual men desired a mesomorphic, muscular body type, a finding that is consistent with many other studies on gay and heterosexual men (Brewster et al., 2017; Filiault et al., 2014; McCreary et al., 2007). However, bisexual men in this study made a clear distinction between stereotypically masculine bodies and gay bodies, indicating that they believed gay men’s bodies were skinnier, leaner, more hairless, and more carefully groomed than the former. When asked about which body they would prefer to emulate for themselves, the bisexual participants in Filiault et al.’s (2014) study felt that they would prefer some medium point between the masculine and gay bodies. This appears to suggest that bisexual men share a drive for muscularity with gay and bisexual men, but that men’s specific body image goals are not consistent across sexualities.

Passing

With regards to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals, passing refers to the process through which they attempt to blend in with heterosexual culture and appear heterosexual themselves (Berger, 1990). It is an experience that is ubiquitous among LGBTQ individuals due to the constant presence of stigma in modern society (Berger, 1990).
Passing often requires intentional monitoring of one’s own behaviours and speech so as to avoid any indications that they are not heterosexual (Berger, 1990). In this way, passing may be referred to as a type of performance, as it involves adopting an identity that is not one’s authentic self (Spradlin, 1998). Passing can be quite difficult for LGBTQ individuals as it is an ongoing process where the individual’s true beliefs, feelings, and experiences are constantly being hidden from others.

How passing is performed depends significantly on the context of a situation and the reasons that make passing necessary. It can take several forms, each with varying degrees of involvement and effort. Spradlin (1998) identified six strategies used by LGBTQ people to avoid identity detection. Distancing involves avoiding or exiting conversations where personal matters are discussed, such as conversations about marital status or leisure activities. Dissociating refers to avoiding LGBTQ affiliations and peers in order to avoid raising suspicions around one’s sexuality. Dodging is a strategy whereby LGBTQ individuals avoid directly answering questions about their personal life by giving general responses and attempting to change the topic. Distracting uses examples of an LGBTQ individual’s past, such as a divorce to a member of the opposite sex, to give the impression that they are heterosexual. Denial is the refusal to admit to one’s LGBTQ identity or give any explicit indication of LGBTQ identity. Deceit involves giving wholly incorrect information about one’s life to mislead others and appear heterosexual. These identity concealment methods are all intimately familiar to the LGBTQ population, as they are often employed to avoid harassment (Spradlin, 1998).

As described by Fuller, Chang, and Rubin (2009), there are several benefits to maintaining a falsified heterosexual identity. One of the most prominent advantages is that passing allows LGBTQ people to retain the benefits that appearing straight provide. These
benefits may include greater upward social mobility, respect from community members, and the ability to maintain a degree of privacy from outsiders. Passing also protects LGBTQ people from discrimination that they would otherwise face. Some social relationships may also be retained by passing, especially among individuals who are not closely acquainted with LGBTQ people.

Simultaneously, Fuller et al. (2009) also describe numerous drawbacks that come with passing. Passing is a difficult and emotional process for LGBTQ people because it involves denial and deceit, which can cause feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety. Therefore, individuals who frequently pass may begin to resent their true identity as the cause for their need to pass. Increased exposure to individuals who do not support LGBTQ people may also result in increased direct exposure to prejudice and stigma. Hiding one’s identity makes interacting with other LGBTQ people difficult, and may require avoiding them altogether (Spradlin, 1998). Interestingly, passing also decreases the strength of some relationships with close personal relationships, such as significant others or family members (Berger, 1990). This suggests that the need to hide one’s LGBTQ identity has an adverse effect on important relationships in one’s life, but not with casual relationships. Altogether, LGBTQ people find the process of passing to be difficult and tiring, using up much more energy that could go towards more positive efforts (Spradlin, 1998).

**Research Question**

This purpose behind this research was inspired by the findings and future directions of Brewster et al.’s (2017) study on internalized homophobia and body image in gay men. They identified that future research should address the roles of different minority stressors like passing and identity concealment on gay men’s body image concerns. Brewster et al.’s (2017) reasoning for this hypothesis was that if gay men associate musculature with passing for the masculine,
heterosexual ideal, then gay men may also be motivated to change their physical appearance in order to reduce the stress caused by the passing process. Therefore, the purpose for this study was to understand how the concept of passing may be incorporated into the body image concerns of gay men. Additionally, an inquiry into the separate experiences of passing and body image concerns were conducted to gain a better understanding of these subjects. From this information, a theory was developed that explained how these processes may be experienced together.

Method

The procedure for this study was conducted using grounded theory, which is a qualitative research design developed by Corbin and Strauss (1998) and described by Creswell and Poth (2018). Grounded theory is useful for research that aims to describe the lived experiences of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As this study examined gay men’s experiences with passing and body image concerns, this research design was deemed the most appropriate method to use. Following data collection and analyses using Creswell and Poth’s (2018) recommendations, a model was created that explains the relevant processes. Grounded theory was chosen over other qualitative approaches like narrative research and phenomenology so that a theory of the processes of passing and body image could be generated, rather than only describing gay men’s experiences with these topics (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection

Participants. Interviewees for this study were selected through convenience sampling, a non-random participant recruitment method that tasks the researcher to identify and target a population of interest and recruit on a first-come-first-served basis (Robinson, 2014). As a study on gay men, the only inclusion criterion was that participants must identify as gay and male. Five participants were initially recruited and interviewed. One participant was excluded from the final
stage of data analysis because he identified as more bisexual than gay, and his responses noticeably differed from the other gay participants. While the experiences of body image concerns and passing in bisexual men are deserving of further research, the decision to exclude his responses was motivated by a desire to preserve sample homogeneity. In total, the responses of four participants were used in the final stage of data analysis. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 30. This range likely did not affect results, as there is little effect for age and body image concerns in men until 50 years of age (Brennan et al., 2012; Tiggemann et al., 2007). Participants’ ages likely trended towards a younger age range due to the fact that they were recruited from the University of Regina community. Participants expressed that they were all open or mostly open about their sexuality with their family and friends. All but one participant expressed that they were cisgender, but there were no transgender males in the sample. The one participant who did not identify as cisgender expressed that they were unsure of their gender identity, but they also predominantly presented as male at the time of the interview. Every participant said they were HIV negative.

