Exploring effeminate gay men's experiences of dating using gay dating and hook-up applications: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the work submitted in this thesis is entirely the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Signature: *Stewart Neill*

Date: 03/03/22

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Abstract

Background: Research indicates that effeminate gay men (EGM) experience marginalization and subordination through consistent romantic and sexual rejection amongst gay men with a preference for masculine or 'straight-acting' partners. Furthermore, research has found Gay Dating and Hookup Applications (GDHAs) to be a breeding ground of toxic masculinity regulated by femmephobia in promoting gender-based oppression through the use of derogatory anti-effeminacy language that glorify masculine ideals. The research indicates that EGM are exposed to stressors at an individual and societal level, such as prejudice and discrimination, stigma and hate-crime, which may impact upon their identity as well as developing mental health difficulties. **Aims:** The aim of this study is to explore EGM's experience of dating using GDHAs. It is hoped that this study will contribute and enhance health care professionals and/or services, by better understanding the experiences of EGM in the context of dating using GDHAs. **Methodology:** A semi structured interview was completed with six participants who identified as effeminate, and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). **Findings:** This study produced three superordinate themes (the evolving gender identity, the impact of femmephobia, and the effects of romantic and sexual rejection) and nine sub-themes. **Conclusion:** Throughout this study, the findings appear to be underpinned by toxic masculinity regulated by femmephobia, which continues to marginalise and subordinate EGM. The findings indicate that EGM continue to experience romantic and sexual rejection across GDHAs, creating difficulties in establishing healthy and meaningful relationships with other gay men. As a result of femmephobia combined with romantic and sexual rejection, EGM appear to be at increased risk of psychological distress and poor coping strategies such as substance misuse and/or sexual risk taking. In particular, the findings emphasise the need to embrace effeminacy in order to achieve emotional and mental stability as well as challenging hegemonic norms.

Keywords: *Effeminate Gay Men (EGM), Gay Dating and Hook-up Applications (GDHAs), femmephobia, marginalisation.*

Glossary of terms

APA - American Psychological Association

BPS - British Psychological Society

CoP - Counselling Psychologists

CR - Critical Realism

DA - Discourse Analysis

EGM - Effeminate Gay Men

FoF - Fear of Femininity

GDHAs - Gay Dating and Hook-up Applications

GPS - Global Positioning System

GT - Grounded Theory

HCPC - Health Care Professions Council

HM - Hegemonic Masculinity

IPA - Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

LGBTQ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender and Queer

MGM - Masculine Gay Men

MSM - Men who have Sex with Men

RQ - Research Question

Chapter 1. Introduction

This chapter will begin by introducing the concept of reflexivity followed by a reflexive statement, which explores my own personal motivations and drive for conducting this research, as well as, the emerging biases and assumptions identified throughout the literature review process.

Reflexivity:

Reflexivity acknowledges the active role of the researcher and provides a lens to examine how this can influence the research process and outcomes (Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity cultivates awareness that the researcher and the focus of study mutually and continually influence, inform and shape the research process. As such, reflexive practice encourages transparency between researcher and the focus of study e.g. acknowledging preconceptions, biases and assumptions, as they relate to and facilitate in the production and generation of new knowledge being co-constructed. (Etherington 2016; Haynes, 2012). According to Flood (1999, cited by Finlay, 2012), *"without some degree of reflexivity any research is blind and without purpose"* (p. 35). Consistent with this view, my own personal experience of research reflects a constant moving and never fixed journey; a journey of becoming and transforming (Etherington, 2004).

Reflexive statement:

The origin of my research comes from my own experiences of gender nonconformity as well as being a self-identified EGM using GDHAs. I grew up in rural Scotland within a working-class community where hegemonic masculinity was endorsed, reinforced and rewarded. Sadly, my gender non-conformity was non-concealable, and I experienced endless rejection, bullying and victimisation throughout my school years from peers, unfamiliar adults and family. As a child I was blissfully unaware of my gender non-conformity and lacked an understanding of derogatory language such as, 'poof', 'sissy', and 'faggot', and couldn't understand why I experienced such trauma which I internalised.

As I matured into adulthood and became aware of my sexuality, I understood and identified as gay. However, as a result of my gender non-conformity, my sexual orientation was not surprising to many which made my 'coming out' a mockery. Consequently, being gay wasn't an issue, but the negative response and emasculation as a result of my gender non-conformity was, and this continued to cause internal turmoil and conflict as I struggled with self-acceptance.

In exploring my sexuality and interacting with gay culture, I continued to experience a sense of marginalisation because I am an EGM in a community that favours and privileges masculinity. From my experience, my effeminacy alters my 'attractiveness' as a potential partner from casual 'hook-ups', dateability or relationships, both publicly and on GDHAs. I understand and respect partner preference, however, I struggle to accept gay men who consciously use 'femmephobic' language to separate themselves from EGM or to further ostracise EGM in a contradictory community that strives for equality, union and liberation. This experience reinforces the notion of the 'wounded healer' and has fuelled my personal and professional desire to conduct the current research on EGM's experiences of dating using GDHAs. I believe this research will contribute to CoP and inform practice which may "*make a positive difference in people's lives*" (Kasket, 2012, p. 68).

Upon starting my investigation, focusing my research primarily on 'anti-effeminacy' provided fruitful material, which I believed to reinforce and support my beliefs. Initially, I experienced the research process as exuberating and providing a rich platform to voice injustice and inequality. However, I was aware that some research conflicted with my own agenda and was initially overlooked, evoking powerful feelings within myself.

The more I researched, the more engrossed I became, impacting on my interpretation of research and engagement with my own research. According to Flood (2002): *"the process of engaging in reflexivity is full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails as researchers negotiate the swamp"* (p. 209). Consequently, my own '*muddy ambiguity'* developed into a state of 'fear' and avoidance as I considered exiting the course. This issue was taken to supervision to bracket and revaluate my relationship with my research.

This approach increased my awareness that my emotional mind influenced by my own personal material was impacting on my rational mind and ability to be objective with my research. This was recorded in my reflexive diary and monitored throughout. Consequently, this procedure continued to inform the later development of my research and allowed me to become more aware of my own assumptions and beliefs, which I explored adequately in my reflexive diary (Kasket, 2012).

Through bracketing, i.e. group supervision, 1:1 supervision and on-going professional discussion with peers, I was able to be mindful of my own bias and assumptions. My own biases and assumptions became clear; I thought all EGM would have similar experiences to mine. Bracketing allowed me to shift from my private predisposition to develop a more holistic understanding and appreciate the complexity in gender identity and sexual orientation.

The process of reflexivity has allowed me to develop a detailed understanding of my own personal material that I struggled to make sense of as well as articulate. Schwartzberg and Rosengerb (1998, cited by Sanchez, Westefeld, Liu, & Vilain, 2010) suggest that gay men *"who bear great shame regarding their sexuality express strong discomfort with EGM, projecting onto them their own fears of female identification"* (p. 270, Sanchez et al., p. 105). I am more aware of my own biases and personal rejection towards EGM as influenced by my own attempts to adhere to traditional masculine norms in shame of my effeminacy. The research has provided fruitful insight into my own needs, which I will explore in personal therapy.

Literature research:

The literature review was conducted by inserting keywords into an electronic database known as Psychinfo. The literature review was conducted over a 6-month process. The initial search involved a primary search of keywords such as: effeminate, effeminacy, gender non-conformity combined with masculine, masculinity and gay. Psychinfo provided the biggest bank of literature using the keyword 'effeminate', which highlighted Miller (2016) and Hoskin (2019, 2020, 2021) introducing the concept of 'femmephobia'. For the purpose of this research, the term 'femmephobia' will be used to capture the systemic devaluation and regulation of oppression amongst femme-identified-individuals (Hoskin, 2019, 2020,

2021). This influenced the main direction of the research while also providing invaluable authors and studies which were further researched. Richardson (2009) introduced the term ‘effeminophobia’, which was further researched in Google Scholar and Research-Gate, as well as providing additional references that were explored. Miller (2015, 2016) introduced the researcher to gay dating terminology i.e. Gay Dating and Hook-up Applications (GDHAs), which was used throughout the research.

Chapter 2. Literature review

This chapter will provide a critical review of literature appropriate to the current study. This will begin by conceptualising gender, with close reference to gender identity and gender non-conformity grounded in psychological research and theory. This will be followed by contextualising and evaluating the role of masculinity across the lives of gay men, exploring the relationship between gay masculinities and anti-effeminacy in the context of gender identity, gender non-conformity, partner selection and use of GDHAs, supported by theory and research. This chapter will end with a discussion regarding the clinical relevance of this study.

Gender:

The concept of 'gender' has often been misinterpreted and defined by that of an individual's 'sex'. Throughout research, there is clear distinction between an individual's sex and gender. Commonly, 'sex' refers to and individual's genetic predisposition, reproductive organs, genitals and hormones. Whereas, 'gender' refers to an individual's social and cultural norms as well as the psychological characteristics which stamps the traditional binary model of male and female, including expectations of masculinity and femininity (Fielding, 2021; Minshew, 2022; Mintz & O'Neil, 1990).

According to social cognitive theorists, children learn gender categories as a result of social influences and observations which inform gender identification (Bussey & Bandura, 2004). Gender schema theory suggests that children internalise gender schemata which become a cognitive framework to shape and construct their gender (Bem, 1994, cited by Martinez, Osornio. Halim, Zosuls, 2020). As a result of a simple statement "*it's a boy*" or *"it's a girl",* informed by genital configuration, children in Western cultures are exposed to the process of gender socialization and stereotyped behaviours, as they learn and adopt the expected norms of masculinity and femininity within their given culture (Pleck, 1995). From infancy, children develop an understanding of gender roles and are expected to develop gender identities that correspond to their assigned sex at birth informed by the gender binary (Minshew, 2022).

Although we hold biological gender qualities, our understanding of gender identity is multifaceted.

The concept of gender identity refers to an individual's internal sense and understanding of their own gender which is often, but not always, congruent with their assigned sex at birth (Fielding, 2021). The term cisgender refers to an individual's whose gender identity is congruent with their assigned sex at birth e.g. someone assigned male and identifies as male. Whereas, the term transgender refers to an individual whose gender identity does not match their assigned sex at birth e.g. male to female, female to male. However, conceptualisations of gender have progressed beyond the binary of male and female, often known as non-binary. The term non-binary refers to individuals who identify neither male or female. Some non-binary people experience their gender as both male and female or have a 'third gender' on the spectrum in between male and female as well as experiencing no gender (Fielding, 2021; Minshew, 2022). There are a number of identities that fall under the umbrella of non-binary, including genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, demigender and neutrois as well as many more. As we move towards a more gender-expansive society, many third person singular pronouns have been adopted as well as new pronouns being established. For example, gender neutral pronouns '*they, them, their'* have been adopted amongst many non-binary individuals as well as being used in the context of a person's gender being unknown. Moreover, many neopronoun's have been established in order to move away from binary representation of genders endorsed by the s/he dichotomy and include 'ze/hir' e.g. Alex is a vet and ze works in London. I use to work with hir. Also, xe/xem e.g. Sam moved home but xe is visiting next week and I'm excited to see xem (Fielding, 2021; Minshew, 2022).

An individual's gender identity is intimately associated with one's gender expression (Price & Skolnik, 2017). An individual's gender expression is an outward presentation that aligns and informs one's gender identity from the physical, e.g. hairstyle, clothing, makeup, or social such as name choice or pronouns. According to Butler (1988), pervasive gendered messages perpetuate and regulate appropriate gender expressions informed by cultural norms, rather than biology, physiology and/or sexual orientation. Butler (1988) argues that gender is a social role that is performed by individuals through self-presentation, bodily and nonverbally, which is validated and accepted by society. Butler suggests that gender identity is not a fixed,

stable or coherent process, but rather produced discursively within a given culture from which it is performed and maintained through specific behaviours and presentations, with each repeated performance reproducing new meaning within context from which it occurs.

Prior to colonialization, many gender identities and expressions existed and were celebrated within different cultures across the globe. Amongst the native Americans, two-spirited individuals were believed to be those born intersex and/or possessed both male and female spirits within them. Within such communities, children were allowed to explore gender without boundaries and wore gender neutral clothes until they were old enough to express their own identity (Powell, 2021, cited by Wick, 2022). The Lakota people recognise three genders; male, female and winkte. The winkte were neither male or female but seen in-between as well as positioned within a spiritual role. Within Kanaka culture, the Māhū is the middle gender between male and female and reflects a third expression of self over notions of gender identity or sexual orientation. The Māhū is sacred and is described as a state of being which embraces both male and female expressions within the self (Zimny, 2016, cited by Wick, 2022). Furthermore, within Ugandan cultures, there are those who identify as mudoko dako (feminine males) who are treated like women and allowed to marry men (Elnaiem, 2021, cited by Wick, 2022).

Although Western ideas and terms surrounding gender are useful, the above captures the rich, diverse and uniqueness of gender that goes beyond the binary and challenges notions of predetermined gender categories. However, due to societal and cultural pressures as well as gender binary models, many individuals conceal their true gender identity resulting in psychological distress and harm (Price & Skolnik, 2017). Gender scholar, Judith Lorber, (2000) suggests that the gender binary needs to be demolished as it reflects a harmful and artificial social construct worldwide, perpetuating norms that endorse stigmatization, marginalisation, subordination and violence against gender non-conforming identities and expressions.

Psychological perspective of gender development:

Freud provides a psychodynamic perspective on gender development and suggests that gender identity is developed during the third stage of psychosexual development;

the phallic stage (Freud, 1905 cited by Wilson, 1987). During the phallic stage, boys experience the Oedipus complex and conflict with the father develops fuelling feelings of rivalry and frustration. As such, the boy also realises that his father is stronger and unconquerable leading to further conflict. Consequently, this conflict is resolved through the defence mechanism of 'identification' as the boy internalises his father and incorporates this identity into his psyche (Freud, 1905 cited by Wilson, 1987). The boy's successful identification with his father provides resolution of the id-ego conflict and leads to the development of heterosexuality and formation of the male gender role. Freud suggests that failure to successfully resolve the Oedipus complex maintains the boy's identification with the mother which directs his libidinal cathexis onto his father and results in homosexuality (Freud, 1905 cited by Wilson, 1987).

In contrast, a more contemporary psychodynamic perspective comes from Nancy Chodorow (1979), a sociologist and psychoanalytic feminist. Chodorow (1979) suggests that the pre-oedipal stage and early childhood experiences with mothers impacts on personality development between males and females. According to Chodorow (1979), children are unaware of the sex difference as their mother nurtures them; however, the mother is aware and begins to treat male and female children differently. Consequently, children become aware of gender differences which influences and impacts on their emerging sense of self and identity. The mother-son relationship lacks the emotional intimacy that can be seen between a mother-daughter relationship, as they share the same sex. Therefore, during this process the boy is particularly vulnerable as he has to distance himself from his mother in order to develop a masculine gender identity, whilst rejecting his mother's femininity. This separation negatively impacts on boys' personality as they develop a mistrust and fear in all things feminine (Chodorow, 1978).

An alternative perspective of gender development comes from Carl Jung, who introduced the concept of '*archetypes'* in understanding emerging identities (Culbertson, 1993). According to Jung, an '*archetype'* is a psychic instinct which represents the universal patterns, images and models of human knowledge and behaviours we inherit from our ancestors. Jung believed that archetypes are involuntary psyche processes within the 'collective unconscious' and are established before birth. These archetypes organize the psyche in response to our own

experiences which influence our behaviours and personalities, expressed through recurring dreams and mythological motifs in which we learn to attach and frame by language (Culberston, 1993).

The anima and animus archetypes hold classical characteristics of gender that function in the psyche and influence how we 'relate' to the world, other and self. Jung believed that both the animus and anima were androgynous. The animus is the primary sense of self which is inherently androgynous and is capable of being projected as either masculine or feminine depending on the individual's gender and experiences. The anima is ones opposite primary self which holds assumptions of men and women influenced by family, social, cultural and historical accounts of humankind. Therefore, everyone has an androgynous animus and anima within their psyche. The need to integrate the animus with the anima (the primary with its opposite character) is essential in achieving emotional and mental stability e.g. a man who projects his masculine animus as his primary characteristic will need to integrate his feminine anima with his masculine animus to achieve stable emotional health (Culbertson, 1993).

Mitch Walker identified and proposed a new archetype which he called 'the double'; the masculine anima and animus. Walker suggests that men desire and fear intimacy with other men, with this fear presenting in dreams resulting in confusion, anger or hatred. Walker argues that men dreaming of other men represents the doubled-animus in an overwhelming process of reconciliation as the nurturing masculine anima attempts to integrate a hostile and frightened masculine animus. According to Walker, a man with the doubled-animus requires immediate psychological support to interpret and make sense of the fear evoked by male/male dream images. Upon successful integration, issues of homophobia reduce as well as increasing feelings of freedom and expression of intimacy amongst men (Culbertson, 1993).

Scripting theory:

Sexual script theory (Gagnon & Simon, 1973) provides a theoretical framework which suggests the construction of gender and sexuality is influenced by internalised cognitive scripts that allow individuals to navigate and evaluate social and sexual interactions. Scripting occurs across three interactive levels: cultural (the influence of

the wider cultural environment on scripted behaviours), interpersonal (referring to how an individual alters their scripted behaviour influenced by changes to the wider social and cultural environment), intrapsychic (referring to fantasies, memories and/or mental rehearsals of scripts to better navigate the cultural and interpersonal). Within these scripts, gender is at the heart of the process of organising and constructing sexual scripts and identity, which influences the role and actions (what is and/or isn't appropriate based on cultural surroundings) adopted by individuals as they engage and interact with others as they develop and/or engage in a sexual, casual and/or intimate relationships.

Consequently, sexual scripting theory provides a useful framework to understand relationships that do not conform to prevailing social norms. For example, cultural scripts regarding relationships endorse heteronormative ideals which privilege individuals who adhere to such scripts with status and power (Gurney, 2020). According to Duggan (2002), homonormativity holds a similar script to heteronormativity and argues that sexual minorities want to be part of mainstream heterosexual culture as well as being rewarded for following this script (Duggan, 2002). Therefore, by favouring mainstream ideologies, which perpetuates rigid ideals associated with binary gender expressions and relationships (monogamy, marriage and children), homonormativity continues to devalue, subordinate and marginalise sexual minorities who do not conform to such scripts, in particular EGM.