Grounded theory research is guided in part by theoretical saturation, where themes have been thought to be fully explored in the text and additional responses are unlikely to reveal any new or relevant information (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). For most qualitative studies, saturation is thought to occur around the twelfth interview and more general themes become saturated by the sixth interview (Guest et al., 2006). An original goal of twelve interviews was set to maximize this study’s potential. This number was not reached due to time constraints and participant availability. However, Saunders et al. (2017) notes that saturation is not a definite point across all qualitative studies, as some studies may require more or less interviews to approach saturation. Therefore, Saunders et al. (2017) propose that saturation may best be
viewed in degrees, relative to the topic and scope of the research. Considering this, it is possible that some degree of saturation of these topics has occurred within this study’s sample, supported by the knowledge that passing and body image are nearly universal experiences for gay men (Fuller, Chang, & Rubin, 2009; Levesque & Vichesky, 2006).

Recruitment for this study began following approval from the University of Regina Research Ethics Board. Participants were recruited through posters that advertised the study (Appendix A). Posters included a brief description of who was eligible to participate in the study and what the study aimed to examine. Contact information was included, allowing participants to set up a time to be interviewed through text message or e-mail. Fifteen posters were displayed around the University of Regina on poster boards belonging to the University of Regina Student Union. The Gay and Lesbian Community of Regina were also contacted, and five more posters were hung at their location at the Q Nightclub and Lounge. Awareness of the study was also spread by word of mouth, and participants were encouraged to recommend the study to anyone who they knew fit the inclusion criterion. As recommended by Noy (2008), snowball sampling works in service of referring individuals with similar experiences. This is also a more intimate and community oriented method of recruiting, which fosters trust between participants and the researcher. Three participants were recruited through posters and two were recruited by snowball sampling.

**Procedure.** The data for this study were gathered through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. A semi-structured interview style was chosen for this study to facilitate orderly discussion about the relevant topics, while still permitting additional questions for clarification or elaboration. A question guide was created to ensure that the questions were asked in the same order across all interviews (Appendix B). In keeping with Creswell and Poth’s
(2018) recommendations for grounded theory research, questions asked during the interview were designed to inspire responses that explain the relevant processes regarding passing and body image. These questions were designed to elicit thoughtful and meaningful responses that describe the participants’ experiences in their entirety. Interviews were conducted in person to observe non-verbal information, such as body language or eye contact. With this information, a better understanding of a participant’s emotions and thought process could be understood.

Upon recruitment, participants were offered a choice regarding the location of the interview. Participants could choose whether the interview took place in one of the group study rooms in the Archer library at the University of Regina campus or at their home address. Before the interviews, participants were encouraged to think about instances in their past where they attempted to pass and how they felt while passing. By doing this, participants could remember more about their experiences with passing, resulting in more detailed responses. Participants were also instructed to be as descriptive as possible so a detailed and accurate representation of their experiences could be constructed.

Before the interviews began, participants were informed of their ethical rights and consent was recorded with a consent form (Appendix C). Once consent had been received, participants were given a short questionnaire that was used to screen for relevant personal traits and background information (Appendix D). Participants’ openness about their sexuality, HIV status, and gender identity were recorded with this questionnaire. These items were used to partially guide the interview process, allowing the researcher to identify and inquire about particular areas of interest. A definition of body image and passing were also provided with this form, allowing participants to familiarize themselves with the study’s working definitions of these terms. Passing was defined as “acting or appearing ‘heterosexual’ to avoid being outed as
Body image was defined as “one’s perceptions, feelings, and beliefs about their own body and how they look/appear to others.” Body image concerns were differentiated from body image in this study. Body image concerns referred specifically to issues that participants had with their bodies, while body image was used as a term for how they generally felt about their body. A space to include a participant’s chosen pseudonym was also included with this form.

Interviews were recorded with an audio recording device that was capable of replaying the participants’ responses to the questions. Interviews followed a set order of questions. The first question group inquired about participants’ feelings, perceptions, and beliefs about their body image. The second question group prompted participants to recall and describe an instance or set of instances where they attempted passing and their feelings about the passing experience. The third question group attempted to integrate the processes of body image and passing together to assess if gay men associate the topics with each other. The objective of this question group was to investigate how passing pertains to body image and vice versa. Additional questions were asked if deemed appropriate and important for understanding the participants’ experiences. Examples of some additional questions included the particular triggers of body image concerns, the specific behaviours involved in passing, and the general frequency of body image concerns and passing experiences. At the end of the interviews, participants were thanked for their time, informed of when the results of the study would be disseminated, and encouraged to recommend other gay men to participate.

**Ethical considerations.** Since the participants for this study belong to a vulnerable minority population, several procedures were utilized to prevent negative outcomes. Participants are represented in the text under pseudonyms that they chose for themselves. If a participant did not choose a pseudonym, one was assigned to them. This was done to prevent others from easily
identifying the participants from the text alone. The study did not involve deception, as it was not required. Removing the element of deception also fosters trust between the researcher and participant, which may have led to more honest descriptions of the participants’ experiences. Participants were also permitted to choose a location to be interviewed where they feel most comfortable. This was done to allow participants to feel more at ease in their environment, promoting more honest responses and less inhibition. Participants could also choose a time that fit their schedule, affording them more control over the interview process. Three participants chose to be interviewed at the University of Regina campus, while the other two chose to be interviewed at their home address.

**Data Analyses**

Data in grounded theory qualitative research is analysed through three stages of coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In these three stages, the researcher takes bits of information from participant interviews and reorganizes them to create a model that describes the overall processes of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The objective of grounded theory has been compared to writing a story that encapsulates and links all relevant themes together (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this narrative, a core category can be identified and related to all other relevant conditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once the core category and its related conditions are represented, they can be showcased with a visual matrix which easily demonstrates the study’s findings as a diagram (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, the only computer program that was used for data analysis was Microsoft Word.

In order to be analyzed, the audio recordings of the interviews were first transcribed into text. Transcription was performed by myself, Andrew Wilhelms, to enhance my familiarity with participants’ responses. Open coding—the first stage of analysis—was performed by searching
the transcribed text for small sections of fragments that pertained to important categories of
information. Codes were selected if they were consistent across all interviews, extensively
discussed by participants, and important in explaining the participants’ experiences.

Axial coding began after the conclusion of the open coding stage. In axial coding, open
codes are reviewed and categorized with the intent to identify one category as the most salient
(Creswell & Poth, 2018). This category should be central to the participants’ experiences in the
given area of study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, open codes that were highly similar in
nature were combined into broader categories and subcategories. This was done in order to
simplify similar responses between participants.

With all of the categories decided, selective coding was performed by identifying other
themes that related to or explained the central theme. Selective coding incorporates the previous
two stages by synthesizing the data to form a theoretical model (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The
model is comprised of propositions which link related categories together (Creswell & Poth,
2018). The core category, its causes, and its consequences are all included and represented with
this model (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Categories within this study’s data were examined until a
core category was identified, which was then re-examined for related categories and
subcategories. With this knowledge, a theory was developed that could provide an answer to the
initial research question. This theory and its interrelated categories were represented with a
visual matrix.

**Results**

With the assistance of my primary advisor, Dr. Mary Hampton, 15 open codes were
generated from the participants’ responses. Open coding was initiated after the first interview
and concluded after the fourth interview. In axial coding, the 15 open codes were reviewed and
‘desired presentations of self’ was identified as the core category that linked the processes of body image and passing. The following results presented here are the results of the selective coding process.

The core category that linked the experiences of passing and body image concerns in gay men was ‘desired presentations of self’. Through selective coding, it was revealed that how gay men present themselves to others was an inherent quality in their experiences with passing and body image. Both experiences involved the formation of a self-concept or identity that was being expressed to others. However, participants stated that they did not believe that their body image concerns were affected by their experiences with passing, nor did they believe that passing was influenced by their physical characteristics. Instead, superficial markers of appearance like fashion, grooming, and mannerisms were seen as a primary factor in determining passing success.

When gay men are presented with a social situation where their sexual orientation is questioned by others, they make a conscious decision to attempt passing or reveal their sexuality. Their decision is enacted by modifying or maintaining their self-presentation to achieve the desired effect of passing or not passing.

I think that [passing] comes down to being able to, you know, how good you are at acting or, like, how good you are at being able to deceive people based on your behaviours and what you say. Maybe how you dress can definitely affect that, but, as for actual, like, what a person physically looks like, I’m not sure. (Cole)

I don’t have a desire to, but if I were to dress like a country boy with cowboy boots and a hat- like **** like that, umm, I guess it would change […] and I guess even, like, if I changed how I talked or things along those lines, it could because there’s a certain image, I guess, associated with that. (Ben)
Depending on what decision is made, gay men’s emotions and interpersonal relationships are affected, which contributes towards further identity formation. A visual matrix was created to demonstrate these processes (Figure 1). The core category and the processes of self-presentation were formed using the coding strategies designed by Corbin and Strauss (1998) and described by Creswell and Poth (2018).

**Identity Formation**

Before a self could be presented to others, participants formed their identities using a variety of different life experiences. Whether positive or negative, the experiences a participant had would guide the development of their sense of self.

**Sexual orientation.** Participants’ reflections on their sexual orientation influenced the ways they thought about themselves. The realization of their sexual orientation was a particularly emotionally charged experience. The predominant emotion felt by participants was fear, particularly over the thought that they would be judged differently by others. High school appeared to be a particularly difficult time for participants due to the fact that they began to consider the possibility that they may be gay during this time period.

I was in grade 11 where it really started to like, click that like, “Oh I think I’m gay.” Like, ‘cause there was- it was kind of around grade 9 where I was noticing these attractions more and more. […] And then, in grade 11, when I kind of realized that I was gay there was still that kind of, like, I don’t know I think it was the initial horror of, like, “Oh god, I really am that thing.” (Adam)
Figure 1. This visual matrix diagram demonstrates the central role that self-presentation holds in the passing process. Gay men form their identities through experiences with their sexual orientation, societal norms, body image concerns, interpersonal relationships, and their emotions. This identity affects how they present themselves to others, their openness with their sexuality, and their superficial appearance. Gay men also reintegrate these presentations into their identity. In passing, a choice is made between being open or closed about one’s sexuality. These decisions
are made by evaluating the social context and deciding if being open is worth it. Gay men use different presentations of self to fulfill their decision. Their decision can affect their emotions and interpersonal relationships, contributing to further identity formation.
However, participants expressed that they eventually became more comfortable with their sexuality after high school, as one participant recounted:

So basically, all through high school, and because I went to a rural high school I didn’t think that it’d be accepted by people that- like my peers or people that I was going to school with. Umm, and so I opted to not come out until I moved to the city. When I did come out, then almost- pretty much everyone that I did go to school with was supportive of it. (David)

The reason for this change appears to be due to a fear of being perceived differently by others that dissipates after leaving secondary education. Once leaving the high school environment, participants gained more confidence in themselves and became less focused on the opinions of peers about their sexuality.

**Norms.** Norms played a part in their identity development, governing what society and culture deemed to be acceptable behaviour. Specifically, issues of gender expression appeared to be particularly important as participants came to terms with cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity. Participants considered how they fit within society’s gender norms and evaluated themselves through these considerations. Defying gender norms appeared to cause identity confusion, as a participant expressed how he had difficulty with his outward appearance and his behaviour.