The male gender role:

According to Mahalik, Locke, Ludlow, Diemer, Scott, Gottfried and Freitas (2003), the male gender role is influenced by gender norms and reflects a pervasive social structure that can be both guiding and constraining upon an individual's gender and social expression. In Western and heteronormative societies, women are portrayed to be passive, sentimental, and emotive whilst men are expected to be aggressive, stoic, and brave (Connell, 2005, cited by Wedgwood, 2009). Masculinities are socially constructed and vary in expression with hegemonic masculinity reflecting an extreme practice and expression of masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity (HM) is exclusively heterosexual and reflects a pattern of practice which legitimises men's dominant position within society, while sanctioning

the subordination of women and homosexuals (Connell, 1995, cited by Wedgwood, 2009). The practice of HM perpetuates the power inequalities between men and women (external hegemony) and amongst men (internal hegemony, Connell, 2012). The compulsory heterosexuality of HM reproduces patriarchy, as women are sexual objects for which men compete (Donaldson). According to Connell (1995, 2013), men that fail to embody or achieve HM are positioned as a less valuable or culturally subordinated masculinities. This suggests that multiple masculinities exist with some masculinities having more status and power over others. Donaldson (1993) suggests that homosexual masculinities are subordinate forms of masculinities because same sex relations negate the HM ideals of male domination over women. Consequently, homophobia and anti-effeminacy attitudes are at the core of HM and reflects heterosexuals' attempts to maintain social order and personal security by subordinating and marginalizing homosexual men (Jewell & Morrison, 2012).

In contrast to the above, Anderson (2009) suggests that HM as a theoretical framework may be outdated as young heterosexual males are incorporating alternative gender expressions, with a repertoire of masculinities which are 'inclusive' and promote homosocial relationships and the rejection of homophobia. Anderson (2009) suggests that such inclusivity reflects a decline in '*homohysteria'* and suggests that men are less concerned with the possibility of being identified as gay, which allows multiple masculinities to form.

According to David and Brannon's (1975, cited by O'Neil, Denke & Blazina, 2016) 'No Sissy Stuff' theory, throughout the male socialisation process a 'fear of femininity' (FOF) is learned with an emphasis on the rejection and inferiority of all things feminine i.e. values, attitudes and behaviors (O'Neil et al., 2016). This FOF provides guidelines as to how a 'real man' ought to be and is learned by: 1) early onset of anxiety related to fears of being regarded as girly, sissy or feminine; 2) that men should never resemble women or possess feminine qualities; 3) that qualities such as openness and vulnerability are un-masculine; 4) a fear of being seen as homosexual (O'Neil et al., 2016). Consequently, adherence to such rigid gender expectations combined with an aversion to femininity results in many boys learning to reject or repress their feminine qualities (Herek, 2009; Pleck, 1995) with heteronormative discourses i.e. *"big boys don't cry",* becomes the persistent norm (Good & Sherrod, 2001, p. 24). According to Herek (1989, 1994, 2000), gender

norms are more rigidly prescribed for men than women and this may result in increased anti-gay attitudes as a product of the masculine socialisation process and development of masculine identity. Research suggests that pressure during gender socialisation to adhere to traditional gender norms facilitates and elicits increased levels of prejudice, anger and aggression towards sexual minorities resulting in marginalisation (Herek, 2000).

Marginalisation:

Marginalisation reflects an extreme form of social exclusion on an individual, interpersonal and societal level. People who are marginalised experience social exclusion with varying degrees of stigma, prejudice and decimation which limits social contribution and/or participation within society, including health services, employment, leisure and housing, as well as impacting on mental health i.e. low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, isolation (Subhrajit, 2014). The stigma associated with homosexuality, influenced by masculine ideals, continues to perpetuate the marginalisation of gay men within society and excludes them from accessing many support structures, such as families and health services (Herek, 2000, 1989, 1994).

Herek (2007) introduced the construct of 'sexual stigma' to conceptualise the prejudice faced by sexual minorities, known as 'sexual prejudice'. Theory and research suggest that sexual prejudice is significantly associated with aggression towards gay men (Parrot, 2008). In particular, research indicates that heterosexual men view gay men as possessing more female-type qualities, which violates traditional male gender norms. Therefore, the conceptualisation of gay men *"being like women"* (Kimmel, 1997, p. 229, cited by Parrot, 2008) may facilitate the endorsement of the anti-femininity norm; this elicits an increase in prejudice, discrimination, anger and aggression, further marginalising gay men within society (Parrot, 2009).

Consequently, research suggests that gay men may shape and maintain their masculinity to compensate for their sexuality and to regain power and status in attempts to avoid such marginalisation (Rodriguez, Huemmer & Blumell, 2017). Many gay men make attempts to avoid being stereotyped gender non-conforming and/or 'effeminate' by distancing themselves from feminine behaviours through

‘defeminisation’ as a result of discrimination and marginalisation during childhood and adolescence as they learn to monitor their behaviour in order to present as masculine (Martin & Ruble, 2010; Szymanski & Carr, 2008).

Gender non-conformity:

Gender non-conformity can be understood as an individual gender expression and reflects a process of not conforming to a given culture’s prescribed ideologies of gender roles, norms and/or expectations (Plöderl and Fartacek, 2009). It’s important to note that gender non-conforming individuals may or may not identify as transgender. Many gender non-conforming individuals continue to identify with their assigned gender at birth, while expressing an interest and preference to engage in activities associated with other genders (Feilding, 2021; Minshaw, 2022). Therefore, gender non-conformity transcends societal and/or psychological expectations around assigned sex through self-presentation, behaviour, identity and other means amongst transgender and cisgender persons (Feilding, 2021; Minshaw, 2022; Wick, 2020).

Gender non-conformity and psychological distress:

Sexual minorities who are gender non-conforming disproportionately report increased levels of discrimination and hostility over their gender confirming peers. In particular, a growing body of research suggests that gender non-confirming youths are at increased risk of being victimised by school peers. Beusekom, Collier, Bos, Sandfort and Overbeek (2020) found that amongst 2,185 Dutch adolescents (ages 11-18), gender non-conformity was associated with increased homophobic abuse and general victimisation over gender conforming peers. These results also indicate that victimisation was experienced more amongst boys than girls as well as youths who experience same-sex-attraction. Additionally, Chan (2022) found that gender non-conformity was associated with peer victimisation and increased rates of depressive symptoms, social avoidance, poor relationships with teaching staff and poor academic attainment; these associations were greater amongst gender non-confirming boys than girls. These findings highlight the increased vulnerability and stress amongst gender non-conforming boys as a result of gender transgressions.

Consequently, research suggests that gender non-conformity may be an indicator of future mental health issues, irrespective of sexual orientation. Zukowska, Rahman & Dragan (2022) found that childhood gender non-conformity was associated with increased symptoms of depression and social anxiety amongst heterosexual (n-296) and gay men (n-449), with increased prevalence amongst gay men. Moreover, childhood gender non-conformity was associated with depressive symptoms, poor self-esteem, lower life satisfaction, intense feelings of loneliness, rumination, neuroticism, separation anxiety, post-traumatic stress, substance misuse and suicidality, in adolescents and adults (Charak, Villarreal, Schmitz, Hirai, & Ford, 2019; Guss, Shumer, & Katz-Wise, 2015; Zhao, Xiao, Wang, Wu, Dewaele, Zhang, Buysse, Song, Guo & Lu, 2021).

Individuals who are gender non-confirming tend to report higher rates of abuse and violence from family members. As such, research suggests that family abuse may be a means to control their child's gender expression (Baams, 2018). According to Roberts, Rosario, Corliss, Koenen & Austin (2012), increased familial abuse and peer victimization as a result of gender transgressions can lead to the development of social anxiety amongst sexual minorities. Consequently, these findings highlight how gender non-conformity can be a stressor in the development of meaningful interpersonal relationships, which in turn may contribute to increased distress and anxiety amongst sexual minority populations. Furthermore, gender non-conformity has been associated with increased intimate partner violence and perpetration amongst young adolescents, independent of sexual orientation (Adhia, Gordon, Roberts, Fitzmaurice, Hemenway & Austin, 2021).

Sexual minority stress:

Throughout literature, sexual minorities tend to be more gender non-conforming compared to their heterosexual peers and report increased levels of psychological distress characterised by elevated rates of depression, anxiety, suicidality and substance abuse disorders. According to Meyer (2003), elevated rates of psychological distress amongst sexual minorities can be conceptualised by minority stress. The minority stress model suggests that sexual minorities experience external and internal 'stress' as a result of systemic discrimination based on prejudice and stigma. Consequently, exposure to such discrimination and associated stress results

in psychopathology amongst sexual minorities. Therefore, increased rates of psychopathology amongst sexual minorities reflects a process of discrimination, prejudice and stigma over sexual orientation exclusively.

Consequently, such experiences create a process of expectations and heightened vigilance combined with internalisation of negative social attitudes which may compromise physical health and psychological wellbeing (Lick, Durso & Johnson, 2013; Sandfort et al., 2007). Thoma, Eckstrand, Montano, Rezeppa and Marshal (2021) completed a meta-analytic review which investigated the relationship between gender non-conformity and minority stress amongst LGB individuals, using thirty-seven identified studies. The findings indicate that LGB individuals continue to experience minority stress in the context of increased prejudice events, less concealment of sexual orientation, lower rates of internalised homonegativity and higher rates of rejection amongst LGB populations. In particular, the results highlight how gender non-conformity and prejudice events were experienced more amongst gay and bisexual men as opposed to lesbian and bisexual women.

Moreover, research indicates that LGB individuals who are gender non-conforming may experience increased rates of discrimination and rejection within their own community (Thoma et al., 2021). In contrast, studies have also shown that gender non-conformity amongst LGB facilitates integration within the community as well as increasing access to peer support and/or community resources more easily and frequently, which provides a buffer against minority stress (Frost & Meyer, 2009).

Gay identity:

According to Cass (1979, cited by Dunkle, 1996), there are six stages involved in the formation of a gay identity: identity confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride and synthesis. Cass (1979, cited by Dunkle, 1996), suggests that individuals experience ‘identity confusion’ as they become consciously aware of their same-sex feelings resulting in confusion or denial. This is followed by a stage of ‘identity comparison’ associated with increased feelings of alienation and heightened self-awareness and sense of ‘being different’ from heterosexuals. Stage three marks ‘identity tolerance’ as individuals’ begin to tolerate, but not yet accept, the possibility of being gay leading to further isolation from heterosexuals. At stage 4, an

individual's sense of self and sexuality is privately 'accepted'; however, publicly individuals strive to pass as heterosexual. Stage 5 reflects 'identity pride' in which the private and public self-begin to merge as individuals' enter the gay community and embrace their 'pride' in being gay over the oppression of their sexual orientation. At this stage, the individual is less concerned with hiding their sexuality. The final stage marks a process of 'identity synthesis' and involves the immersion and complete acceptance of being gay and the self to form a wholesome gay identity (1979, cited by Dunkle, 1996).

Cadwell (2009) explored the role of shame in forming gay men's gender and sexual identity and found that the denigration of effeminacy comes from childhood experiences of gender policing as well as a wanting to be loved and accepted by parents/guardians. Cadwell (2009) acknowledges the pressures of HM ideals amongst all men, but highlights that vulnerability amongst gay men results in them being shamed as *"fem, mama's boy or sissy"* (p. 200). According to Cadwell (2009), such pressures creates in-group denigration of emotional vulnerability and increased sensitivity amongst gay men as they navigate their own shame in forming their identity, manifested by internalised homonegativity (Thoma et al., 2021).

Internalised homonegativity is considered a natural development within gay identity associated with negative feelings and discomfort towards one's non-heterosexuality (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000, cited in Fischgrund, Halkitis, & Carroll, 2012). Internalised homonegativity is associated with the development of one's own attitude towards sexual minorities, fears of self-disclosure and fears of identifying as a sexual minority (Riggle, Rostosky, Black & Rosenkrantz, 2017). Furthermore, internalised homonegativity is associated with identity incongruence and increased levels of shame, self-loathing (Thepsourinthone, Dune, Liamputtong & Arora, 2021) and poor psychological adjustment including reluctance to connect or engage with the gay community (Fischgrund et al., 2012).

Gay Masculine Ideology:

Gay masculinities:

Taywaditep (2001) examined literature on the perceptions of femininity, androgyny and non-masculine behaviours amongst gay men, referring to them *"marginalised among the marginalised"* (p.1). In his review of literature, Taywaditep (2001) established a historical overview of anti-effeminacy and pro-masculinity amongst gay men from the 1910s when gay men adopted the use of 'queer' to distinguish themselves from heterosexual and EGM (Chauncey, 1994, cited in Taywaditep, 2001). In particular, Taywaditep (2001) reports that in the 1960s, notions of camp and drag were celebrated as subversions of the traditional male gender role within the gay scene, with a shift in 'butch' lending itself to the development of hyper-masculine representations within fashion, leisure and erotica (Levine, 1998; Messner, 1997). Taywaditep (2001) suggests that this shift towards gay masculinity led to the development of anti-effeminacy amongst gay men influenced by hegemonic masculinity ideology.

As a result of anti-effeminacy attitudes and pressure to conform to masculine ideals, many gay men engage in a process of '*defeminisation'*. Research by Taywaditep (2002) explored this phenomenon and found that childhood gender non-conformity resulted in 'defeminisation' during adolescence. Consequently, this process resulted in such men entering gay life as gender conforming adults. According to Taywaditep (2002), this process of 'defeminisation' is ironic and contradictory as he states *"gender non-conforming gay men may suffer from discrimination not from society at large, but from other gay men, who are most likely to have experienced stigmatization and may have been effeminate earlier in their lives*" (p. 7). Ultimately, Taywaditep (2002) argues that gay men continue to perpetuate and reinforce femmephobic attitudes through their own process of 'defeminisation'. The policing of masculinities amongst homosexuals reinforces ideals of hegemonic masculinity and internal hegemony, in which gay men glorify HM and express power by formulating gender hierarchies that position EGM as undesirable or deviant (Rodrigues et al., 2017; Taywaditep, 2002).

Furthermore, research indicates that masculinity remains an advantageous characteristic resulting in power inequalities amongst gay men. Research by Gerrard, Morandini and Dar-Nimrod (2023) explored the impact of feminine gay presentations on status attainment amongst heterosexual (*n*-128) and gay men (*n*-128). The participants were required to watch six videos of shortlisted candidates for a tourism campaign and indicate their preference for the role in the absence of qualifications. The study employed gay actors who acted out the same script in a feminine and masculine manor (manipulating voice, mannerism and posture). The results found that both heterosexual and gay men had a preference towards the masculine gay actors over the feminine gay actors for the casting role. These findings indicate that masculine gay men (MGM) receive preferential treatment and increased opportunities in status and attainment, while feminine gay men continue to experience discrimination and inequality. In particular, this study captures the power inequalities, intracommunity discrimination and privileging of masculinity amongst gay men in securing power, status and attainment over feminine gay men.

Straight acting masculinities:

Gay masculinity has often been referred to 'straight-acting' as a means of gender identification (Bailey, Kim, Hills & Linsenmeier 1997; Clarkson, 2006; Connell, 2005). According to Clarkson (2006) *"straight acting describes gay men who are more masculine than the effeminate stereotype"* (straightacting.com cited by Clarkson, 2006). This definition suggests that like heteronormative masculinity, 'straight-acting' masculinity is inclusive of anti-effeminacy ideals and homophobia.

Research by Sanchez et al., (2009) examined descriptors of masculinity and femininity amongst gay men. The results found that MGM were described stereotypically using personality and physical traits such as restrictive emotions, control and competitiveness, as well as being muscular, athletic and strong. As such, MGM were described as 'straight-acting' or passing as heterosexual. In contrast, EGM were described stereotypically as possessing feminine personality and physical traits such as having a higher voice, concerned with appearance, dressing flamboyantly and being more affectionate. Furthermore, EGM were associated with their inability to conceal their sexual orientation or inability to pass as 'heterosexual'. These findings support Clarkson's (2006) view of straight-acting masculinities and

suggest that gay men's anti-effeminacy may mirror an extension of traditional masculine ideology facilitating sexism, anti-femininity, homo-negativity and the subordination of EGM (Connell 1995, 2013; Taywadietep, 200).

Furthermore, research highlights how gay men who identify as 'straight-acting' use derogatory language such as *'bitchy, fem, sissy or queens'* to further marginalise and subordinate EGM; this creates a hierarchy of gay masculinities reinforced by the dominance of traditional hegemonic masculinities (Christian, 2005; Clarkson, 2006). These labels demonstrate how gay men police their masculinity to secure their position and power within a HM frame within the gay community (Rodrigues et al., 2017). However, attempts to achieve the ultimate masculine ideal can result in negative consequences as a result of heightened vigilance to rigid gender expectations (Fischgrun et al., 2012; O'Neil et al., 2016).

Gender role conflict (GRC):

The adherence of traditional masculine ideas amongst gay men is strongly correlated with negative health outcomes, e.g. psychological wellbeing and mental health (Sánchez, Westefeld, Liu, & Vilain, 2010). Sanchez et al., (2010) completed a large-scale online survey (*n*=622) and found that masculinity as a construct is important amongst gay men, with a preference towards masculine partners. The results also indicated that gay men desire to be more masculine, despite self-identifying as masculine over feminine, associated with negative feelings regarding their non-heterosexuality.

Research by Choi, Herdman, Fuqua and Newman (2011) explored GRC using a sample (*n*=400) of gay men and found that masculine gay men presented with increased GRC over androgynous, feminine or unspecified gay men; higher levels of masculinity were associated with greater GRC and *"inner turmoil"* (p. 517). The researchers suggest that "*embracing femininity*" (p. 517) may reduce levels of GRC in accepting different masculinities within the self.

The above findings are consistent with previous research and suggest that negative feelings about being gay may be associated with traditional masculine ideals that reject the notion of affectionate behaviours towards other men (O'Neill et al., 2016).

The research effectively captures the increased vulnerability of gay men who privilege masculinity, in particular those gay men who identify as ‘masculine’. However, the research fails to examine the effects of masculine ideals amongst EGM who may also value traditional masculine ideas; this further excludes EGM within research with a bias towards notions of GRC amongst MGM.

Hyper-masculinity:

According to Fischgrund et al., (2012), when masculinity is threatened, men tend to display and/or engage in ‘hyper-masculine’ activities or behaviours which reflects an exaggeration of masculine characteristics or qualities that an individual perceives they lack. Research by Halkitis (2001) completed an ethnographic investigation into the norms of 15 gay men (29-56 years of age) who are HIV+ and living in New York. The findings report that all gay men associate masculinity with physical appearance i.e. toughness, vitality and health. Moreover, participants report increased pressure to obtain ‘muscularity’ via extreme body-enhanced behaviours adhering to masculine ideals. Finally, results suggest that participants also associate masculinity with sexual experience. These results suggested that many gay men value and strive for outward self-presentation of masculinity motivated by hyper-masculine ideals informed by traditional notions of masculine ideology.

Moreover, research by Hunt, Fabio, Carnaghi, and Cadinu (2016) examined whether masculinity threat would result in masculine gay men distancing themselves from EGM, as well as making attempts to present themselves as more masculine. Hunt et al., (2016) procedure involved placing gay men within either masculinity-affirmed or masculinity-threatened conditions and presented vignettes describing both masculine and feminine gay men. The findings indicate that gay men whose masculinity was threatened resulted in higher rates of ‘similarity’ to MGM combined with lower levels of desirability to interact with EGM, resulting in MGM distancing themselves from EGM.

These findings highlight the stigma experienced by many EGM who represent expressions of gender non-conformity which reinforces the existence of sexual prejudice within sexual minorities, this suggesting that ‘effeminate’ behaviours, characterises, identities and interrelationships are rejected (Herek, 2007).

Furthermore, these results illustrate how such stigmas create, maintain and enforce a social gender dichotomy between MGM and EGM; this a hierarchy based on traditional gender norms.

Internalised sexual stigma:

Research indicates that the FOF as a unique phenomenon to masculinity also exists amongst gay men and facilitates higher rates of internalised sexual stigma resulting in anti-effeminacy attitudes. For example, Glick, Gangl, Gibb, Klumpner & Weinberg (2007) investigated masculinity threat amongst gay men and examined perceptions towards other gay men both masculine and feminine. The result found that gay men perceived EGM more negatively when their masculinity was threated compared to those who experienced no masculine threat. These results suggest that gay men possess the desire to reject feminine traits within themselves, this resulting in the rejection of femininity in other gay men. This notion has been supported by Schwartzberg and Rosengerb (1998, cited by Sanchez et al., 2010) who suggest that gay men *"who bear great shame regarding their sexuality express strong discomfort with EGM, projecting onto them their own fears of female identification"* (p. 270, Sanchez et al., p. 105).

Research by Salvati, Ioverno, Giacomantonio and Baiocco (2016) was influenced by Glick et al., (2007) and extended his research further by examining attitudes to both MGM and EGM, with a particular focus on the impact of internalised sexual stigma amongst gay (n=44) and heterosexual participants (n=44). All participants responded to the same set of questionnaires; however, only the gay participants completed the measure of internalised sexual stigma. The experimental procedure was similar to Glick et al., (2007) and employed two stereotypical descriptions of MGM and EGM. The results are similar to that of Glick et al., (2007) and Hunt et al., (2016), illustrating that EGM elicit more negative emotions than MGM. Moreover, results found that gay men who report higher levels of internalised sexual stigma reacted more negatively to EGM than MGM.

However, Glick et al., (2007) and Salvati et al., (2016) used stereotypical descriptions of gay men to facilitate their participant's responses to masculinity threat. In doing so, they failed to capture the variations of effeminacy amongst gay

men. Therefore, the results reinforce stereotypes which limits their validity and overall use.

Partner preference:

Research by Bailey, Kim, Hills and Linsenmeier (1997) investigated partner preference amongst gay men using personal advertisements and found that EGM were marginalised through consistent sexual and romantic rejection, e.g. *"no femmes"* (p. 970). Furthermore, results indicate that gay men's self-descriptions and their desired partner's characteristics were biased towards masculine descriptors, e.g. straight acting, dominant, muscular and athletic. These findings highlight how masculine ideals inform and influence interpersonal relationships for such gay men, with the acceptance of masculinity and rejection of effeminacy. This suggests that for many EGM, establishing romantic and meaningful interpersonal relationships may be difficult in a pro-masculine community, as well as impacting negatively in EGMs self-esteem and confidence.

Sexual positioning:

Research suggests normative language used by many gay men to negotiate anal sex, i.e. a 'top' is the insertive partner and a 'bottom' is the receptive partner, have become associated with gender roles. Johns, Pingel, Eisenberg, Leslie Santana and Bauermeister (2012) used a semi-structured qualitative interview approach to investigate sexual behaviour amongst young gay men (n=34) with emphasis on 1) sexual positioning, 2) decision making and 3) gender roles. Firstly, the results found that participants described 'tops' associated with hegemonic masculinity i.e. dominant, muscular and tall, whereas; 'bottoms' were regarded as feminine i.e. submissive, smaller and slender. Participants reported 'versatility' as new construct which redefines sexual positioning and deconstructs stereotypes of tops and bottoms attributed to masculinity and femininity. Secondly, decision making was influenced by perceived interaction either as a casual encounter i.e. hook-up, long-term and/or dating/relationship.

Many participants reported that stereotypes of 'tops' and 'bottoms' are useful in negotiations, as well as evaluating their own masculinity against that of potential

partners to determine sexual positioning during casual encounters. In contrast, participant's report being unrestrictive with sexual positioning when in a long-term relationship and embrace the pleasure and 'versatility'. Thirdly, participants suggest that notions of tops and bottoms reflect social identities in which many gay men create personas of a 'typical' top (masculine, straight acting) or bottom (feminine, visibly gay). Participants report a desire and interest in partners who encompass both masculine and feminine traits, this challenging the ideal 'top' which reflects a hyper-masculine state. The results demonstrate the flexibility in negotiations of masculinity and femininity when evaluating sexual positioning both personally and in potential partners. However, this sample consisted of young gay men which makes it difficult to generalise findings across generations of gay men impacting on validity.

Vytniorgu (2022) explored sexual fantasy narratives on social media and blogging platform Tumblr, using fourteen accounts posted between 2015-2021. The narratives denote individuals who self-identify as '*pussyboy'* or '*boiwife'* expressing fantasises centred on gender-stratified androphilia associated with bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism (BDSM). These sexual fantasies are supported and reinforced by narratives of self-identifying "*daddies*" (p. 8) who desire and affirm the effeminate identities of pussyboy's and/or boiwives. According to the Vytniorgu (2020) 'pussyboy' or 'boiwife' reflect identities that are effeminate, exclusively bottom and seeking men who are masculine, dominant and exclusively top. The narrative of such identities on Tumblr share similar accounts of explicitly sexualising exaggerated forms of masculinity such as "*hairy beefy dominant men*" (Blogger 2, p. 10) as well as sexualising their exclusive role as being receptive, such as *"smooth pussy"* (Blogger 1, p. 9) as well as "*100% bottom and submissive*" (Blogger 2, p. 9) to entice others to penetrate them through their *"sexual submissiveness and anal receptivity*" (p. 11). Furthermore, narratives of pussyboy's and boiwives refer to traditional domestic roles in their relationships such as Blogger 1 *"a married stay at home femboy housewife"* (p. 11) and Blogger 2 *"Alpha male willing to wife me up"* (p. 9) as well as "*a boi [wife] know her place in the HIS kitchen, feeding him"* (Blogger 8, p. 12).

The narratives of 'daddies' sexualise effeminacy in the context of dominance and control, as suggested by Blogger 13 *"a good man's reward is a submissive boypussy desperate to serve him and treat him like a king the moment he walks in the door"* (p.

17) as well as prioritising sexual needs, as suggested by Blogger 14 *"a wife seduces her husband for HIS sake to fulfil her wifely duties"* (p. 17). Furthermore, daddies encourage, affirm and reinforce effeminacy in their desired partners from appearance, voice and mannerisms, such as Blogger 10 who states "*I love you for exactly the wifey qualities that made you feel rejected by others*" (p. 13). Additionally, Blogger 11 writes *"fairy effeminate voice, and classic gay boy voice drives me wild with desire"* (p. 15). Furthermore, 'daddies' reinforce traditional gendered domestic roles e.g. *"in your kitchen, in your place"* (Blogger 12, p. 15).

Consequently, many pussyboy's, boiwives and daddies experience prejudice and marginalisation for reinforcing harmful sexual fantasies that negatively stereotype gay men as well as adhering to traditional gender ideals. However, such platforms provide an outlet for users to express their sexual fantasies that eroticises, embraces and values effeminacy, which challenges mainstream ideals of masculinity being eroticised and glorified through notions of 'masc4masc'. However, associating effeminacy with being bottom needs to be approach with caution because many EGM are top as well as embrace versatility sexually. Additionally, eroticising effeminacy associated with being bottom, enforced by traditional gendered ideals, may increase sexual risk and vulnerability amongst EGM.

EGM experiences and anti-effeminacy:

Zubair's (2016) research investigated gender non-conformity amongst gay men (*n*=7) who identify as 'non-masculine' using a narrative approach. In particular, the research focused on participant's subjective experiences of gender non-conformity at an individual and societal level. Participants were found to evaluate 'non-masculinity' within themselves and others negatively, with some participant's viewing *"effeminacy as immature, a conscious disclosure of homosexuality and suggestive of emotional instability"* (Zubair, 2016 p. 87). This suggests that 'non-masculinity' is a strong indicator of homosexuality and the language appears influenced by traditional masculine gender norms and suggests that 'effeminophobia' i.e. the fear of effeminacy, may also exist within marginalised 'non-masculine' men (Richardson, 2009).

Furthermore, participants report experiences of being romantically rejected, as well as rejecting others who express effeminate traits, while masculinity is eroticised and desired. In particular, MGM were reported as having a concealable homosexuality which reinforces notions of 'straight-acting' masculinities which celebrates a pro-masculinity whilst condemning 'effeminacy' and suggestive of 'negative feelings' about their own sexual identity (Sanchez et al., 2009).

Although small, the research does present some positive qualities attributed to 'non-masculine' gay men, such as flexibility in using '*effeminacy'* to negotiate and resolve dynamics of 'power' as well as possessing qualities of compassion, expressiveness and humour which supports 'non-masculine' gay men as an individual and social level i.e. work (Zubair, 2016).

This research suggests that femmephobia exists amongst EGM. The notion of non-masculine gay men promoting femmephobic attitudes demonstrates the extent to which sexual minorities are influenced by traditional gender norms. It's possible that 'non-masculine' gay men may reject other EGM a result of prolonged internalisation of discrimination resulting in their ant-effeminacy attitude (Meyer's, 1995). Ultimately, more research is required to understand the complex and integrated cycle of anti-effeminacy that exists amongst gay men who identify as 'non-masculine'. Finally, more research is need to understand how specific gender identities amongst gay men that co-exist within 'non-masculine' identifies make sense and understand masculinity and femininity.

Embracing effeminacy:

Davis (2020) applied Bialystok's theorisation of authenticity to explore the identity-based challenges EGM may experience within the gay community. According to Davis, the narratives of many EGM share the importance of embracing 'effeminacy' as being authentic to their identity and sense of self, despite community denigration. As such, many EGM refuse to conform to hyper-masculine gendered norms and continue to identify and express feminine gendered expressions. Regarding how embodiment can relate to authenticity and self, research has shown how many gay men conform to body building cultures that holds erotic and sexual privilege along with community acceptance (Hutson, 2010 cited by Davis 2020). However, the

narratives of many EGM suggest that their sense authenticity is reinforced by not altering their embodiment *"in order to remain true to their inner sense of self*" (p. 110).

For many gay men, the pressures of femmephobia leads to a process of '*defeminisation'* in adulthood, in which individuals attempt to present themselves as heterosexual (Taywaditep, 2002). However, many EGM retain their effeminacy and gendered expressions in adulthood which reinforces their sense of authenticity and gender identity. This creates conflict for many EGM who seek a sense of belonging in a common gay community as well as perceiving their effeminacy as a core unchangeable characteristic central to their identity. Davis (2020) suggests that EGM who continue to embrace their authentic self despite experiencing high rates of discrimination and marginalisation are able to establish their own individual and unique forms of gendered expressions which challenge hegemonic norms.

Anti-effeminacy terminology

Throughout the literature, several anti-effeminacy terminologies emerged to conceptualise the marginalisation and subordination of femininity against pro-masculine ideals amongst gay men, which include sissyphobia, effeminophobia and femmephobia. The inconsistences in terminology captures the complexities and need to better understand anti-effeminacy values and attitudes amongst gay men.

Sissyphobia:

Tim Bergling (2001) coined the term 'sissyphobia' in his book *'Sissyphobia: gay men and effeminate behaviour'* and refers to the fear or hatred of effeminate men or '*sissies'*. According to Bergling (2001), sissyphobia becomes a form of social control enforcing normative gender roles and perpetuating homophobia as well as being considered an unattractive characteristic resulting in romantic rejection. Bergling (2001) suggests that hostility towards 'sissies' reflects the pressures of gay men who conform and desire the heteronormative masculine image known as 'straight acting'. Consequently, the discourse of 'sissyphobia' becomes an oppressive communication strategy that enables straight acting gay men to justify and empower their masculinity.

According to Eguchi (2011) the discourse of 'sissyphobia' reflects a process of internalised heterosexism or homophobia over the notion of feminine gay men being unattractive. Eguchi (2011) suggests that straight acting masculinities conceal their attraction towards effeminate gay men because of the stigma attached to male femininity. Therefore, the communication strategy of sissyphiobia reflects a heteronormative script that allows straight acting gay men to evaluate their gender performativity in public and/or social interactions with others. Furthermore, Eguchi (2011) highlights that many straight acting gay men who are secure with their own gender performativity do not discriminate against or reject EGM.

Effeminophobia:

The term effeminophobia has been most frequently used within research (Annes & Redlin, 2012; Pascoe, 2007; Richardson, 2009; Zubair, 2016) and it is suggested that negative views towards EGM reflects a process of 'effeminophobia', which is a fear of effeminacy rather than internalised sexual stigma.

According to Pascoe (2007) 'effeminophobia' reflects an anxiety that is developed within early childhood as a result of 'fear' elicited by the 'effeminate boy'. The effeminate boy becomes as a figure of anxiety because he is renouncing his masculine privilege and lowering his status by 'doing' femininity. Consequently, the 'effeminate boy' demonstrates the plasticity of gender to others resulting in 'fear'. Pascoe (2007) argues that 'effeminophobia' is strongly expressed by boys policing their own masculinity and teasing the 'fag'; a label that signifies non-conformity to hegemonic masculinity rather than labelling sexual orientation. Although this language is understood to be homophobic, the intent articulated is a 'fear of effeminacy'.

Research by Annes and Redlin (2012) examined the experiences of 30 rurally-raised gay men in the Southwest of France and North America using life story interviews. The results suggest that "*masculinity is more problematic than sexuality*" (Annes & Redlin, 2012 p. 277). The participants appeared to accept their own sexuality and expressed a general acceptance of other gay men; however, all participants report having a negative view of EGM. The researchers suggest that the participants were

reporting feelings of 'effeminophobia' over feelings of 'homophobia' or 'feminophobia' (as they did not express a desire or dislike towards women). The researchers argue that the participant's feelings of 'effeminophobia' may reflect the lack of visible homosexual role models in comparison to an ever-visible heterosexuality influencing adherence to the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990, cited by Annes & Redlin, 2012).

Richardson (2009) explored the relationship between homophobia and 'effeminophobia' in the Channel 4 show dating programme 'Playing it Straight' (2005, cited by Richardson, 2009). The show involves a woman having to identify and differentiate between ten men who are 'straight' or 'gay'. The show rewards the gay man who can 'pass' as straight with £100,000, while the women gets nothing. Richardson (2009) argues that the show validates and promotes 'effeminophobia', with masculinity being rewarded as a position of 'victory' in comparison to 'effeminacy' resulting in 'failure'. The show found gay men to present with the most hostile and 'effeminophobic' attitudes. The winner of the show, who is gay, stated that he entered *"to prove a little point that he was not a big, fuckin, la-la, sissy"* (Richardson, 2009 p. 529-530). Richardson (2009) suggests that the winner's hyper-masculine portrayal i.e. exaggerated cockney accent and working-class portrayal, was enacted to strengthen his own sense of masculinity while anxiously asserting his fear of effeminacy as reflected in his 'effeminophobic' statements.

Femmephobia:

According to Hoskin (2019, 2020) the term '*femmephobia'* is used to reflect an overarching framework that draws on various concepts of feminine devaluation (such as sissyphobia, effeminophobia, homo-negativity, transmisogyny, anti-effeminacy/femininity) to provide an enhanced understanding of feminine based oppression. Hoskin argues that 'femmephobia' reflects a *"deep-seated anxiety over femininity and feminization, as well as the overarching fear and hatred of femininity, separate from people's gender and sex"* (Hoskin, 2021, p. 257). Therefore, femmephobia can be described as an aversion to femininity resulting in prejudice and discrimination towards those individuals who identify as 'femme'. Consequently, femmephobia is the response to such deviations and targets femme-identified-individuals throughout a process of gender policing that regulates the patriarchal

norms of femininity, while maintaining a subordinate position against masculinity (Hoskin, 2019, 2021). Hoskin (2021) argues that femmephobia provides a theoretical framework and lens to understand gender-based oppression by recognising the multifaceted ways in which femininity continues to be devalued and regulated across different social groups and brings them together i.e. gay men, transwomen, transwomen of colour. Therefore, femmephobia provides a platform to discuss anti-feminine attitudes and oppression more broadly within research and amongst scholars.