And of course, my luck being the most effeminate one in the family, I got a beard […] So it really screwed with me because for the longest time I’d basically found refuge in the idea that I could appreciate- like I could be pretty if I embodied this kind of feminine archetype, […] and my whole, like, self-worth just went out the window, ‘cause, like, I didn’t know how to be attractive, like as a guy. (Adam)
However, the influence of gender norms was not entirely negative, as the participant also expressed how his feminine behaviour could be used to give him confidence and reassurance in his identity.

I was also aware that, you know, as problematic as this may be it was kind of the perception around the ideal female is that she is pretty, and I was like “Well if I’m a girl, I must be pretty!” […] So it was kind of like a self-defence mechanism of like, taking that thing that I was being made fun of for and kind of using it as the thing that gave me self-worth. (Adam)

**Body image.** Body image was also an important factor in this process, as it affected how participants evaluated themselves through how pleased they were with their physical appearance. Body image only included physical traits, such as participants’ figure or height. Some participants discussed how they were content with the way they looked and that they did not have many body image concerns. For these participants, their body image was not an issue to them and the way they looked did not negatively affect their emotions, leading to more confidence in their identity.

I don’t think I’d, like, change anything, like, physically, permanently—like not anything plastic surgery-wise, but potentially, like, start going to the gym but not anytime in the future and not anything, like, I think I would feel that much greater about myself. I think I’d just be more attractive, potentially. (David)

I have a certain body image, I guess, that I would like to attain, but it’s not that I’m only wanting that or only driven by that, like I’m happy with the way I am and if I eat McDonald’s then I’m like “Oh great, I ate McDonald’s, you’re an idiot.” But I’m not, like, kicking myself over it a lot where I’m stuck on it. (Ben)
Other participants did express how their physical appearance affected them emotionally and how it frequently occupied their thoughts. Similar to the other participants, these negative evaluations also reflected how they felt about themselves which contributed to their identity formation.

I would say, uhh, it can be really discouraging sometimes, and then I get really down, umm, and then if I let that kind of ruminate then I could end up having a depressive state, umm, which will affect school or work, or whatever. (Cole)

I feel like this [teetering hand gesture] you know, type of a deal about it, like on some days I’ll look in the mirror and think like, you know, that scene from that movie where it’s like “I’d fuck me.” […] Sometimes it’s like that or sometimes I’m just like “Everything about me is ugly,” so it’s like... Yeah, I go from the two extremes quite regularly. (Adam)

Common body image concerns for participants were their muscularity and weight. Participants expressed that they would like to build more muscle mass and lose weight to achieve a more slim and toned figure. “I could probably be more muscular, more ripped or something” (David). “I would say I'm not satisfied with the way it looks. Umm, I don't- I don't like my, uhh, you could say the shape of my body” (Cole). “I have a certain body image, I guess, that I would like to attain. […] It’s like the standardized male body where, yes, I’d like to have abs and stuff like that” (Ben). Height was also a relevant factor of body image, though participants differed in their beliefs about their height. Some participants expressed a desire to be taller, while others were content with their height.

I don't know, the height is a big one for me. The stature is, uhh- seems to bother me quite a bit. Umm, I notice that, on average, almost every other person I talk to, whether they're a guy or not is taller than me. (Cole)
I’m already tall, which is an attractive attribute, and umm, I think that just, like, muscular is also attractive, so if I could make myself more muscular I think I’d be more attractive.

(David)

The severity of participants’ body image concerns differed between participants. For participants who thought their body image was very important, they also expressed a greater displeasure with the way they looked. One participant discussed how his body image concerns were recurring thoughts throughout his day:

[I think about my body] several times a day. When I wake up, when I take a shower, when I go to bed, when I change clothes, every time… Every time I need to- Yeah, like, change things, or touch my, like, touch my body when I’m in the shower or whatever. (Cole)

Participants expressed that seeing another attractive person caused them to reflect upon their own body image. This event typically involved a comparison of themselves and the other person. One participant described this interaction: “When I see someone who’s like, attractive, and then I kind of compare it against myself. This usually happens with men more” (Adam). Other attractive men were an important group that participants compared themselves to. Upon seeing another attractive male, participants evaluated themselves according to the idealized beauty that they see in the other man.

When I see other guys that I am attracted to, that would trigger it [thoughts about my body]. Umm, when I see, I don’t know, people at the gym sometimes. I get really self-conscious and think about it more than… Umm, instances like that where I see examples of what I idealize to be, of what I should be. (Cole)
Desired Presentations of Self

Participants’ formed identity defined how they presented themselves to others. Their identities directed the choices they made about their self-presentation, depending on how they wanted others to perceive them across different social contexts. Participants expressed that they do not always act the same in every social context they find themselves in. Therefore, they have multiple constructed presentations of self that they may use in different social contexts. The participants’ identities act as templates for self-presentations. They maintain a similar personality across different social contexts, but their self-presentations can also change and fit to how they would like to appear to others. One participant discussed how they felt that their presentation while passing was a significant departure from their formed identity:

I’m not myself. I deliberately don’t talk about certain things that I otherwise would. Umm, I don’t- I obviously talk about men or my homosexual life partners, activities, so that all is not even brought up in conversation. My main behaviour, I don’t know, I guess that’s kind of less subtle. I wouldn’t say there’s a huge change in that part, but I would maybe take a little more caution in doing things that might come across as gay. Like, with my voice I will maybe make sure I don’t come across as what might be stereotypically considered to be ‘gay sounding’ or hand gestures or stuff like that. (Cole)

Participants’ identities were also affected by how they presented themselves, as they incorporated the experiences they had into their identity formation process. The same participant later discussed how they began to internalize the traits they exhibited while passing after many years of modifying their self-presentation:

I’m definitely conscious about it. I’m conscious about, umm, trying to avoid any strikingly homosexual behaviours or gestures. It makes me feel, umm, maybe a little bit
out of place, maybe a little bit awkward, but, umm, I did it for 23 years anyways so it’s really pretty natural, actually. (Cole)

Together, these findings suggest that identity formation and self-presentation are cyclical and continuous processes that involve taking new experiences, using them to define oneself, and projecting that definition back to others, thereby repeating the process.

**Openness with sexuality.** One particularly important way that gay men’s self-presentation differs across situations is their openness about their sexuality. Participants expressed that they did not always feel comfortable revealing their sexual orientation to others, depending on the social context. One participant explained the differences between being open around different types of family members:

I’m only out to my parents and my siblings, but I am not out to most of the extended family, such as the grandparents and some uncles, cousins […] because the older ones I don’t feel would be able to handle it and I know that the relationship I have with them would definitely change, and, uhh, well, yeah, that’s all part of their, I guess, belief system. That’s the way they were raised, so I feel I can’t destroy that. (Cole)

Their beliefs about how their sexuality would be received and their own level of openness both contributed to participants’ passing decisions.

**Superficial appearance.** Participants also talked at length about superficial characteristics of appearance that were not tied to their physical appearance. Physical appearance and superficial appearance were differentiated, as they were viewed differently by participants. All mentions of a participant’s build, shape, or stature were categorized as part of their physical appearance. Superficial appearance included all mentions of their body that did not pertain directly to their figure, such as choice of clothing, grooming habits, mannerisms, and speech
patterns. Superficial traits were seen as modifiable outward markers of participants’ identities that were not as fixed as their physical body. This was important to participants, as they expressed a desire to present themselves in the best way possible to fit a given situation. However, participants also expressed that they preferred to present themselves according to what they believed was their true identity, and that others’ perspectives mattered less than their own.

I think I like to look presentable, I guess in, like, the mainstay of the word. Umm, like when I’m going out to meet people or something, or like, going to a function, or in a meeting, or something I like to look like I know what I’m doing, I guess, or like I… I guess like in a slightly professional manner or like I guess like I have a sense of fashion. But, I don’t know if that’s like- like I like to look good for myself, and if that translates to people, umm, I guess, perceiving me in a different light or something like that, then sure. But, it’s for me, ‘cause I want to feel good in how I look. (Ben)

In passing, participants changed their superficial appearance in a variety of ways to not be labelled as gay. Participants used many tactics described by Spradlin (1998). A participant described using deceit, the act of fabricating heterosexual experiences, to make his colleagues believe that he was heterosexual:

At work, umm, depending which colleagues I’m interacting with I, uhh, pretend to be straight. […] So, I talk about women, I talk about fictional girlfriends. […] I guess I over-act a little bit, you know, a little overly heterosexual […] ‘cause I don’t like women but yet I talk about it as if I do, as if I am having sex with them. (Cole)

Another participant used dodging to avoid directly answering questions about their sexuality:

A couple days ago, I was gaming with some friends and they’re all straight guys- like I don’t- I’m indifferent towards that, but, umm, I got a snapchat and I was replying to it.
Umm, and they were like “Oh who’s that?” Like, “How’s your girl?” kinda thing and I’m like “Fine.” Like, ‘cause I- and I guess that, like, I didn’t be like “It’s not a girl,” Like, one, because it was not. (Ben)

Participants also discussed their choice of clothing and how their fashion could affect passing success. Dressing better and dressing more feminine was associated with homosexuality by participants. Therefore, participants would try to avoid doing this while attempting to pass.

I think if you, like, dress more to your feminine side, or even mannerisms, obviously, umm, portray more of- or even- like even if you think like, metrosexually, like, people who are dressed well, umm, sometimes whether they’re gay or not, well, some people will assume that they are. (David)

Modifying these characteristics was vital to the success of one’s passing attempts. Participants’ abilities to successfully deceive, mislead, or distract others by changing their superficial appearance was the most important factor in the passing process.

So, I don’t really think that the way that I looked has ever impacted [passing], because based on how I look and my lack of how I don’t really care how I look, almost never has anyone ever suspected that I was gay before I or someone else has told them. (David)

**Passing Choice**

When participants were confronted with a situation where they felt that their sexuality may have come into question, they made an important decision about whether to attempt passing or not.

This decision was motivated by the participants’ perceptions about whether revealing their sexuality was worth the added conflict that may ensue. “I didn’t correct them because I just didn’t feel the need to. Like, I don’t… It’s not that I’m trying to hide it at all, like, it’s just that I don’t know if I necessarily want the conflict” (Ben). Participants’ decisions to pass were largely
dependent upon the social context they were in and the people they were around and whether they felt comfortable being open or whether they thought that coming out was worth the hassle. However, participants considered passing in nearly any social interaction, regardless of how meaningful the relationship between the participant and the other person was. A participant discussed how he passed around his family and work colleagues:

The ones that I act straight in front of, I would say that those relationships are still pretty healthy and stable. The colleagues, the grandparents, the family members that I pretend to be heterosexual around - those relationships are still intact, functional, but yes, I do feel, umm, sad that I cannot be myself around them and talk about my partners or former partners to them and with them. (Cole)

Another participant discussed how he used to pass in high school:

So basically, all through high school, and because I went to a rural high school I didn’t think that it’d be accepted by people that- like my peers or people that I was going to school with. Umm, and so I opted to not come out until I moved to the city. (David)

Another participant discussed how he used passing to avoid bringing up his sexuality around online friends:

A couple days ago, I was gaming with some friends and they’re all straight guys- like I don’t- I’m indifferent towards that, but, umm, I got a Snapchat and I was replying to it. Umm, and they were like “Oh who’s that?” Like, “How’s your girl?” kinda thing and I’m like “Fine.” Like, ‘cause I- and I guess that, like, I didn’t be like “It’s not a girl,” Like, one, because it was not. Umm, but, I didn’t correct them because I just didn’t feel the need to. Like, I don’t… It’s not that I’m trying to hide it at all, like, it’s just that I don’t know if I necessarily want the conflict. (Ben)
**Interpersonal relationships.** Participants did not want their sexuality to affect their interpersonal relationships, but they felt that revealing their sexuality may cause unwanted issues with others.