Gay Dating and Hook-up Applications (GDHAs):

Gay Dating and Hook-up applications (GDHAs) are widely used within the gay community and research suggests that gay men are actively using on average 5 GDHAs, with many reporting on having 12 distinct profiles on different GDHAs (Gudelunas, 2012). Furthermore, GDHAs have become a popular source for many gay men and men who have sex with men (MSM) to find potential sexual and/or romantic partners. Grindr is perhaps one of the best known GDHAs used by many MSM because of its instant Global Positioning System (GPS) access which allows gay men to connect and engage with others locally or across physical distances. There are a number of GDHAs similar to Grindr that provide a more mainstream network for MSM and include Jack'd, Hornet, Manhunt and Adam4Adam, whereas others are specifically designed for sub-groups of MSM, such as Scruff which is targeted towards hairy men, GROWLr which is targeted at 'bears', and MISTER which is targeted towards 'mature masculine men'. The above examples demonstrate the diversity that exists between GDHAs that have been designed and branded by traditional masculinity to facilitate partner preferences; to date, there are no GDHAs branded distinctly for effeminacy as an optional partner preference (Miller, 2015). Miller (2015) reports that GDHAs, such as Grindr, privilege masculinity and have become an outlet of toxicity and platform for 'femmephobic' language and attitudes.

Due to social marginalisation, access to GDHAs provides an invaluable source for many gay men in providing a platform to normalise, explore and experiment as well as construct their sexual and social identities and/or expression (Zervoulis, Smith, Reed & Dinos, 2020). However, Zervoulis et al., (2020) found that higher rates of GDHA use was associated with reduced feelings of community and life satisfaction

as well as increased feeling of loneliness. For those users accessing GDHAs for sexual encounters, results suggest increased self-esteem and satisfaction over other users accessing GDHAS for different types of relationships and interactions. Moreover, Obarska, symczak, Lewczuk & Gola (2020) completed a narrative review of 59 articles exploring threats to psychological health associated with GDHAs. The results indicate that excessive GDHA usage was associated with poor psychological and social wellbeing, poor sleep hygiene and increased depressive symptoms. In particular, the results highlight how GDHA facilitate in seeking sexual partners accompanied by sexualised drug use, which is associated with polydrug substance abuse, sexual risk taking, transmission of STIs, psychological distress, depression, anxiety and even psychotic episodes.

Discrimination and marginalisation on GDHAs:

Many users do not get to experience and/or benefit from gay online spaces fairly as a result of discrimination, marginalisation and stigma perpetuated by other gay men (Zervoulis et al., 2020). According to Connor (2021), GDHAs produce a sexual hierarchy grounded in heteronormative gender roles that promote the evaluation, stigmatisation, marginalisation and discrimination through a process of 'personal preference' characterised by blocking, filtering and ignoring users, which have become normalised and tolerated online. Robinson (2015) found that filtering systems on GDHAs facilitates 'personal preference' by removing particular racial bodies from viewing, which remarginalizes gay men of colour online through this social exclusionary practice. Forbes and Stacey & Forbes (2022) explored how users express their 'personal preference' using context analysis of 858 unique user profiles as well as interviewing 26 individual users accessing the GHDAs Grindr, Jack'd and Scruff. The results found that 24 percent of profiles expressed a 'preference' in a manner that was positive and/or policing such as *"I'm into…"*. Furthermore, interview data indicates that users deliberately exclude other using positive framing during interactions with others as they express 'personal preference'. The above findings demonstrate how the expression of 'personal preference' facilitated through the design of GDHAs create and maintain a toxic culture online that perpetuates stigmatised ideologies.

Research by Hammack, Grecco, Wilson and Meyer (2022) investigated the forms of intracommunity stigma experienced amongst young sexual minority men (*n*-32, aged 19-25 84.4% non-white) as they participate within the community through mobile applications, using content analysis. The results found that 62.5% of the men (20/32) discussed their engagement on mobile applications (establishing social and sexual connections with other men on Grindr, Scruff and GROWLr), when discussing community experiences more widely. This finding highlights the significance and centrality of GDHAs within the men's experience of community. This provides an advantage for sexual minority men in more rural and/or conservative locations with limited access to community. However, research suggests that men are motivated to use GDHAs to seek sex with other men (Cascalheira & Smith, 2020). Consequently, this can create challenges when using GDHAs as a major source for community building.

Additionally, the findings indicate that the participants experienced intracommunity stigma in regards to body size, race/ethnicity, gender expression and sexual positioning, with participants being the recipient and/or agents of such stigma on GDHAs. In the context of body size and gender expression, the findings revealed an increased pressure to conform to particular body ideals, masculine performance and presentation informed by masculine ideals that denigrate and marginalise femininity. In regards to race and ethnicity, stigma was experienced by men of colour in the study with a preference towards white men or men with lighter skin tone. Finally, narratives regarding sexual positioning indicate increased stigma and 'bottom shaming' against feminine gay men who identify as bottom. These findings highlight the extreme, ironic and contradictory nature of GDHA use amongst gay men, severing as a vital source of community and a buffer against minority stress as well as being a platform to perpetuate internalised stigma and ideologies resulting in negative experiences. Furthermore, the findings highlight how such stigma is experienced in nuanced ways amongst marginalised and intersectional identities resulting in inequality and unfair treatment on GDHA.

In particular, racism continues to be a significant challenge across many GDHAs resulting in a 'hierarchy of desire' that privileges heteronormativity, lighter skin tones and European phenotypes amongst MSM in the context of partner selection and/or preference (Cascalheira & Smith, 2020). Ethnicity is not amenable to change,

unlike masculinity, which results in increased rates of sexual racism amongst MSM of colour. In a study by Wade and Pear (2022), they investigated racialised sexual discrimination across two GDHAs, Grindr and Jack'd, amongst young sexual minority black men (*n*-548) searching for intimate partners online. The findings indicate that participants using Grindr reported increased instances of white superiority (e.g. specifying preferences for intimate partners who are also white), as well as rejection by white men compared to participants using Jack'd. Whereas, participants accessing Jack'd reported increased preference and physical objectification of black men compared to participants accessing Grindr. Furthermore, Stacey & Forbes (2022) explored the impact of racial fetishizing amongst sexual minority men of colour (*n*-26) using in-depth interviews with users accessing Grindr, Jack'd and Scruff. As a result of racial fetishizing, the men reported feelings of being objectified, hindering the development of platonic and/or intimate relationships as well as being reduced to a stereotype resulting in marginalisation.

Furthermore, weight stigma and discrimination, often referred to as 'fatphobia', continues to marginalise gay men who do not conform to masculine body ideals on GDHAs (Barret, 2020; Conte, 2018). According to Conte (2018), Grindr has become a homonormative space that glorifies queer bodies that are white, masculine and muscular while rejecting and marginalising non-white, fat and femme queer bodies, deemed as 'unwanted' and 'undesired'. However, Conte (2018) highlights the complex intersections between fatness and femininity on GDHAs in the context of fetishization amongst *"cubby chasers"* (Conte, 2018, p. 28). Conte (2018) argues that fatness is admired and desired because of bodily differences and feminised features such as breasts, hips and reduced genital visibility, which threatens the embodiment of HM. Consequently, this sense of threat motivates queer men to establish and maintain HM ideals by distancing themselves from notions of fat and femmes. Similarly, Austen, Bonell and Griffiths (2022) explored how sexual minority men (*n*=17) with different body sizes make-sense of fatness in context of body appearance, ideals and pressure, using Grindr. The results found that participants described fatness in the context of not being masculine or desired as well as being unattracted to other fat men. These findings suggest that sexual minority men may be at increased vulnerability of internalising weight biases, self-devaluation and desexualising. Furthermore, the participants' negative treatment on Grindr was

associated with body size, either being stigmatised or fetishized, which continues to marginalise gay men with alternative body sizes.

Self-presentation on GDHAs:

GDHAs are becoming a breeding platform of toxic masculinity and gendered discrimination towards users who do not conform to masculine ideals informed by HM. According to Rodriguez et al., (2016), gay men who emphasise and/or exaggerate their own masculinity as well as maintain masculine ideals by seeking masculine partners online engage in a behaviour called '*mascing'*. This behaviour is driven by a fear of being identified as a 'sissy' or 'fem' fuelled by homophobia and misogyny within the gay community. Consequently, mascing creates an online culture that endorses and privileges masculinity, which leads to the discrimination and marginalisation of many alternative gay masculinities, while reinforcing a gendered hierarchy within online gay spaces.

The performance of mascing can be seen in men who continue to express and/or advertise their own masculinity through self-selected photos, language and conversations on GDHAs (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Miller (2015) explored self-presentation and partner preference amongst MSM (*n*-300) using a specific GDHA, Jack'd, with particular emphasis on how men frame their own and others masculinity/femininity, age, race, body type and fitness. The results found that none of the participants described themselves as 'feminine' using textual language on their profile. Despite having the option to upload photographs, the results found that faceless profiles were significantly correlated with self-descriptions of masculinity and masculine partner preference. This suggests that 'faceless' profile users may be more concerned with traditional masculine ideology as reflected in their vocal position regarding their preferences and/or tastes. As such, the intentional use of anti-effeminacy language on GDHAs may reflect an individual's need and attempts to *"enhance their appeal by aligning themselves with the anti-effeminacy ethos they perceive to be popular"* (Taywaditep, 2002, p. 16).

Sarson (2020), found that gay men perform a 'straight acting' identity that imitates British ideals of being a 'lad' through linguistic construction on GDHAs, characterised by being socially indirect and communicating in a constrained manner

that is short and blunt, to inflate their own masculinity in order to connect with other MSM. Research suggests that MSM who self-present as masculine on GDHAs will receive increased communication rates over other users (Cascalheira and Smith, 2020). This suggests that the performance of a straight acting identity on GDHAs may be associated with increased sexual and/or romantic desirability. However, this can lead to further marginalisation and risk amongst EGM, and other gay identities, who do not utilise masculine language and/or speech practices online, resulting in increased rates of discrimination, stigmatization and subordination associated with diminished feelings of self-worth, sexual and/or romantic desirability (Sarson, 2020).

In a study by Granath (2019), interviews with gay men (*n*-21, ages 18-23) explored how they experience and navigate mascing culture online. The findings indicate that all the participants experienced mascing behaviours online as well as developed their own unique strategies to manage and/or alleviate pressure to perform a hyper-masculine self-online. Some of the participants acknowledged their own mascing behaviours and inflated sense of masculinity online e.g. altering bios, changing text/vocabulary/tone of interactions as well as embodying a more 'straight-acting' self-online. Whereas participants who were comfortable with their own masculinity appeared unaffected and authentically presented themselves online. These results highlight the glorification of hyper-masculinity across GDHAs manifested by mascing behaviours, which appear to complicate the distinction between online and offline self as a result of increased pressures to appear more masculine over presenting an authentic self. However, this pressure may result in many challenges for such men in developing healthy and meaningful relationships that extend offline due to unauthentic presentations of self and unrealistic expectations of potential partners to appear masculine (Granath, 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2016).

Anti-effeminacy language on GDHAs:

The need to understand how anti-effeminacy language is framed and perceived on GDHAs is essential in order to develop knowledge and awareness of the impact of such language upon partner preference and selection. GDHAs are user-generated, allowing individuals to create their own profile using specific linguistic content informed by their own cognitive frames of homosexuality and masculinity. Research suggests that such frames facilitate and inform the perception and interpretations

amongst other online users and influence how they think, feel and respond to potential sexual or romantic partners. Many GDHAs users typically seek to frame themselves advantageously and intentionally use anti-effeminacy language to frame their preferences and tastes (Miller, 2015; Miller and Behm-Morawitz 2016).

Research by Miller and Behm-Morawitz (2016) investigated the effects of 'femmephobic' language used amongst MSM (*n*=143) to frame their profiles on Grindr, with particular emphasis on how such 'femmephobic framing' influences the perception, partner preference or intent to meet. Participants were asked to complete an online language survey and were exposed to one of two framing conditions 1) femmephobic condition 2) non-femmephobic conditions; the profile was consistent in contents and attractiveness across all conditions.

The results found that the exposure to femmephobic language did not alter the physical attractiveness of the profile user; however, the use of femmephobic language negatively altered perceptions of intelligence, sexual confidence and dateability amongst profile users. Furthermore, participants were significantly less interested in interacting or meeting with profile users displaying femmephobic language for friendship or romantic purposes. Despite the above results, participants report a willingness to continue having sex with profile users displaying femmephobic language. However, men with low levels of anti-effeminacy consistently responded negatively to those users displaying femmephobic language, whereas men with higher levels of anti-effeminacy were more likely to connect and engage with other femmephobic profiles. These ironic results illustrate the wider impact and understanding of femmephobic attitudes online and suggest that those profile users who engage in femmephobia may experience their own rejection and marginalisation from online users who resist femmephobic attitudes.

Summary of literature review

The literature reviewed consistently illustrates that EGM continue to be evaluated negatively by both heterosexuals and sexual minority groups, with the most visible expressions of femininity eliciting negative feelings and deemed incongruent with masculine ideals. Throughout the research, EGM have been utilised as a '*stressor'* and/or '*variable'* (using stereotypical descriptors) in order to conceptualise notions

of anti-effeminacy against masculine ideals, such as masculinity threat, internalised homophobia, partner preference and femmephobia (Clarkson 2006; Glick et al., 2007; Sanchez et al., 2009; Salvati et al., 2016). As such, the literature provides invaluable insights and perspectives regarding the complexities of gender identity amongst gay men and their vulnerability to anti-effeminacy values. However, it fails to acknowledge that anti-effeminacy is also a '*stressor'* amongst EGM which continues to adversely impact on an individual's personal, social and professional life as well as compromising psychological health and wellbeing. Therefore, more research is needed to understand the role and significance of anti-effeminacy within the lives of EGM.

The literature effectively captures the increased vulnerability of gay men who privilege masculinity and identify as 'masculine' to poor health outcomes, e.g. psychological wellbeing and mental health (Chio et al., 2011; Sanchez et al., 2009, 2010). However, there is limited research which explores the importance and impact of alternative masculinities on health outcomes. One study explored subjective experiences of gender non-conformity amongst gay men who identified as non-masculine and found that non-masculinity was associated with internalised anti-effeminacy values, marginalisation and romantic rejection (Zubair, 2016). This study provides a unique lens to conceptualise and understand the experiences, psychological functioning and wellbeing amongst gay men who identify as non-masculine. However, the term 'non-masculine' in this study was used to encompass a range of gender identities that deviate from traditional masculine ideals to include the presence of femininity. Therefore, more focused research is required to better understand the role and significance of femininity across the lives of gay men who identify with femininity.

Additionally, the research illustrates how GDHAs have become a toxic platform and culture that perpetuates intracommunity stigma and discrimination that privileges masculinity, especially within the context of partner preference and selection process. Research by Miller and Behm-Morawitz (2016) investigated the effects of 'femmephobic' language on GDHAs and found that the participants did not want to interact and/or meet with users displaying femmephobic language for friendship or romantic purposes. This study provides a unique understanding and impact of femmephobic language on GDHAs influenced by toxic masculinity regulated by

femmephobia. However, more research is required to conceptualise how toxic masculinity and femmephobic language is experienced by alternative masculinities on GDHAs, such as EGM, in order to develop knowledge and awareness of the potential impact this may have on forming meaningful interpersonal connections as well as psychological health and wellbeing.

The literature identified femmephobia as a potential theoretical framework to understand the systemic devaluation and oppression of femininity more widely, separate from gender and sex, which includes sissyphobia and effeminophobia. However, more research is required to conceptualise the role and significance of femmephobia amongst alternative gay masculinities, such as EGM, in order to contribute and strengthen femmephobia as a theoretical framework to understand anti-effeminacy as a product of gender-based oppression amongst femme identified individuals.

Crucially, Meyer (2003) suggests that subjective experiences of marginalised individuals should not be overlooked. With this in mind, the present study aims to embrace and explore the subjective experiences of EGM who continue to be devalued and marginalised online as well as in research. This research aims to investigate the question: How do effeminate gay men experience dating using gay dating and hook-up applications?

This question will be addressed through three main objectives. Firstly, to generate new knowledge informed by the lived experiences of EGM. This approach will bridge a substantial gap identified in the literature review which fails to focus on EGM's lived experiences directly. Secondly, to facilitate an understanding of the role and significance of effeminacy within the lives of gay men more broadly, which is currently underrepresented within research. Finally, to understand the significance of effeminacy within the context of online dating using GDHAs and its relationship with femmephobia amongst EGM, which is currently lacking in research.

Relevance to counselling psychology:

According to Sandfort, Melendez, & Diaz (2007), gender nonconformity reflects the *"expression of characteristics that are socially and culturally associated with the*

opposite sex" (Baily & Zucker, 1995, cited in Sandford, et al., 2007, p. 182). Therefore, gender non-conforming gay men may be vulnerable to increased experience of stress as a result of the stigma associated with deviating from gender norms and conformity. Stigma surrounding non-conformity can begin from childhood and studies have shown significant results linking childhood non-conformity with increased vulnerability to mental health needs in adulthood. For example, Harry (1983, cited by Sandfort et al., 2007) found that children who were gender nonconforming or effeminate reported low levels of self-esteem as adults. Furthermore, childhood non-conformity has been associated with body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in gay men (Meyer, 2001; Sandfort et al., 2007; Strong, 2000). Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) found increased attempts in suicide amongst gender nonconforming youths as a result of visible 'feminine' characteristics. Furthermore, research has shown that gender non-conformity is significantly associated with parental, maternal and peer rejection in childhood (Landolt, Bartholomew, Saffrey, Oram & Perlman, 2004).