I feel a little bit bad for deceiving them, but I feel it’s necessary to maintain the kind of social standard that I have with those particular colleagues, and that goes for certain family members too, like the old ones, like the grandparents that can’t maybe handle that sort of thing, it’s the same thing. (Cole)

Participants were especially worried that they would be subject to prejudice due to the perception of homophobia in other people. One participant recounted how “I felt like I needed to hide, umm, because- likely because of the loose usage of the word ‘fag’ or ‘gay’ being looked as not good” (David). Whether the usage of these terms was intentionally derogatory or not, participants perceived slurs as evidence of an unwelcoming environment that they may need to attempt passing in. Passing was an important tool that participants used to maintain interpersonal relationships, especially close relationships.

It is allowing me to maintain and keep the relationships that I think are worth keeping, so yes, it’s worth it to just, you know, fake my heterosexuality- to fake that in front of them because I value those relationships, umm, and I feel there’s still really important people in my life, whether or not they know about that aspect of it or not. (Cole)

However, participants also expressed that their experiences with passing and their interpersonal relationships allowed them to grow and become stronger after coming out. This feeling contributed to further identity development.
When people find out that I’m gay who I’ve met previously, I’m less worried about what their reaction is going to be and how that’s going to go, and I’m more, umm, prepared or willing to tell people that I’m gay than I would have been at that point. (David)

I tend to pride myself on, like, being at least, like a little more self-aware. Like, it made me aware of how- of my behaviour, I’m more confident in myself. I guess the major benefit would just be it reaffirmed my kind of, at least, belief in who I am as a person.

(Adam)

**Emotions.** Participants were also affected emotionally by their decisions. Participants expressed guilt over deceiving people about their sexuality. They preferred to have their sexuality be known, but felt that it may not be well received if they did come out.

I never felt a need to bring it up or anything or like- ‘cause I’m pretty sure they don’t know, umm, but I just- I don’t- ‘cause I know with the way my family is, ‘cause my family is weird, and there are a lot of other things happening on my mother’s side that are, I guess, ‘high-tensioners’ right now, that I wouldn’t know how they’d react, and honestly I don’t know if I’d care, but I know it would affect my parents, and stuff like that if things were to happen. […] I want them to know, obviously, like I don’t- Like I don’t mean to be hiding anything, umm, because I’m not ashamed of my sexuality. (Ben)

Passing was also a depressing process for participants. Once again, this was tied to their inability to express their true selves to important people in their lives. One participant explained: “The ones in the past, before I came out, well then of course it was very much tormenting experience, umm, not having to express anything to anybody, so all sorts of emotions like depression and sadness and despair” (Cole). Fear was a particularly salient emotion in passing, as participants described how they felt afraid that their identity could be revealed at any moment.
I would always be worried that, like, whatever action I do is gonna, like, trigger them. You know in a videogame sometimes when like, you accidentally blow something up or something or you press a wrong button, and you’re suddenly like “Oh my god, everything’s going to go to shit now.” That’s exactly how I felt with that. (Adam)

These emotions also affected their identities in the form of self-confidence and a sense of control over their identities. Participants discussed how being open about their sexuality led them to continue being open with more people. Worry and fear also diminished after coming out.

Certainly when I was passing to everyone, passing before I came out, then of course, yes, it was very detrimental. But, since coming out, it’s been better, and been able to handle things. (Cole)

I think now when I meet new people, or, umm… When people find out that I’m gay who I’ve met previously, I’m less worried about what their reaction is going to be and how that’s going to go, and I’m more, umm, prepared or willing to tell people that I’m gay than I would have been at that point. (David)

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the interplay of body image concerns and passing experiences in the mind of gay men. The results of this study appear to contradict Brewster et al.’s (2017) hypothesis that identity concealment and passing contribute towards body image concerns. Gay men’s feelings and beliefs about their body do not seem to be directly affected by passing. They do not appear to consider passing when thinking about their physical appearance. Instead, body image appears to be affected by other factors such as the desire to look attractive to others or social conceptions of attractiveness. In the process of passing, the results suggest that
body image is an additional factor in identity formation but it is not a primary driving force that determines passing attempts or passing success.

While physical appearance did not seem to be a vital element in the passing process, these results suggest that gay men do alter their superficial appearance to appear more heterosexual. This is achieved by modifying personal characteristics like clothing and mannerisms to align more with a culturally defined heterosexual ideal. Participants expressed how acting heterosexual was more important than physical characteristics when trying to pass. This suggests that passing is an active process where gay men make specific choices about their self-presentation, rather than a passive process of simply trying to appear heterosexual.

Several unique facets of gay men’s body image concerns were revealed with this study. It seems as though gay men do consider the attention they receive from other men when thinking about their body. They show a desire to appear attractive to other men, indicating that sexual attraction and desirability affect their body image concerns. In addition to the influence of others, body image concerns appear to be affected by one’s own satisfaction in their physical appearance. Participants discussed how their ultimate goal with their body image was to be content with how they look, regardless of anyone else’s perspective. While participants said they would enjoy the added attention from other men, they felt that having a body that they felt confident in would bring them more happiness.

The results of this study were also consistent with prior research into gay men’s body image drives. Gay men perceive several physical characteristics to be attractive. Muscularity was described as an attractive trait that participants liked in other men and wanted to cultivate for themselves. Height is also a concern for participants that was associated with attractiveness. A perceived lack of height can be distressing, causing feelings of sadness and despair. Being slim
and having a leaner figure is also seen as desirable by gay men. These findings are very similar to previous studies on men’s body image concerns which list muscularity, stature, and figure among men’s most prominent areas of concern (Brewster et al., 2017, McCreary et al., 2007; Tiggemann et al., 2007).