The experiences and needs of EGM continues to be underrepresented within research and may compromise the way in which Counselling Psychologists (CoP) work and support the needs of this client group. Best practice guidelines by the British Psychological Society (BPS) acknowledges the pressures and potentially harmful impact of hegemonic masculinity amongst gay men, however; only identities 'femininity' as a constraining stereotype. This understanding of effeminacy fails to capture and address its significance within the lives of many gay men, e.g. experiences, culture and history. Furthermore, the American Psychological Association (APA) (2012) Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ+) guidelines make no reference to gay effeminacy, but discusses issues surrounding emasculation and deviations from masculinity as potential losses. Therefore, identifying and acknowledging the significance of effeminacy as a distinct and separate need associated with femmephobia may better represent EGM in guidelines and inform 'best practice' to reduce risk with this client group.

The research indicates that masculinity is an important construct amongst many gay men, however, research fails to focus on 'masculine ideals' specifically amongst EGM. This lack of understanding may impact on how psychologists conceptualise and therapeutically work with EGM. It's possible that issues regarding gender roles

may be confused with sexual orientation resulting in misattribution of the presenting problem. Therefore, addressing issues surrounding masculinity with EGM may provide valuable insight into their own assumptions and prejudices regarding gender roles and how these impact on their sexuality and sense of self, as well as psychological wellbeing, relationships and intimacy.

The literature demonstrates that EGM continue to experience marginalisation in gay space and online (both websites and GDHAs). By incorporating these findings into Meyer's (1995) minority stress model, it's possible that psychologists may be able to support EGM at an individual level with their experiences of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, as well as at a society level through community and psycho-education approaches to address issues of femmephobia, prejudice and discrimination amongst sexual minorities.

Research by Delgado-Romero and Shelton (2011) suggest that the process of therapy can be hostile for sexual minorities and report micro-aggressions and covert expressions of discrimination towards LGBTQ+ clients in therapy. The above literature extends this notion and suggests EGM elicit negative feelings amongst heterosexuals and sexual minorities. Therefore, these findings suggest that clinicians working with EGM must be mindful of their own personal predispositions, judgements and material that may surface whilst working with EGM.

Chapter 3. Methodology and Procedures

This study employed a qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith and Osborne, 2008). The rationale for using this approach as a suitable methodology in exploring the study's research questions (RQ) with regards to EGM's experiences of dating using GDHAs will be explored throughout this section.

Rationale for using a qualitative methodology:

The literature review provides invaluable insight and perspectives regarding the complexities of gender, gender identity and GDHA use amongst gay men. However, a large proportion of research has used a quantitative approach to better understand the role of masculinity amongst gay men and/or on GDHAs, which unfairly represents and marginalises EGM within research (Clarkson 2006; Glick et al., 2007; Sanchez et al., 2009; Salvati et al., 2016). Therefore, using a quantitative methodology was deemed not suitable for the current study and likely to produce a reductive lens for this underrepresented population.

Additionally, my review of the literature indicates a failure to explore and capture the significance of effeminacy across the lives of gay men who may experience marginalisation, oppression, sexual and/or romantic rejection on GDHAs. This indicates the need for more exploratory and non-directive research that focuses on lived experience and meaning-making amongst EGM, which would complement and add to existing literature, informing the decision to align this study using a qualitative methodology to address the RQ and enhance the voice of EGM within research.

In applying a qualitative methodology, this approach aims *"to understand and present the experiences and actions of people as they encounter, engage and live through situations"* (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999, p. 216). The epistemology of qualitative research allows the researcher to capture and highlight complex phenomena through an individual's subjective experience which is not easily quantifiable (Willig, 2008). A number of qualitative methodologies can be applied to explore complex phenomena such as dating. However, reflecting on the RQ guided

the researcher to select interpretative phenomenological analysis as the most suitable approach over other qualitative methodologies for this study (Willig, 2008).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA):

IPA is a qualitative methodology that was developed by Smith (1996) and aims to explore individual lived experiences. The epistemology of IPA has three distinct theoretical underpinnings: phenomenological, ideographic and hermeneutic (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022).

- *Phenomenological*

Central to phenomenology is the study of consciousness in order to understand the meaning of lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). IPA aims to explore an individual's perceptions of the world and their experience within it:

"when people are engaged with 'an experience' of something major in their lives, they begin to reflect on the significance of what is happening" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 2).

IPA is phenomenological and concerned with the meaning from lived experiences which becomes the focus of exploration. IPA values the distinct features related to the individual as well as those values shared between researcher and participants. This approach is consistent with the aim of this study which is to explore and understand how EGM perceive and 'make sense' of their experiences in the context of dating using GDHAs.

- *Ideographic*

The ideographic nature of IPA embraces the uniqueness of lived experience and offers a detailed examination and in-depth analysis of individual cases to develop an understanding of phenomena and does not allow results to be generalised across populations (Lyons & Coyle, 2007, Smith et al., 2022). The current study is concerned with the unique and underrepresented experiences of EGM in the context

of dating using GDHA, which would benefit from the detailed examination and in-depth analysis which IPA offers.

- *Hermeneutic*

Within IPA, hermeneutics is concerned with the researcher's attempts to understand and interpret an individual's lived experience, which creates a double hermeneutic and is a distinctive feature within IPA (Smith & Osborne, 2008), which Smith describes as:

"the participants are trying to make sense of their worlds; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborne, 2008 p. 53).

This double hermeneutic allows the researcher to develop a detailed examination of phenomena which is grounded in the individual's experience, which results in a shared understanding of reality being achieved (Smith & Eatough, 2007). IPA allows the researcher to identity meaningful themes that can be used to capture the nature and quality of phenomena as they present (Smith, 2004, 2008).

IPA accepts the impossibility of researching an individual's subjective experience and acknowledges the active role of the researcher and hermeneutics (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge the researcher's subjective view of the data through a process of bracketing in order to remove personal judgement when interpreting the participant's subjective experience (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith et al., 2022). In considering IPA for the current research, it is important to note that using a double hermeneutics approach may result in variation of interpretations of the same data amongst different researchers (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Rationale for IPA:

The epistemological foundations of IPA provide a dynamic methodology that allows under-examined phenomena to be explored and analysed in detail to enhance and/or create a new understanding of topics that may be underrepresented within research.

As highlighted in my literature review, there is limited research which examines the processes of lived experiences amongst EGM in the context of dating as well as dating using GDHAs.

Therefore, IPA's theoretical underpinnings provides a distinct lens to address the RQ, which has not been done before within qualitive research. This provides a unique opportunity to begin to address the gaps in research for this marginalised population, as well as using meaning from such lived experiences to transcend into practice, policy and education.

The researcher was attracted to IPAs idiographic focus and in-depth analysis of the 'particular'. The current study is concerned with the unique and underrepresented experiences of EGM in the context of dating using GDHA, and would benefit from the detailed examination and in-depth analysis offered by IPA which goes beyond language and explores how latent ideas, assumptions, psychological processes and ideologies inform meaning.

Additionally, the RQ is compatible with IPA's use of hermeneutics and allows the participants to make-sense and share their experiences freely, while also recognising the active engagement of the researcher through a process of interpretation using a systematic procedure (Smith, 2004, 2008), to gather data and produce meaningful findings regarding EGM experiences of dating using GDHAs, supported by bracketing.

Finally, IPA's theoretical underpinnings align with my relational approach and identity as a CoP, as I seek empathically to understand how individuals relate to and make sense of their subjective lived experiences through reflective interpretation (Smith, 2004; Woolfe, Strawbridge, Douglas & Dryden, 2010). This further supports the rationale to use IPA within the current study.

Discounted approaches:

Alternative research methods were also considered for the present study, such as Grounded Theory (GT) and Discourse Analysis (DA). Similar to IPA, GT aims to understand phenomena using a systematic approach to gather, synthesise, analyse

and conceptualise qualitative data (Charmaz, 2006). However, GT aims to produce theoretical explanations to capture the essence of psychological phenomena as opposed to understanding an individual's lived experiences (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, GT was discounted because the aim of the current research is to develop a deeper understanding of EGM's subjective experience of dating, over formulating theoretical explanations. Ultimately, IPA provides a more focused approach over GT to explore and understand the inner psychological world of EGM as they make sense of their own subjective experiences of dating.

DA is concerned with the role and function of language used to infer on experiences as a means of constructing reality and understanding phenomenon (Potter, 2012). DA and IPA share similar interests in the role and function of language in exploring phenomena. However, DA explores the hidden meaning and effect of language being used to construct meaning from personal experiences, whereas IPA acknowledges the complexity of cognition as *"dynamic, multi-dimensional, affective, embodied, and intricately connected with our engagement with the world"* (Smith et al., 2009 p. 191), in order to understand how an experience becomes 'known' (Moran, 2000), however, language is not considered the sole construct of reality (Smith, 2008). DA was therefore discounted because the current research is concerned with subjective experiences rather than investigating the use and impact of language to construct meaning from 'dating'.

Ontology and Epistemology:

The current study is grounded within a critical realist position (Bhaskar 1978 cited by Saunders, 2009). Critical realism (CR) provides an ontology that recognises the existence of 'reality' and 'knowledge' as independent from humans. CR suggests that phenomena are perceived and experienced subjectively while being influenced by idiosyncratic beliefs and expectations (Bunge, 1993). CR simultaneously acknowledges the role of both 'agency' and 'structural factors' that influence human behaviour in attempts to respond to and understand reality as it exists (Saunders 2009).

The foundations of CR are in parallel with the current study's RQ that aims to understand the complexity of 'dating' and how this phenomenon influences and

shapes 'reality' for EGM. Additionally, CR is consistent with the aims of IPA and is concerned with 'meaning making' through phenomenology (Willig, 2008). Furthermore, IPA's hermeneutic position aligns with CR thinking and accepts the impossibility of gaining direct access to reality (Willig, 2008). Therefore, the researcher will attempt to provide a rich and comprehensive description of EGM's subjective experiences and perceptions through a process of interpretation.

Procedure:

- *Participants and sampling*

Purposive sampling was used to systematically select participants that fulfil the research criteria. Consistent with IPA, this approach facilitates the recruitment of a fairly homogenous sample and allows idiosyncratic experiences to be explored (Smith & Eatough, 2006). According to Smith and Eatough (2006), IPA studies typically employ a small sample size due to IPA's idiographic nature. Therefore, in line with such recommendations, six men were recruited for this IPA study. The participant's anonymity and confidentiality were protected throughout using pseudonyms. Please see table 1 for further demographic information regarding the current sample.

Table 1 *Demographic information of 6 participants*

Participant pseudonym	**Age (Yrs)**	**Ethnicity**	**Gender identity**	**Relationship status**
Fergus	*34*	*White British*	*Effeminate*	*Single*
Ethan	*24*	*White British*	*Effeminate, Non-masc*	*Single*
Toby	*24*	*White British*	*Effeminate*	*Single*
Ekam	*28*	*British Indian*	*Non-masc*	*Single*
Tanveer	*30*	*British Indian*	*Effeminate*	*Single*
Blair	*23*	*White British*	*Effeminate*	*Single*

- *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

In order to establish a homogenous sample, the research employed gay men who identify as 'effeminate', 'fem, 'camp' or 'non-masculine' because these identities are consistently underrepresented within literature and exposed to on-going minority

stress and anti-effeminacy within the gay community (Annes & Redlin, 2012; Clackson, 2006; Meyer, 1995; 2003; Millar, 2015; Sanchez et al., 2009, 2010). Gay men who do not identify as the above were excluded, as well as those who identify as lesbian, bisexual or Trans because the current research is concerned with EGM experiences only. By using EGM, this ensures a homogenous sample in regards to gender identity which supports the researcher's rationale in exploring the RQ.

Furthermore, EGM experiences of dating across various GDHAs were explored as EGM continue to be marginalised within online gay space (Miller, 2015; Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2016). Therefore, participants were required to be 18 years and over, which reflects the legal requirement of many GDHAs for persons to create an online profile as well as being the age at which parents/guardians' consent is no longer required (Miller, 2015; Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). There was no age restriction in the current study because GDHAs are used by EGM from different generations and the researcher welcomed EGM to share their subjective experiences across different age groups.

Research by Hammack et al., (2022) found that mobile applications are a central resource amongst gay men to engage within the community in establishing social and sexual connections with other men. Furthermore, research suggests that gay men are actively using on average 5 GDHAs as well as having 12 distinct profiles on different GDHAs (Gudelunas, 2012). Given the wide range of activity and engagement on GDHAs, the study required participants to have experienced activity and/or use of GDHAs within a 6-month period prior to the interview to ensure that data reflects current experiences and/or reflections in order to keep the sample as homogenous as possible. Therefore, potential participants who do not have current activity and/or use of GDHAs within a 6-month frame will be excluded.

Additionally, participants were required to be fluent in English in order to maintain a homogenous sample. This rationale is in keeping with qualitative research which places emphasis on language and acknowledges the possible risk of using translators which may contaminate the richness of the data (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, the exclusion criteria include non-English speaking individuals because this will impact on the researcher's ability to interpret data in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experience.

The researcher assessed the participants' psychological and emotional health prior to giving informed consent and before participating in interviews, in order to reduce any unforeseen risk. Those participants who experienced a current state of poor psychological and/or emotional health were to be excluded and signposted to supporting agencies, in order to reduce risk which may be triggered or worsened by the interview process. The participants in the current study reported no concerns regarding their emotional and psychological health and were able to partake in the study. The researcher continued to monitor psychological and emotional health informed by the designed distress protocol.

The current research is interested in the EGM experience of dating via GDHAs within the UK only, therefore; EGM experiences of dating via GDHAs from outside the UK were excluded.

- *Recruitment process*

The recruitment of participants was facilitated by a recruitment poster (Appendix 2) which detailed research aims, inclusion and exclusion criteria accompanied with contact details of the researcher. The researcher produced a template email (Appendix 3) which introduced the study and requested if the recruitment poster could be advertised in staff and service user areas to generate interest. The researcher sent this email, with the attached recruitment poster, to various universities and university LGBTQ+ societies as well as organisations within London that provide emotional and well-being support to gay men, for their consideration (Appendix 4). However, the response to this recruitment strategy was slow and only a few organisations responded and expressed their interest in supporting the current study through advertisement. Therefore, the researcher considered alternative recruitment avenues using social media.

The researcher created an Instagram page to facilitate in recruitment and uploaded the original recruitment poster and used specific LGBTQI+ hashtags associated to gender, gender identity and gender-nonconformity to generate awareness of the study (Appendix 5). This was the most effective approach in generating interest in the study and recruiting participants. Additionally, other recruitment strategies included using existing contacts such as counselling psychologists and/or other professionals

to share and spread the word about the current study facilitated by the recruitment poster.

As outlined by the recruitment poster, individuals were advised to contact the researcher via email to express their potential interest in participation. The researcher then provided participants with an information sheet (Appendix 6) and welcomed any questions and/or concerns they may have. Following this, the researcher contacted participants to arrange either face to face or online interviews depending on their preferences, availability, time and distance. In total, six men were recruited who met the research criteria; four via social media and two via organisations. Following successful recruitment, two interviews were conducted online via Zoom and four interviews were conducted face to face across various locations within London informed by the participant's preferences e.g. place of work, public library.

Ethical consideration:

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of London Metropolitan University (Appendix 1). Ethical consideration was closely evaluated when choosing the sample for this study because current literature highlights EGM as a vulnerable client group with increased risk of experiencing 'effeminophobia', anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, victimisation and hate-crime (Richardson, 2016; Sandfort et al., 2007). Therefore, all measures have been taken into consideration to reduce such risk informed by ethical guidelines proposed by the BPS Code of Human Ethics (2014) and Health Care Professions Council (HCPC) standards of conduct, performance and ethics (2016) when exploring participant's subjective experiences pre and post interviewing supported by information sheet, distress protocol and debrief.

- *Consent*

Prior to interviewing, the participants were required to read and sign the provided consent form which set out detailed information regarding participants' rights, study aims and data management (Appendix 5). The participants were made aware that they were under no obligation to partake in the research and may withdraw at any point without reason or penalty within six weeks of interview completion. Moreover, participants were informed that they did not need to respond to any

questions that made them feel uncomfortable. The researcher explicitly discussed the purpose of the interview as research and not therapy for participants. Furthermore, the researcher's supervisor name and contact details were provided if participants felt the need to report any concerns or address any queries unforeseen pre or post interviewing. Once the participants signed the consent form, the interview process could begin.

- *Confidentiality and anonymity*

The participants were explicitly informed of confidentiality and its limits prior to interviewing as well as this being outlined in the information sheet and consent form. Furthermore, participants were informed that interviews would be recorded using an encrypted Dictaphone with data being transcribed for each case. The identification and use of data were supported by pseudonyms to protect each participant's identity. All confidential forms and recordings were kept in a secure locked cupboard or password protected at the researcher's home address.

Furthermore, the participants were informed that their data was being used as part of a doctoral thesis which may be published. Therefore, direct quotes from their transcript data would be used in the write-up with all personal information being anonymised. Participants were reassured that all audio-recordings would be destroyed, while all anonymised data would be kept for five years post research before being destroyed in accordance to the London Metropolitan University's Code of Good Research Practice (2014).

- *Distress*

During interviewing, the participants were exposed to questions of a sensitive and personal nature which could have resulted in unforeseeable distress. All measures were taken to reduce risk and participants were explicitly informed prior to interviewing that there was no obligation to answer any of the questions and that they could withdraw at any time. However, some topics could result in unanticipated material being disclosed which could have made the interview process emotional, uncomfortable and distressing. In the unlikely event of this happening, a distress protocol was established to monitor and manage risk with the researcher being attuned to verbal and non-verbal cues (Appendix 7). Once the interview was complete, participants were debriefed about the nature of the research and outcomes.

This debrief also provided contact details of both the researcher and supervisor alongside other supporting organisations (Appendix 6).

Data collection:

- *Interview schedule*

An interview schedule was designed and consisted of open-ended questions to address topics and questions that were appropriate to the current research and further supported by 'prompt' questions to fully capture the participant's subjective experiences (Laforest, Bouchard & Maurice, 2012) (Appendix 3).

Consistent with IPA, the interview schedule was used flexibly in order to ensure an open framework and dialogue which allowed conversation to flow freely resulting in a 'dual focus' with the interview being participant-led but guided by the researcher (Smith & Eatough, 2007).

The interview schedule was further developed through extensive feedback from my supervisor and through experimental learning, trialling mock interviews with other counselling psychology peers. This resulted in several drafts being developed with appropriate modifications being made to establish a satisfactory schedule that engaged the participants in order to address the RQ.

- *Data collection via Zoom*

The literature effectively highlights the value and significance of online platforms within research in offering a safe and inclusive space for hard-to-reach populations (Morison, Gibson, Wigginton & Crabb, 2015). As such, this informed the decision to use Zoom to conduct and collect data online. This software tool was used because it generates password protected links to maintain security and confidentiality. Zoom also offers privacy and allows shared access to conferencing without sharing personal contacts between researcher and interviewee. Furthermore, Zoom allowed the researcher to reach out and welcome underrepresented participants who may be geographically and/or socially isolated as well as those who are unable to or prefer not to attend in person. For example, research illustrates how online environments allow gay men to participate within research with lower risk to their anonymity (Ayling & Mewse, 2009). Additionally, Zoom has been considered a favourable

platform within research amongst researchers and participants over telephone, face-to-face and other video conferencing technologies when conducting interviews. Finally, Zoom has the further benefit of convenience, accessibility and use, time and cost effectiveness, interactivity and security (Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey & Lawless, 2019). In this study, a personal computer and/or laptop was required with a reliable internet connection, web cam and Zoom installation, to facilitate in the interview process.

- *Interview process*

The interviews were conducted online using Zoom as well as being face to face, informed by the participants preferences and/or needs. Two participants requested online interviews influenced by issues related to location, timing and availability. The researcher and the participants mutually agreed to conduct online interviews in a quiet and secure setting via Zoom, using generated password protected links to maintain security and confidentiality throughout the interview in a shared meeting space.

The researcher and three of the participants mutually agreed to meet and conduct interviews face to face at their place of work. The researcher discussed practical requirements with the participants such as space, availability, timing, confidentiality, access and safety. The participants were able to provide and/or arrange a quiet and confidential room for the required interview length. Following this, the researcher and participants mutually agreed specific times to meet informed by availability and room bookings.

One participant declined the invitation to interview at a university library due to distance, but continued to express their preference for a face to face interview over online. The researcher and the participant mutually agreed to meet at a local library close to the participant, influenced by their availability and times. This allowed the researcher to contact the library and book a private room informed by the participants preferences to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

Reasonable steps were taken to ensure researcher safety through advanced preparation before meeting participants i.e. familiarisation with location, entry and exit areas, planning the interviews within office hours and in daylight, ensuring my

mobile was fully charged, sharing the time and an estimated length of the interview with a friend as well as contacting them pre and post interviews.

The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes with questions being asked at a pace that suited the participants, thus allowing them time and space for detailed responses and elaboration. All interviews were recorded using an encrypted Dictaphone as outlined in the consent form. On completion of interviews, participants were fully debriefed accompanied with a distress protocol to support their emotional and well-being needs. Each participant was thanked for their participation within the study and given the option to receive a copy of the thesis once completed with communication being limited to email contact. At the end of each interview, the researcher recorded thoughts, feelings and non-verbal observations within a reflective diary that was used to support reflexivity and inform the analytic process (Smith et al., 2009).

Data analysis:

- *Analytic process*

Once recorded interviews were transcribed for each case. The researcher flexibly employed recommendations as suggested by Smith et al., (2009, 2022) to facilitate in the analysis of data using IPA. The first stage of the analytic process involved several readings of the transcript and listening to recordings in order to become immersed within the participants experience and data (Smith et al., 2009). Each transcript included margins on the left- and right-hand side to record notes supported by line and page numbers. As such, preliminary interpretations were noted on the left-hand margin reflecting exploratory annotations including linguistic and conceptual commentary on significant ideas, issues or topics. The idiographic nature of IPA involved each transcript being evaluated and interpreted individually in order to identify themes which were relevant to each participant's individual subjective experience (Smith et al., 2009, 2022).

The next stage involved identifying and developing 'emerging themes' from the transcript on the right-hand margin, informed by preliminary interpretations and psychological concepts. This stage reflects a shift in description and interpretation that allows theoretical connections and patterns to be established whilst remaining

grounded in the text of the transcript. Consistent with IPA, the participant's own words and phrases were used to label emerging themes where possible (Appendix 8).

Following this, the third stage involved identifying and organising emergent themes into 'clusters' based on connections and/or similarities that share meaning or reference to create superordinate themes (Smith & Osborne, 2008) This process was completed across all transcripts resulting in a table of superordinate and subordinate themes supported by quotations from each participant (Appendix 9).

Using these tables, the next stage of the analytic process involved identifying and grouping re-occurring themes through a process of relabelling and/or reconfiguration. Consequently, this approach allowed the researcher to identify and present a final table of superordinate and subordinate themes that transcend across all cases and reflect the focus for analysis (Appendix 10).

- *Validity*

The researcher employed four principles proposed by Yardley (2008) to ensure the highest standards of quality and validity within qualitative research. Within the present study, 'sensitivity to context' can be demonstrated in the appreciation of the sociocultural context, the existing research base and ensuring that all data analysis is grounded in the participants' own language. Additionally, 'commitment and rigour' was established through in-depth engagement with the topic, which involved thorough data collection and analysis. This process was supported by maintaining a reflective journal to record and bracket my assumptions during the interpretative stage. This reflective approach provided insight into my own bias and preoccupations, which could be explored during supervisory meetings and further bracketed. The researcher also engaged in research discussions with peers and other professional psychologists to further unearth and bracket interpretations and themes. The 'transparency and coherence' of the study has been established and maintained by implementing a structured approach throughout the analytic process, already discussed in-depth within this chapter. Furthermore, Yardley (2008) suggests that the researcher's reflexivity can be an extension of 'transparency', and this has been shared below. Finally, 'impact and importance' was established by my 'commitment' in addressing gaps within literature to highlight the clinical relevance of the study and identifying the contributions to practice.

Reflexivity:

In this chapter, a reflexive statement provides the opportunity to reflect on the analytic process. The analysis presented within the current research represents my analytic interpretations, in which I attempt to present a deeper understanding of the participant's 'sense making' using a double hermeneutic approached offered by IPA (Smith et al., 2009, 2022). Inevitably, I acknowledge that using this approach provides room for biased interpretation which may cloud my assumptions. Consequently, I found it useful to engage and maintain a reflexive journal that allowed me to record my thoughts and emotions evoked during the interview and analytic process. This created space to consider how this may have influenced and/or steered my interpretations. The process of data collection, analysis and interpretation will be explored below.

- *Data collection*

My drive and motivation to give EGM a voice within research coupled with my own lived experiences undoubtedly influenced the research design and conduct. I acknowledge that the origins of the study were initially fuelled by my desire to challenge and deconstruct toxic masculinity influenced by my personal want to triumph over trauma. Furthermore, my literature review enhanced my understanding of the neglect and lack of exploratory research into the lived experiences of EGM, which further enforced my desire to empower and give voice to a marginalised population. Reflecting on this material with my supervisor and personal therapist has cultivated more awareness of this personal predisposition and the potential impact this may have upon my research e.g. limiting my curiosity which may compromise the openness and reciprocity with my participants that I strive for throughout the research process. This invaluable insight allowed me to become more aware of my own personal investment and salient influences emerging within my research, which I continued to bracket in order to remain ethical throughout the study.

The recruitment phase of the study was a twofold experience. Initially, I was excited about getting to this stage and advertising my research to capture the attention of potential participants. Additionally, I was anxious and feared that no one would be interested in participating in my research and if/when this process began.

Consequently, I received a high volume of emails expressing an interest to take part in the study from individuals who do not identify as effeminate, fem, camp or non-masc, but welcomed an opportunity to express their experiences of dating using GDHAs. This made me realise that the research topic was relevant across the gay community and I felt like a 'bad researcher' having to decline individuals who did not meet the recruitment criteria, for whom this opportunity may have provided a platform to share experiences and information more widely.

Prior to interviewing, I was anxious that the participants would sense my unfamiliarity being in the role of 'researcher' and the potential impact of this. In order to manage my anxiety, I engaged in role play with colleagues using my interview schedule as well as familiarising myself with conducting interviews using IPA to increase my confidence and flow between interviewer and interviewee (Smith et al., 2009, 2022). This learning experience allowed me to grasp and navigate my shifting role from therapist to researcher and interviewer.

During my first interview, I found myself slipping into my role as therapist i.e. paraphrasing and/or empathising, which may reflect my own anxiety being in an unfamiliar role. Consequently, this awareness made me anxious that I unintentionally contaminated the participant's material. To my surprise, I was relieved to find that I managed to stay close to the participant's experiences when listening to my recordings, despite my anxieties. This invaluable process allowed me to review and self-monitor my approach throughout subsequent interviews as well as increasing my confidence in my role as researcher and interviewer.

I was also relieved to have my interview schedule to help guide me through the process as I tried to maintain an open and non-leading dialogue with my participants. However, I felt that some participants didn't fully understand my questioning and/or provided vague responses, which compromised this sense of openness I strived for. Consequently, I found myself repeating questions and/or relying on prompts to develop deeper insight into the participant's experiences and meaning.

This was an insightful process which allowed me to become aware of my own preconceptions. On the surface, the participants limited and/or vague responses increased my anxiety and thoughts that my interview questions and/or prompts may

not be relevant or accessible to address the RQ. I feared this would compromise the richness of the material, which influenced my tendency to repeat questions and/or rely on prompts.

Through reflexive practice, I am more aware that these processes may have been influenced by my own feelings of dissatisfaction in wanting 'more' detailed and fruitful material. I also have a sense of how I responded to such questions may have been influenced by my own personal material, which may have unintentionally created an assumption regarding how I thought my participants may have responded. This topic was discussed in supervision with the intention to bracket such material in order to maintain an open and non-leading dialogue, for myself and participants. Reflexive practice has increased my awareness of the on-going emerging influences that represents an unavoidable process within such research, despite best efforts to bracket. This learning allowed me to be mindful of the on-going need to engage in reflexivity throughout the research process in order to remain close to participants experiences and meaning.

- *Data collection using Zoom*

The application of Zoom allowed me to collaborate with the participant's and facilitate interviews that were safe and inclusive as well as acknowledging their individual needs e.g. time, convenience, accessibility and use (Archibald et al., 2019; Morison et al., 2015). In the context of this study, two participants were unable to attend a face to face interview due to issues of time, access and/or location. Previous research suggests that Zoom offers high-quality and in-depth interviews when meeting face to face is not possible (Gray, Wong, Rempel & Cook, 2020). Without the application of Zoom in the current study, these participants would not have been able to access and/or contribute to the current study. Therefore, Zoom provided an invaluable opportunity to address such barriers as well as promoting access to the current study. With this in mind, I'm aware that my decision to use Zoom also reflects my hope to establish and maintain motivation amongst participants who may be ambivalent about participating by making the study as accessible as possible.

Reflecting on my experience of interviewing, I am more aware of how the setting and environment can influence the process. For example, themes of control and boundaries emerged in the context of planning and managing remote interviews to

ensure privacy, confidentiality and ethical practice, which increased my awareness of the need to work flexibly utilising online platforms.

The participants completed online interviews from the comfort of their own home, in which they appeared more relaxed and engaged. This appeared to enhance the rapport building as well as facilitating in rich dialogue which is consistent with current research (Archibald et al., 2019; Labinjo, Ashmore, Serrant & Turner, 2021). Furthermore, Zoom allowed direct contact with participants which enabled me to identify and respond to non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and gestures, to build trust and encourage exploration while evoking a sense of 'being with' them throughout the process. Inevitably, some technical issues did arise compromising the flow of the interviews, such as brief pauses in audio and/or video due to poor Wi-Fi connections. Despite such issues, I was able to reconnect and engage with participants in rich dialogue.

Reflecting on my experience of interviewing, I'm aware that I felt more comfortable and less exposed online as opposed to face to face, which reflects my anxieties being in an unfamiliar role as researcher. This invaluable reflection allowed me to recognise the shifts in my anxiety informed by the interview context, which enhanced my understanding of my own internal emotional world and need to remain contained during interviews across both modalities.

- *Analysis and interpretation*

Prior to the analytic process, I was aware of several assumptions and biases preoccupying my mind that I made positive attempts to bracket. Firstly, an awareness of my own responses to such questions. Secondly, the underlying belief that participants will have similar experiences to me. Thirdly, the assumption that participants would be inclusive and embracing of alternative masculinities. During the analytic process, I was able to recognise my own processes of projection identification e.g. themes of rejection, defeminisation, conformity, toxic masculinity, marginalisation and subordination. I found it easier to capture such emerging biases and preconceptions in order to stay close to the participants' material e.g. recognising when my interpretations were influenced by my own projections, experiences and language over the participant's voice, meaning and language.

Furthermore, I was aware of my conflicting feelings when the participants material was different and/or challenged my underlaying assumptions and beliefs. For example, I was aware of my shock and anger towards participants who continued to gender police and reject other EGM, which resulted in reactive interpretations e.g. internalised homophobia, femmephobia. Initially, I struggled to sit with this anger and recognised the need to pause and distance myself from the analytic process in order to make sense of my own thoughts and feelings. This compassionate response to self was utilised throughout the analytic process during such states of conflict and allowed me to return with an enhanced understanding of my own biases which enabled me to stay close to the participants experiences and meaning.

The initial stages of data analysis were an overwhelming and exhausting process. This was influenced by the quantity of data coupled with my own need and want to prove I'm 'good enough', which was further exasperated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to contain my anxiety, I found it useful to immerse myself within each of the participant's interview by re-reading transcripts to fully understand their experiences and meaning. This increased my own feelings of familiarity and confidence working through each transcript and making interpretations of the data. However, this process was impeded by the COVID-19 pandemic which compromised my time and emotional health. With this in mind, I decided to extend my thesis write-up for a year and temporarily disengage from the analytic process; this gave me the necessary space and time to focus on my needs.

As the pandemic eased, I slowly began to immerse myself back into the analytic process, which gave me a fresh perspective on the data. However, I was aware that I felt a sense of pressure to establish sophisticated interpretations and themes that I could share with my supervisor. This was shared with my supervisor and acknowledged as a barrier to my own progress. On reflection, I'm aware this sense of 'pressure' reflects my own need to prove myself as well as making up for missed time within the analytic process.

Chapter 4. Analysis

In this chapter, I will present the research findings by offering an in-depth analysis of the three superordinate themes and nine sub-themes that emerged from the data, accompanied by quotes that effectively illuminate each theme's core (see table 2).

Throughout the analytic process, a sequential structure emerged within individual interviews and across the collective data set to facilitate in addressing the current RQ. The first superordinate theme captures a developmental process amongst the participants as they move through youth into adulthood and make sense of their gender identity against traditional gender ideals, impacting on their sense of self. This is followed by the second superordinate theme which highlights the participants on-going experiences of stress and toxic masculinity regulated by femmephobia on GDHAs making it difficult to form meaningful romantic and/or sexual relationships with other online users. Consequently, the final superordinate theme captures the impact of such relational difficulties facilitated by GDHAs, as the participants continue to experience romantic and/or sexual rejection as a result of their gender identity.

Throughout the analytic process, I acknowledge that the current findings are formulated from my own perspective and interpretation of the data derived from each interview transcript. This process was enhanced through reflexivity and bracketing as well as collaboration and discussion with my supervisor and academic peers to condense, structure and organise my themes in a manner that captures the authenticity of the participant's experiences.

Table 2 Superordinate and sub-themes with quotes

Superordinate Theme	Sub-theme	Quote	Interview	Page/line
The evolving gender identity	Gender ideals in youth	*"I tried to butch up at one point and pretend that I wasn't so feminine. I remember my mum used to paint my nails and stuff when I was younger. I went to school one day and I remember this guy teasing me...And then from that point on I was like mum, I don't want nail varnish on my finger nails, only my toenails because no one will see it....It was never kind of putting it aside, it was always hiding it, and I think that's quite telling from putting it on my toenails rather than my nails"*	Toby	2/51-59
	The art of dulling down	*"I seem to be flipping it on or off, it's hard to know, like am I ridiculously effeminate all the time or am I not so much that it's hard to know, because I change it for other people not for myself".*	Ethan	3/128-131
	The authentic feminine man	*"I have a beard and I'm quite hairy at the moment, so to look at most guys are probably thinking, "Oh, yes, butch guy." And then they hear my voice… I am quite feminine, especially the way I move, the way I probably walk… in my wardrobe.... definitely something more effeminate"*	Tanveer	2/48-55
The impact of femmephobia	Marginalisation and subordination of EGM	*"You'd see on their profile, 'masc for masc' or 'Don't message if you're camp'"*	Fergus	11/517-519
	Pressure to conform	*"you're constantly reminded…that people want a masculine man, or a real man"*	Ethan	6/258-259
	Rejecting effeminacy	*"I don't really like to admit it, but I guess I'm not really*	Ekam	16/735-736

	in self and others	*attracted to effeminate guys"*		
The effects of sexual and/or romantic rejection	Poor emotional health enhancing risk taking behaviours	*"I feeling a bit down in the dumps. I just had a really crap picture, and just put the word 'now', and I had so many messages. "I want to come over. I want to come over."*	Fergus	10/438-441
	Expectations of rejection	*"I think when you are swiping on apps a lot of the time like oh god he's really hot, and then you look at more pictures and like he's not going to be interested in me…I am too scared to be rejected by him".*	Toby	11/494-498
	Diminished desirability	*"I feel like it's just not attractive. I feel like I'm not attractive"*	Ekam	8/348

Superordinate theme 1: The evolving gender identity

This superordinate theme captures the significance and role of effeminacy throughout the life of the participants, and how this has evolved and shaped their understanding of their gender identity, from youth to present day. The participants shared similar accounts of increased vulnerability and distress throughout their youth, as they negotiated and reconstructed their gender identity as a result of gender ideals, while making efforts to connect and retain parts of their authentic selves. As some of the participants move into adulthood, they continued to adjust and adapt their identity to the environment through a process of "*dulling down*" to avoid possible victimisation and/or rejection, resulting in distress and confusion regarding their sense of self and identity. Some of the participants shared an evolved process of self-acceptance allowing them to embrace their effeminacy, despite community denigration, leading to feelings of wholeness and allowing them to express their authentic selves as feminine men, while challenging HM ideals.