As a relatively unexplored concept in psychological research, the results of this study reveal a significant amount of information about passing. Passing appeared to be characterised by the emotions of fear and worry over being perceived as gay. In particular, participants feared that being outed as gay would affect their interpersonal relationships, causing anxiety over other’s perceptions of their sexual identity. Greater levels of fear appeared to lead to more worrying over being outed and more frequent passing attempts. Passing is an emotional experience, as participants expressed guilt and despair over being unable to be open about their sexuality. Judging from their responses, passing was a primarily negative experience for participants without many clear positive outcomes. While passing allowed participants to maintain important relationships in their lives, it paradoxically caused those relationships to weaken because they were hiding a part of their identity. This reduction in emotional connection with others appeared to be alleviated after coming out, as participants expressed that they generally felt closer with their loved ones after telling them about their sexualities.

Self-Reflection

As my first foray into psychological research, I found this experience to be eye-opening in several respects. I wish I had kept a journal of my thoughts throughout this process, so I could reflect upon all of the things I have learned over the past two semesters. In any case, conducting my own research has taught me a lot about qualitative research methods. Before starting this project, my understanding of qualitative research was admittedly poor. I did not understand how
data could be pulled only from participants’ responses to questions. Through the assistance of my supervisors and fellow Honours students, I learned a tremendous amount about research design, data collection, analysis, and scientific writing under grounded theory. I was initially unsure of my ability to perform these duties, but I feel that I have emerged from this experience with greater research competence than when I had started. Over the course of this project, I gained hands-on experience with drafting a research proposal, interviewing participants, analyzing their responses, and drawing conclusions to my research problem. All of these experiences have contributed to my learning and growth as a student and researcher, and I plan to gain more opportunities like this in the future.

The process of interviewing participants was one aspect of research that I found particularly informative. When I started this project, I promised myself to be as unbiased as possible to not let my own preconceived beliefs affect my research. In practice, I found this to be much harder than I initially thought. I often found myself wanting to ask participants questions that agreed with my own personal experiences. I did my best to avoid these errors, though I am unsure if I was successful in this regard. However, I replayed every interview and tried to identify times where I could have responded differently, making mental notes of where I could improve for the next interview. I felt that this was an effective way of monitoring and attempting to prevent bias, as I felt myself becoming more comfortable and consistent after every successive interview. I enjoyed having the privilege to listen to all of my participants and I am tremendously grateful for their contributions. I hope that my model aligns with their experiences and I have accurately represented their responses.

Performing data analyses was more interesting than I had initially predicted. I enjoyed familiarizing myself with my participants’ responses during the open and axial coding stages.
Selective coding made me think more abstractly than I am accustomed to, which was a new challenge that I did my best to work through. Noticing the connections between data felt like working through a puzzle of words and trying to articulate these connections was a new and exciting experience.

**Limitations**

As this study examined the experiences of a vulnerable population, the sample may have been unwilling to fully open up about their experiences. Sample inhibition could have been due to discomfort with the subject material or the interview process. There is a possibility that this may have led to inadequate descriptions of the sample’s experiences with passing and body image concerns. Participants were also asked to recall emotional past events that could have been affected by biases or recollection errors. The sample for this study was smaller than the initial goal of twelve participants. As theoretical saturation occurs approximately after the twelfth participant in grounded theory research, there is a possibility that the findings here are not fully exhaustive or representative of the greater gay male population. As a fellow gay man, the researcher’s own sexual orientation may have affected the way data was interpreted. The researcher’s inexperience may have affected the interview process and data analysis as well. Validation techniques like member checking or triangulation were overlooked and not performed. Member checking in grounded theory research involves asking participants to evaluate a study’s results on their accuracy and validity to their own experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation involves using multiple methods of gathering data from different sources to corroborate the findings of a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Validation is important for qualitative research as it is a way to demonstrate credibility in subjective qualitative research.
(Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, the credibility of this research may have suffered because validation was not performed.

**Implications and Future Research**

The results of this study were consistent with previous studies on gay men’s body image concerns, adding to the growing evidence that gay men tend to have similar goals in terms of their bodies. Passing is also a relatively uncommon concept to heterosexual individuals, so this study may be used to increase awareness and draw attention to issues facing the gay community. This study did not explicitly examine the effects of homophobic discrimination against gay men, which may be an underlying factor of passing. It is possible that being the victim of anti-LGBTQ discrimination can cause gay men to hide their identity for their own protection. Participants in this study did mention that they had past experiences with anti-LGBTQ discrimination, but it was unclear how this affected their desire to pass. Therefore, future research that examines the potential interrelation between passing and discrimination may be needed to fully understand the passing process. Since passing is characterised by a fear over being outed as gay, future quantitative research could compare gay men’s anxious and fearful tendencies with how often they attempt passing. This study did not examine transgender men’s or bisexual men’s experiences with either passing or body image concerns. Because of this, it is unknown if the experiences of these groups differ from those of cisgender gay men. Future research could investigate these potential differences.

**Conclusion**

While this study found that body image concerns and passing are not directly associated in the minds of gay men, they are both parts of the self-presentation process. Body image is just one source that gay men may build their identity around, next to interpersonal relationships and
societal norms. Passing is an important self-preservation tactic that is used by gay men to avoid discrimination and maintain relationships through modifying their presentations of self. As a vulnerable population, greater attention should be paid to issues that affect the gay community, especially within the field of psychology and the general public. Both passing and body image concerns have the ability to negatively affect the lives of gay men by causing inhibition and diminishing their self-confidence. These issues affect gay men’s ability to live freely and without discrimination. Increased acceptance of LGBTQ identities could have a tremendous impact on reducing or eliminating gay men’s need to pass. This study and its model of passing may serve as the foundation for further research into LGBTQ issues in the future.
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doi:10.1080/15538600903005334

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doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2005.10.007


Appendix A

Exciting Research Participation Opportunity for Gay Men

A new study at the University of Regina is looking for gay men who are willing to discuss their experiences with body image and LGBT identity concealment (passing). All information will be kept anonymous and secure. Participants will be eligible to win a $50 VISA gift card!

Procedure:
- A brief questionnaire, followed by a short 30-45 minute interview

To learn more/apply to be a participant, email us at:
willelan@uregina.ca
Appendix B

Sample Interview Questions

Questions will seek to evaluate gay men’s body image concerns and what role passing plays in the development or continuation of these concerns.