Sub-theme: Gender ideals in youth

This sub-theme refers to how the participants understood and responded to gender ideals throughout their youth and how this influenced and/or impacted upon their

gender identity. The participants describe similar processes of having to renegotiate their gender identity as a result of gender policing amongst peers and parents, characterised by defeminising publicly whist expressing their true gendered self privately. Some of the participants discuss the centrality of gender role models in constructing and/or validating their unique gender identity and/or expressions as they move through youth.

Toby, Ethan, Ekam and Tanveer share similar feelings of distress and vulnerability as a result of gender policing in which they became aware of their gender expressions, leading to a shift in understanding their gender identity:

"I tried to butch up at one point and pretend that I wasn't so feminine. I remember my mum used to paint my nails and stuff when I was younger. I went to school one day and I remember this guy teasing me...and then from that point on I was like mum, I don't want nail varnish on my finger nails, only my toenails because no one will see it....it was never kind of putting it aside, it was always hiding it" (Toby, 51-59)

Toby appears to be describing the ridicule he experienced as a result of his gender expressions. From this experience, it's seems that Toby developed an awareness of gender norms and expectations resulting in feelings of shame that may have internalised, as he attempted to defeminise and conceal his true gender identity as suggested though his language "*butch up*", "*pretend*" and "*hiding*". As such, Toby's language "*butch up*" suggests he is embracing heteronormative ideals of gender performance stereotypically associated with masculinity.

Ethan also spoke of his need to conceal his true identity.

"I always wanted to wear dresses, I hated wearing my school clothes, because I couldn't wear a skirt or ... I wanted to dress like the girls basically" (Ethan, 45-47)

"my dad was just embarrassed to be seen with a son who was wearing a dress or makeup. So there were certain spaces that I could do it, if I was in public that would be not allowed". (Ethan, 61-62)

Ethan seems frustrated as he speaks, which evokes a sense of him being denied and caged by gender binary expectations that prevent him from expressing his true gendered self. Ethan's discomfort and longing to be authentic to himself is expressed through his repetition of "*I*". Ethan seems to be aware of his father's disapproval and possible rejection as a result of his gender transgressions through his use of "*embarrassed*". It's possible that Ethan felt the need to suppress parts of himself in fear of parental rejection, and also, learned to be ashamed of his true gender identity by performing masculinity.

Consequently, both Toby and Ethan appear to be negotiating and compromising their gender identity as they learn how to perform heteronormative ideals of gender associated with masculinity and publicly conform to masculine ideals in order to be accepted, whilst engaging in private behaviours that allow them to connect and explore their true gendered selves.

Ekam spoke of his distress and vulnerability.

"I remember being a kid and having people point those things out to me, like, "Oh, you sound like a girl," or "You talk like a girl" ... which when I was a kid, when you're really impressionable… (Ekam, 58-66)

Ekam appears to be describing his feelings of being different and targeted as a result of his voice. Ekam seems vigilant and self-conscious about his voice and aware of the potential threat it may evoke in others, leaving him exposed and vulnerable. His words suggest that his self-esteem may have been compromised by fear and judgement imposed by others, which appears to influence how he feels about himself.

Tanveer spoke of his resilience.

"I think it was in secondary school…they get even more meaner…it's like, "Oh you're gay"… and you just try and do different things. But it didn't stop me, I still loved to dance in secondary school, still liked music" (Tanveer, 121-125).

Tanveer's experiences at secondary school escalated as suggested by his language "*more meaner*" as a result of his gender transgressions. Tanveer describes a shift from gender policing to homophobic abuse as a result of stigma associated with effeminacy. Despite his experience of peer victimisation, Tanveer evokes a sense of resilience that informs and validates his gender identity as he continues to channel his subject interests.

Blair and Ekam spoke about their need for gender role models in forming their gender identity:

"So I didn't really have any male influences. Then I was also like a devil child. I got kicked out of school, like I was the devil child, so I think not having a masculine figure there affected that. Because I feel like my mum could only do so much" (Blair, 43-46).

Blair alludes to his lack of experience in regards to male role models in constructing his gender identity, as suggested by his expression "*male influences*". Blair describes himself as a "*devil child*" repeatedly which may reflect his attempts to rebel against his mother and reject femininity through his performance of hyper-masculine stereotyped behaviours he has internalised e.g. aggression. Furthermore, Blair appears to be self-reflecting when he states "*I feel like my mum could only do so much*", in which he may be questioning to himself if having a positive role model of masculinity would have made a difference to his gender identity.

Ekam shares this need for identification.

"I remember a TV show I was watching where someone said that he always played the girl when he played a video game, and I was like, "Oh, I always used to do that too" and I didn't realise that was something that we all did. (Ekam, 117-126)

"Seeing like Disney princesses and seeing who the prince is attracted to… in Year Six or Year Seven and flared jeans came in… but only girls wore them… I kind of wanted flared jeans…if that's attractive as a woman, that's what attracts men…that's the same thing with Disney princesses" (Ekam, 160-171)

Ekam describes a sense of isolation he experienced throughout his youth as a result of limited role models to affirm his gender identity. Ekam appears to discuss his process of projection identification seeing similar gender expressions on "*TV*", which seem to validate and normalise his identity while creating a sense of relief for him. Furthermore, Ekam's appears to have internalised "*Disney princesses*" and women's fashion, in constructing his gender and sexual identity. His awareness of binary expectations seems to have restricted his natural growth and invalidated his gender identity.

Sub-theme: The art of dulling down

This sub-theme theme refers to how some of participants continue to respond and manage their effeminacy in adulthood. As a result of internalised stigma and shame associated with effeminacy, some of the participants describe a constant process of renegotiating their gender identity influenced by the environment, resulting in a lack or stable coherent sense of self, characterised by incongruence and confusion.

Fergus spoke of his anxiety when meeting new male members of staff.

"I always get quite worried … we got a new member of staff…sports coach…That always worries me slightly, and I feel like I have to dull myself down a bit…Suppress how I would normally be around him. If it's a woman, funnily enough, I don't. It's only when we get the new guys come in… give it a month or so…They were all over it, joining in, and it's all absolutely fine" (Fergus, 128-145).

Fergus appears to be threatened by unfamiliar men and experiences intense emotional turmoil through his repetition of "*always"* and "*worried"*. Fergus uses words "*quite*" and *slightly*" to describe his emotional response, which are in opposition and may reflect his own difficulties making sense of complex emotions. Under such conditions, Fergus appears to evaluate and alter his gender expressions and attempts to "*dull*" himself "*down*" and "*suppress*" parts of himself, which may reflect his need for acceptance. Furthermore, Fergus acknowledges his relaxed feelings amongst unfamiliar women contrasted by his cautiousness amongst unfamiliar men. It seems as though unfamiliar men evoke a sense of threat and stress in Fergus, which appear to be associated with fear and/or rejection. Moreover, Fergus

appears to expect different levels of regard and responses between men and women, leading to feelings of 'worry' and uncertainty.

Ethan spoke about context and his identity.

"you're more accepted for being more effeminate in certain spaces around like-minded people. And I suppose for my sense of self, it's a bit like which one am I… I seem to be flipping it on or off, it's hard to know, like am I ridiculously effeminate all the time or am I not so much…I change it for other people not for myself" (Ethan, 125-131)

Ethan alludes to his perceived control in altering his gender expressions when he talks about his ability *"to be flipping it on or off*", which appears to be influenced by his context. Ethan describe a spectrum of gender expressions as suggested through his language "*more effeminate*", with a sense of 'acceptance' in "*certain spaces*" associated with feelings of freedom and safety. Such experiences seem to give Ethan permission to connect and express parts of himself as well as challenging his understanding of his own identity as reflected in his questioning "*am I ridiculously effeminate?"* This is juxtaposed by a need to "*change*" to please others by altering his gender expressions leading to a sense of identity confusion as suggested though his self-reflection.

Ekam spoke of his confusion.

"I get really confused about my identity, I think, because the gauge I'm getting is from other people telling me that I am too much or telling me that I'm not as much" (Ekam, 243-246)

Ekam appears open to vulnerability when he describes his need to self-monitor and "*gauge*" how others experience and respond to him as a result of his gendered expressions. This process appears to have contributed to his weak self-concept through his continuous efforts and need to be accepted. Ekam's need to invite judgement from others may perpetuate his feelings of inferiority while invalidating his identity.

The above participants appear to be adjusting and altering their gender expressions influenced by the environment, rather than focusing on themselves. This suggests that the participants may have a profoundly deep sense of defectiveness engrained into their identity as a result of internalised stigma associated with effeminacy, compromising their ability to express their true gendered selves.

Sub-theme: The authentic feminine man

This sub-theme captures how some of the participants developed a sense of self-acceptance regarding their effeminacy in adulthood, allowing them to validate their gender identity and authenticity as feminine men. The participants discuss the role and significance of resilience in embracing their effeminacy and retaining and/or expressing their true gendered selves, despite community denigration.

Fergus and Blair unapologetically spoke of their self-acceptance.

"I am who I am, I don't really care, to be honest. I've got other things to worry about…when I was … sort of my early- to mid-twenties, it kind of played a big thing" (Fergus, 181-184)

"I am me, I'm not necessarily super-gay, super-straight, I am what I am, take me for whatever I am, or bye." (Blair, 147-149)

Fergus and Blair appear assertive and empowered within their gender identity and refer to their refusal to change as suggested by their words "*I am who I am*" and "*I am what I am*", which suggests a deeper inner knowing of their identity as well as reinforcing their sense of self-acceptance and security within themselves. Blair speaks about not being "*super gay*" or "*super straight"* which may describe his comfort embracing an inclusive gendered identity that authentically integrates both masculinity and femininity. Fergus goes on to describe a process of maturity by reflecting on his vulnerability in "*early to mid-twenties*" and his need to work through painful emotions, leading to a greater sense of wholeness and authenticity to in his identity.

Toby and Tanveer shared this sense of wholeness.

"It's taken a long while to get there but I think I've really recently kind of realised, I'd say in the last 3 years that it is okay to be feminine" (Toby, 119-121)

"I'm finding myself, knowing who I am and definitely feeling like I can be more myself" (Tanveer, 102-104).

Toby and Tanveer describe a journey of self-compassion in developing a positive inner alignment in their sense of self and identity. Toby appears to give himself permission to embrace his femininity when he says *"it's ok to be feminine*". Tanveer alludes to his continuous process of "*finding*" himself with increased feelings of comfortableness, curiosity and self-awareness. Through the passage of time, it's appears that self-compassion may have allowed them to turn understanding, acceptance and love in ward creating a sense of wholeness.

Toby, Tanveer and Blair spoke of their wholeness and authenticity to self.

"I've got bags of all colours and materials and stuff like that. I just love a bag and there's nothing wrong with that" (Toby, 189-190)

"I have a beard and I'm quite hairy at the moment, so to look at most guys are probably thinking, "Oh, yes, butch guy." And then they hear my voice… I am quite feminine, especially the way I move, the way I probably walk… in my wardrobe.... definitely something more effeminate" (Tanveer, 48-55)

"I'll wear like pink blazers and stuff …. people thought I was a woman" (Blair, 276-279).

The above participants describe gender expressions that validate their authenticity as feminine men. Toby speaks passionately of his "*love*" for bags which seems to be a fundamental part of his identity. Tanveer and Blair describe a sense of androgyny and integrate both masculine and feminine characteristics creating a sense of gender ambiguity. The participants appear to have created unique gendered expressions that challenge masculine ideas by their continuous sense of authenticity, which creates a platform for alternative masculinities.

Fergus, Ekam and Toby spoke of their authenticity within their line of work.

"They know who I am, so it makes it a lot easier for me…to actually be my natural self, which is really nice" (Fergus, 109-124).

"There are two classes. One is hip hop and the other one is ballet… and everyone in the class is a female, except for me. But being in that room, it's all about your effeminate energy and sexuality and embracing yourself, and in that room I feel super comfortable, so I kind of can turn it up as much as I want" (Ekam, 262-272)

"I sell shoes and handbags for women…I think it's allowed me to flourish in that kind of industry… it kind of comes naturally to me and it is easier for me to be able to be who I am because that's what I've got to do for life" (Toby, 110-115)

All the participants describe a sense of acceptance and liberation within their place and/or areas of work, which enables them to be authentically themselves. Fergus seems to feel secure and safe being his "*natural self*" at work which enables him to progress in his career positively. Ekam talks about his sense of being unbounded within his line of work and 'embraces' the space to express his identity fully. Whereas, Toby shares his feelings of being successful and 'flourishing' in his line of work. Ekam and Toby describe how their line of work is fruitful in utilising and celebrating their unique identities as being an integral to their sense of self and prompting authenticity.

Ethan and Toby discussed the role of sexual positioning.

"I'm versatile and I suppose it's often you're perceived to be bottom if you are effeminate" (Ethan, 356-357)

"I am very much versatile and I think that you know you can still be a feminine top" (Tob,y 330-331)

The above participants describe how their gender identity is associated with being "*bottom*", imposed by others through gender stereotypes. Both Ethan and Toby

identify as "*versatile*", which appears to challenge gender stereotypes of EGM as 'bottom' as well as validating their gender identity. Moreover, Toby appears to be deconstructing stereotypes of 'tops' through his notion of the "*feminine top*" in his attempts to challenge HM ideals, while creating space for alternative masculinities to gain sexual access and 'top'.

Superordinate theme 2: The impact of femmephobia

This superordinate theme captures the impact of femmephobia amongst the participants in establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships on GDHAs. Throughout this theme, the participants shared similar accounts of feeling marginalised and subordinated by femmephobic attitudes, language and/or branding of GDHAs that privileges and glorifies masculinity. As a result of gender-based discrimination and stigma, some of the participants expressed their sense of pressure to conform to masculine ideals in order to enhance their desirability and attractiveness against competing masculinities on GDHAs. Also, some of the participant's shared their reluctance to date other EGM, characterised by a process of projective identification leading to possible rejection.

Sub-theme: Marginalisation and subordination

This sub-theme refers to how femmephobia continues to devalue, marginalise and subordinate EGM, making it difficult to establish meaningful interpersonal relationships across gay applications. The participants describe a hierarchy of gay masculinities on GDHAs, which continues to marginalise and subordinate femininity, sexually as well as romantically, against pro-masculine values and ideals, characterised by feelings of isolation and rejection. Some of the participants discuss effeminacy in the context of being a "*fetish*" associated with erotic subordination and possible risk.

Fergus and Ethan both spoke of a need for acceptance.

"The biggest one is probably acceptance from other gay men…some gay men … only want masc for masc" (Fergus, 267-272)

"you're often reminded that it's not okay by quite a lot of people, often strangers… it feels like you should be acting differently… then you might be accepted by more people" (Ethan, 187-192)

Fergus and Ethan describe a process of rejection as a result of gender policing amongst gay men regulated by femmephobia. Fergus's words "*masc for masc*" conveys the privilege of masculinity while devaluing and marginalising EGM in the context of partner preference. Ethan alludes to his experience of being shamed and judged by others and suggests a sense of violation and risk being imposed by "*strangers*" policing femmephobia. Consequently, Ethan's want to change may reflect his attempts to avoid possible threat and feelings of vulnerability in his hope to be "*accepted*".

Ekam talked about his feelings of isolation.

"The community still has so much discrimination. So it's kind of like, I can't even fit in with my own community. So there's this loneliness. I don't know, this feeling like, "Am I going to be alone forever?" (Ekam, 398-405)

Ekam alludes to his own experiences of discrimination resulting in his feelings of alienation and marginalisation within the gay community. Ekam appears lost and suggests a sense of failure on his behalf when he speaks "*I can't…fit in with my community*", which may exasperate his feelings of being abnormal. Ekam describes his feelings of "*loneliness*" in the context of romance and fears being "*alone forever*", which may refer to his feelings of desperation and love deprivation.
Tanveer and Ethan discussed the role of camp and dating.

"As a camp or effeminate ... as a camp guy, probably even more difficult…being camp in the dating world." (Tanveer, 388-397)

"I trained as a dancer…they automatically think… here's another queen, here's another camp guy" (Tanveer, 201-207)

"In terms of being effeminate and dating…you've already limited it by people who want to date, but then also limiting it again by people who are accepting of effeminate men, or camp men" (Ethan, 405-409)

Tanveer and Ethan appear to discuss the subordination of camp identities in different ways. Tanveer appears to differentiate between camp and effeminate identities and suggests that "*camp*" identities may be subordinate to "*effeminate*" identities. Furthermore, Tanveer suggests that "*camp*" identities may experience more extreme forms of marginalisation as suggested by his language "*even more difficult*". Tanveer speaks of his experience of being stereotyped and labelled as a "*queen*" and "*camp*", which captures the role and use of language in subordinating alternative masculinities. Ethan seems to refer to "*camp*" and "*effeminate*" interchangeably and describes both with a sense of limitation in partner selection and desirability, which continues to marginalise alternative masculinities.

Fergus, Tanveer, Ekam and Ethan spoke of similar experiences of femmephobic language on GDHAs.

"You'd see on their profile, 'masc for masc' or 'Don't message if you're camp'" (Fergus, 517-519)

"I saw a profile that said 'no femme, fat, Asian' whatever… 'not another one'" (Tanveer, 829-830)

"You'll see people who will say things like, 'No fems' … I've just seen some racist things… very clearly saying… 'This is what I want. If you're not that, you're not good enough,' … in a sort of toxic masculine way. I guess it hurts" (Ekam, 943-950)

All participants describe a range of femmephobic language displayed on profiles that privileges masculinity in potential partners using negative word forms which emphasise and reject femininity such as "*don't*" and "*no*" i.e. "*no femmes*". This captures the role and use of language in marginalising and subordinating alternative masculinities, emphasising what others don't want.