Questions will Examine:

- Participants’ experiences with body image concerns and passing
- Perceptions, beliefs, and feelings about participants’ body image and passing experiences
- How passing is incorporated into participants’ body image concerns

Sample Questions

- **Question Group #1: Body Image**
  - Understanding the body image concerns of the sample
    - **Feelings**
      - “How do you feel about the way you look?”
      - “If you could change anything about the way you look, what would you change? Why?”
    - **Perceptions**
      - “How do you think you appear to others?”
      - “What assumptions do you think others may make about you, given how you look?”
    - **Beliefs**
      - “How is the way you look to others important to you?”
      - “Do you regularly do anything to improve your appearance? What and/or why?”

- **Question Group #2: Passing**
  - Understanding the sample’s experiences with passing
    - “I would like you to think of a specific instance, or set of instances, where you felt that you needed to ‘pass’, or appear heterosexual.”
    - “Describe what happened, and how you felt while it was happening.”
    - “How may this experience, or experiences like this, have changed how you act around others?”

- **Question Group #3: Passing and Body Image**
  - Investigating the potential power of passing over body image concerns
    - “In these instances where you feel that you need to ‘pass’, how do you feel about the way you look or present yourself?”
Appendix C

Participant Consent Form

**Project Title:** Understanding the Experience of Passing and Body Image Concerns in Gay Men

**Researcher:** Andrew Wilhelms, Undergraduate Student, University of Regina, (306) 570-9176, wilhelan@uregina.ca

**Supervisor:** Dr. Mary Hampton, Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Regina, (306) 585-4826, Mary.Hampton@uregina.ca

**Introduction:** The purpose of this research project is to assess the body image concerns of gay men and the role that the experience of passing plays in the formation or continuation of these concerns. Passing is an experience specific to minority groups where they feel that they should or must attempt to hide their minority identity to ‘blend in’. Prior research on the body image concerns has identified passing as a potential important influence that has not yet been explored. This research aims to investigate the experience of these issues as they may happen together. Data collected from this study will be used in an Honours thesis project, and therefore may be used or referenced in further publications, presentations, and research projects.

**Procedures:** You will first complete a short form to assess your familiarity with key concepts and to identify characteristics that may affect the interview process. Once this form is completed, you will engage in a 30 to 45-minute semi-structured interview that will ask questions regarding your experiences with body image concerns and passing. Interviews will take place at the University of Regina campus, unless you do not feel comfortable with this arrangement, in which case an alternate location may be chosen. Interviews will be audio-recorded. These recordings will then be transcribed into text. Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.

**Risks and Benefits:** There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research, besides the time spent participating. Should you feel uncomfortable answering certain questions about body image concerns or passing, please address these issues with the researcher. The question(s) may then either be skipped or the interview stopped.

The information gained from this research may contribute to the clinical treatment of gay men and men with body image concerns. A theory of gay men’s body image concerns that incorporates the experience of passing may also be developed with this research.

**Compensation:** Upon completing the interview, you will be entered into a draw to win a 50$ VISA gift card. Once the final interview has been completed, the winning participant will be chosen randomly, and will be informed of their win through e-mail. The method of delivery of the card to the participant will then be negotiated by the researcher and participant.

**Confidentiality:**
Your name will be changed to ensure their confidentiality. Participants may choose a pseudonym to be referred to during the interview. If you do not choose a pseudonym, one will be used in place of your real name once the interview is transcribed into text. Names of other individuals that may appear in the text will be redacted to further conceal your identity and theirs.

Recordings will be kept secure so that no individual besides the Honours student and his supervisor may be aware of their content. In the event of data withdrawal, your data will be deleted or shredded immediately.

**Storage of Data:**

All data will be stored and backed up on a secure USB drive at the University of Regina. Paper documents will similarly be kept in locked filing cabinet at the University of Regina. The USB drive will be password protected, with no other individual being given the password besides the Honours student or Dr. Mary Hampton.

When the data are no longer required, the data will be destroyed. All files will be deleted or shredded after 5 years of the month following the final submission of the Honours thesis project (May 1st, 2023).

**Right to Withdraw:**

Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort. Should you wish to completely withdraw, all responses will be deleted and will not be used for the purposes of this study. Should you wish to partially withdraw, the specific response(s) will be deleted and not used for the purposes of this study. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until April 1st. After this date, it is possible that some results have been analyzed, written up and/or presented and it may no longer be possible to withdraw your data.

**Follow up:**

To obtain results from the study, participants may request to read the completed Honours thesis project and/or their transcribed interview. This request may be communicated below or through e-mail at wilhelan@uregina.ca. The researcher will e-mail you a copy upon the project’s completion.

**Questions or Concerns:**

Contact the researcher using the information at the top of page 1. This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the UofR Research Ethics Board on February 1st, 2018. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at (306-585-4775 or research.ethics@uregina.ca). Out of town participants may call collect.

**Consent:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records. I understand that I may withdraw up until April 1st, 2018, and that my identity will be kept confidential.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Participant</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

_Researcher’s Signature_ 

Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Would you like to receive a copy of your transcript? Yes / No

Would you like to receive a copy of the completed study? Yes / No
Appendix D

Name: ______________

Preferred Name: ______________

Questionnaire

Please circle which option most applies to you.

- Are you open about your sexuality with…
  - Your family?
    - Yes / Mostly Yes / Mostly No / No
  - Your friends?
    - Yes / Mostly Yes / Mostly No / No
- HIV status
  - Negative / Positive / Prefer not to say
- Gender identity
  - Cisgender male
  - Trans* male
  - Other (Please specify): ______________

Important Terms

- **Passing**: acting or appearing ‘heterosexual’ to avoid being outed as gay
- **Body Image**: one’s perceptions, feelings, and beliefs about their own body and how they look/appear to others
  - Do you understand these terms? (Please circle)
    - Yes / No