Tanveer and Ekam suggest that GDHA profiles have become a platform for "*toxic masculinity*" which is moving beyond femmephobia to issues of fat shaming and racism as suggested by "*No femme, fat, Asian*". This demonstrates how masculine ideals continue to the reject, marginalise and subordinate alternative identities online. Ekam discusses his "*hurt*" and feelings of "*not good enough*" as a result of "*toxic masculinity*" online, which appears to compromise his self-esteem and self-worth.

Ethan spoke of his experience of toxic masculinity regulating femmephobia.

"It's rife and…it goes unchallenged… the people that are writing that on their profiles, no fems, no camps, like it goes way further than that…they are able to get away with just saying that it's a preference and that's acceptable … it's almost like you've got carte blanche then to just write whoever you don't want. And I don't think there's any consideration for the impact that it has on people" (Ethan, 443-450)

Ethan uses the word "*rife*" to describe the widespread and common occurrence of femmephobia online. He seems to suggest that femmephobia "*goes unchallenged*" and is masked as "*preference*", which may give profile users permission to act out freely as suggested by his use of "*carte blanche*". Ethan suggests that the impact of femmephobia "*goes way further*" beyond online and that many profile users lack accountability and "*consideration*" for their actions towards others. This demonstrates the destructive and unregulated nature of femmephobia online that continues to marginalise and subordinate alternative masculinities, while perpetuating toxic masculinities.

Ethan, Toby and Tanveer discussed subordinated sexualities.

"Often you're perceived to be bottom if you are effeminate... if you're masculine you're top, if you're feminine you're bottom. And I've noticed that" (Ethan, 356-366).

"The more feminine is obviously naturally the bottom and the more masculine is naturally at the top… I can imagine that being quite hard for someone who is maybe not so sure of themselves" (Tob,y 334-337)

Ethan and toby describe a hierarchy of sexualities that inform sexual positioning, with EGM perceived as being "*bottom*" and masculine gay men being perceived as "*top*". This captures the assumptions and stereotypes that continue to emasculate and subordinate alternatives sexualities that deviate from masculine ideals. Toby suggests that it may be "*quite hard*" for some EGM to assert and negotiate sexual positioning against superior masculinities. This is extended further by Ethan who shares:

"I suppose I always pander to whoever it is… because that's what I would do, like whatever you want to do" (Ethan, 376-377)

Ethan alludes to his sense of being subservient when he speaks of his need to "*pander*". It's possible that Ethan feels inferior and accepts his subservient role in being used to gratify others who may assert a more dominant masculinity.

Toby, Tanveer and Blair discussed youth and sexuality.

"When I was younger I was…fully bottom… the guys that I were with liked me in that role… fetishized… the feminine boy I guess" (Toby, 321-325)

"I think being an effeminate guy… it's been fetishized… you see these huge muscle-mary guys that are wanting these petite feminine boys, because they must have some sort of control issues … and they just want to dominate a guy. (Tanveer, 402-406)

"I think when I was younger I was always like, 'yes, yes, let's bottom'. And like a girly gay thing" (Blair, 414-415)

Toby and Tanveer describe how effeminacy may have become eroticised and "*fetishized*". Toby suggests that the embodiment of femininity may be "*fetishized*" as the "*feminine boy*" associated with being "*fully bottom*" and youth. Tanveer refers to the power and control attached to the fetish of the "*feminine boy*" imposed by "*huge muscle-mary gays*". It's possible that effeminacy as a fetish may represent right to sexual access as well as providing others opportunities to assert their masculinity through eroticised subordination informed by dominance and control.

Furthermore, Toby and Blair share their experience of being "*bottom*" in their youth and allude to this role being enforced and/or expected by others. They may have experienced a sense of vulnerability in negotiating sexual positions as they moved through youth into adulthood. It's possible that youth may act as an invitation to be dominated and controlled sexually. Blair suggests that the "*bottom*" may be treated as a "*girly gay*", which may enforce gender norms that emasculate, disempower and subordinate younger gay individuals.

Toby spoke of gay geographies.

"In London I don't think it is as hard to be effeminate…back at home like in Surrey it is a little bit harder because there's less people…. So you…have to be … more anonymous…there isn't as large of a pool to choose from of people" (Toby, 364-372)

Toby refers to living back at home in Surrey as being "*harder*" than living in London as an EGM. Toby suggests that there isn't a "*large…pool*" of potential partners to "*choose from*" as a result of his effeminacy in rural areas. This suggests that the policing of femmephobia may be more regulated in rural areas as opposed to urban areas. Consequently, many EGM living in rural areas may experience more extreme forms of marginalisation and subordination.

Sub-theme: Pressure to conform

This sub-theme captures the pressures amongst the participants to conform to masculine ideals in order to enhance their desirability, influenced by the branding of GDHAs, profile users and/or discourses of masculinity across gay applications. The participants share similar accounts of masculinity and muscularity being privileged and glorified on GDHAs, characterised by eroticism, sexual access and prowess, resulting in feelings of low self-worth and need to change. The participants describe a process of self-enhancement and self-presentation influenced by masculine ideas to enhance their prospects of developing meaningful interpersonal connections on GDHAs, against competing masculinities.

Ethan and Toby discuss themes of change.

"I need to become more masculine, because that's the only way that people are going to accept me or the way that I'm ever going to sleep with anyone ever again. Or go on a date with anyone ever again" (Ethan, 221-224)

Ethan appears desperate and suggests his need to become *"more masculine*" in order to gain access to romantic and sexual opportunities as well as being accepted. Ethan alludes to the privilege of masculinity and being seen amongst competitive masculinities. Ethan further shares:

"I've shaved my head recently now I think I look more masculine… people are more willing for me to top now" (Ethan, 356-360)

Ethan describes how he looks "*more masculine*" as a result of shaving his hair. It's possible that Ethan may be engaging in hyper-masculine behaviours and/or defeminising to validate and assert his role as "*top*". This suggests that masculinity is eroticised and provides an advantage in sexual negotiations amongst gay men.

"if I butched up a little bit would that make me more attractive? If I'd got a six pack would that make me more attractive?... I think it is quite damaging…embeds like a low self-worth in you that if you were something different you should find love…I shouldn't have to change just to meet someone" (Toby, 269-286)

Toby appears conflicted as he describes his torment and pressure to change in order to "*find love*", as suggested through his repetition "*if I*" followed by stereotypes of masculine ideals "*butch"* and "*six pack*". Consequently, Toby feels 'damaged' and speaks of his "*self-worth*" being compromised, which illuminates the impact of perceived or actual pressure to conform.

Ekam, Tanveer, Ethan and Fergus discussed themes of self enhancement.

"Part of me feels like not using those apps unless I spend some time going to the gym a lot and dieting and looking a bit more like that. I find that it makes me … more shallow or more insecure…because you see all these profile pictures… from chin to pant line, shirtless torsos" (Ekan, 367-377)

"It does make me think that I need to look a certain way, so then I do try and hit the gym. Absolutely hate the gym, but I try. But there's a bit of a pressure that you have to try to do things to look a certain way" (Tanveer, 414-422)

Ekam and Tanveer appear to be conflicted by their experience and use of GDHAs as they both describe a "*pressure*" to enhance their body by going to the "*gym*", influenced by apps expectations and others profile pictures. Ekam speaks about his sense of being "*shallow or more insecure*". Ekam's insecurities may refer to his feelings of inadequacy and body shame triggered by profiles displaying "*shirtless torsos*" fuelling his need to "*gym*", diet or his avoidance of using GDHAs. Ekam's sense of 'shallowness' may reflect his own judgement and scrutiny as a result of conforming to GDHAs' expectations of masculine ideals. Tanveer appears compelled to go to the gym despite his hatred as suggested through his repetition and need "*to look a certain way*", which alludes to the glorification and sexualisation of muscle as the embodiment of masculinity.

Ethan also spoke of muscularity.

"If you look at Grindr, all of the images that they publicise are all muscle men… if your muscle-y therefore you're masculine… it's going to feed into the app itself…. if you don't do that, then who's going to message you" (Ethan, 419-426)

Ethan suggests that "*Grindr*" privileges masculine ideals by publicising "*muscle men*", which becomes the epitome of masculinity and eroticised. Ethan alludes to Grindr's all or nothing branding that appears to perpetuate an expectation of compulsory masculinity through the embodiment of muscularity, resulting in the need for others to conform in order to be desired and worthy "*to message*".

Fergus spoke further of this conformity.

"My friend always gave me a tip that the one [photo] on Grindr should be like a full one of you standing there, so that people can see, rather than just a face shot, because it's the aesthetics" (Fergus, 471-474).

Fergus describes the inherent narrative of "*Grindr*" being associated with "*aesthetics*" that may facilitate in conforming to the brand's expectations, as suggested when his "*friend*" gave him a "*tip*" to present a full body photo over a "*face shot*". This demonstrates how the body continues to be used and objectified to inform and inflate masculinity, while creating a platform regulated by toxic masculinity.

Sub-theme: Rejecting effeminacy in self and others

This sub-theme refers to the participants rejection of effeminacy in self and others, which appears to influence and inform partner preference, sexual and/or romantic rejection. The participants describe a number of processes manifesting in their rejection of effeminacy in self and others, such as internalised masculine ideals, shame and femmephobia as well as projection identification and hyper-masculinity. Also, some participants share similar accounts of distancing, devaluing and subordinating other EGM to validate their own masculinity regulated by femmephobia.

Ethan, Ekam and Tanveer discussed themes of partner preference.

"I feel like I'm subconsciously against it in other men, their effeminacy. So it's like a double-edged sword where you're envious of the way that they can just have freedom… then also the engrained pro-masculine stuff" (Ethan, 326-340).

Ethan appears to use the metaphor "*doubled-edge sword*" to describe his conflicting feelings in regards to dating other EGM. Ethan describes his "*envy*" associated with the perceived "*freedom*" EGM exude. However, Ethan alludes to his rejection of EGM as being influenced by "*engrained masculine*" ideals which he may have internalised within his 'subconscious'. Consequently, Ethan may be projecting his own need for "*freedom*" because he may feel trapped by his 'subconscious' manifesting inner feelings of shame and guilt, characterised by his femmephobia.

Ekam spoke of his discomfort.

"I feel uncomfortable…there's a hairdresser that works at the salon that I go to and he's effeminate…clearly interested in me… it kind of makes me feel uncomfortable, and I'm trying to figure out why… I think there's this pressure…"This person's attracted to me" … I don't know how to handle that…I don't really like to admit it, but I guess I'm not really attracted to effeminate guys" (Ekam, 726- 736).

Ekam refers to his feelings of being "*uncomfortable*" repeatedly when he talks about his experience of being propositioned by an EGM. Ekam initially appears confused and 'tries' to make sense of his feelings whilst concluding that he is "*not really attracted to effeminate guys*". Ekam's initial confusion may reflect his resistance to acknowledge his own feelings of femmephobia, as he struggles to "*admit it*" to himself. It's possible that Ekam is "*uncomfortable*" with his own effeminacy which he rejects in himself and others. Ekam further shared:

"Grindr makes me just make me look for masculine guys… I'm aware of that too and I don't like that about me" (Ekam, 707-709)

Ekam seems to be aware of his preference towards "*masculine guys*" specific to "*Grindr*", which appears to make him uncomfortable, as he says "*I don't like that about me".* It's possible that Ekam's uncomfortableness may reflect his own feelings of shame as he devalues his own unique gender identity as well as perpetuating femmephobic attitudes online, as he privileges masculinity over femininity.

Tanveer shared this lack of attraction.

"I don't find a hugely effeminate gay man attractive...that's just not what I'm looking for. I don't know what is… I have been on dates with effeminate guys…there's not been a spark for me". (Tanveer, 667-674)

When on dates with EGM, Tanveer appears to scrutinise and evaluate gender expressions in the context of desirability, with extreme expressions of femininity being rejected, as suggested by his language "*hugely effeminate*". Perhaps it's easier for Tanveer to attribute his rejection of EGM associated with no "*spark*" as opposed to acknowledging his own feelings of femmephobia.

Tanveer further shared:

"Sometimes I probably smile and might get drunk, because I'm probably looking into a mirror, because there's probably certain things that I do". (Tanveer, 979-681)

Tanveer uses the metaphor of "*looking into a mirror*" when describing his dating experiences with EGM. This implies that Tanveer may be engaging in a process of projection identification, in which he sees himself in other EGM and doesn't like what he sees, leading to his rejection of EGM men. Consequently, Tanveer refers to his need to "*get drunk*", which may suggest his need for escapism as he uses alcohol to cope and dampen uncomfortable feelings of shame attached to his own effeminacy.

Blair discusses his sense of humour.

"I went on a date once…I have a really awful sense of humour, like I'm just quite dry and I said, "Oh these fairy lights are really poofy." And he was like, "Oh my god." The rant I got back was unbelievable" (Blair, 168-171)

Blair appears to have internalised homophobic language masked by humour which sabotaged his date. Blair's reference to the lights as "*poofy*" may reflect his attempts to reject femininity, while asserting his own masculinity, as he makes sense of his date. Blair appears aloof and dismissive towards his date's feelings as suggested by his language "*rant*" and "*unbelievable*". It's possible that Blair remained constrained, inexpressive and lacked emotional investment to maintain his hyper-masculine position.

Blair further discussed themes of gay geographies.

"Where I grew up there was hardly any gays, because it was rural Scotland" (Blair, 111-112)
"He [his date] grew up in London so he'd had a very different sort of like, "You can do what you want, you can be what you want." And it's a lot more liberal in the way they think." (Blair, 186 – 191)

Blair describes his experience of growing up in "*rural Scotland*" as being isolated with limited opportunities to meet or connect with other "*gays*". Blair suggests a sense of difference between him and his date, when he speaks about his date being "*liberal*" because he "*grew up in London*". It's possible that Blair's rural upbringing and limited experiences with other gay men may have heightened his femmephobia. Consequently, being in an urban city and connecting with gay men with alternative masculinities in the context of dating may threaten Blair's masculinity as manifested in his "*awful sense of humour*" on his date.

Tanveer and Fergus continued this theme of femmephobic attitudes.

"They can also be quite bitchy…If you get on the wrong side of some of these effeminate gay guys, you are going feel the wrath of them." (Tanveer, 324)

Tanveer appears to being using femmephobic language when he describes EGM as "*bitchy*". Tanveer's femmephobic language reinforces the stigma and stereotype of EGM as "*bitchy*" and as potentially dangerous as suggested by "*feel the wrath*". Tanveer's use of "*they*" creates a sense of dichotomy in which he may attempt to distance himself from femininity, while validating his own masculinity.

Fergus also shared themes of stereotypes.

"Maybe he's [previous date] a bit more effeminate… senior dancer, works on cruise ships, maybe he's that effeminate, you know, a bit more effeminate" (Fergus, 511-514)

Fergus describes his previous date as being a "*dancer*" and working "*on cruise ships*" while comparing gender identities. Fergus appears to be making use of stereotypes of EGM to inform and evaluate his own effeminacy and concludes that his date was "*a bit more effeminate*". Fergus's need to compare and evaluate effeminacy may be his attempt to assert and validate his own masculinity while subordinating alternative identities that are "*a bit more effeminate*". This suggests that femmephobia continues to be regulated amongst EGM and reinforces marginalisation amongst the marginalised.

Superordinate theme 3: The effects of sexual and/or romantic rejection

This superordinate theme refers to the multifaceted effects of sexual and/or romantic rejection (perceived or actual) triggered by femmephobia on GDHAs, that transcend beyond gay applications, characterised by stress and uncertainty. The participants shared increased rates of stress and/or difficulties coping triggered by the femmephobic attitudes of others through language and/or interactions, informing their sense of rejection. Consequently, the participants' poor emotional health appears to be associated with increased feelings of sexual and/or romantic rejection (perceived or actual) as a result of being an EGM, characterised by expectations of rejection and sense of diminished desirability, impacting on self-esteem and confidence in reaching out to potential partners on GDHAs.

Sub-theme: Poor emotional health enhancing risk taking behaviours

This sub-theme captures the participant's poor emotional health and risk-taking behaviours as a result of perceived or actual romantic and/or sexual rejection triggered by others' femmephobia on GDHAs. The participants share similar accounts in which they appear to associate negative outcomes, such as rejection, with their effeminacy over other characteristics, qualities and/or external conditions, leading to the development of poor coping strategies that may increase risk to self.

Ethan describes his sense of rejection informed by others' femmephobia.

"every time I make a breakthrough of just being able to be who I am, it's like when you read that again, it takes you a step back". (Ethan, 465-467).

Ethan describes his relentless need to "*breakthrough*" a vicious cycle of turmoil and pain triggered by the emotional blows of femmephobic language on GDHAs informing his sense of rejection and need to change, which may hold him "*back*" in forming meaningful connections with other men, sexually and/or romantically.

Tanveer discusses his need for support as a result of rejection triggered by others' femmephobia.

"I've had times where I've gone back to friends and broke down crying… has it stopped me from becoming or from being who I am?...a little bit... I can't lie". (Tanveer, 232-237).

Tanveer refers to his vulnerability and need for comfort amongst friends when he speaks about his need to break "*down crying*", referring to his pain that transcends beyond GDHAs, as he makes sense of his rejection. Furthermore, Tanveer appears to self-reflect on his identity through his own line of questioning as he makes sense of his possible rejection. This process allowed Tanveer to conclude that his sense of self has been compromised and he evokes a sense of arrested development as a result of his experiences of rejection, which may impact on his ability to form meaningful interpersonal relationships with others as a result of being an EGM.

Toby and Ethan discuss themes of avoiding feelings of rejection triggered by others' femmephobia.

"I am quite good at suppressing things and actually the way I deal with things like that is just to not deal with them". (Toby, 251-253)

"I suppose I'm quite good at deflecting it now… it probably had more of an impact and therefore probably it still has an impact now that I just haven't really thought about". (Ethan, 461-463)

Toby speaks of his need to '*suppress'* his emotions in order "*not to deal*" with them. Toby alludes to his familiarity and use of suppression to mask his pain when he speaks "*I'm quite good*". This is followed by Ethan's need to '*deflect'* which appears to be his familiar coping strategy as suggested when he speaks "*I'm quite good*". Toby and Ethan appear to have mastered the art of avoidance in processing painful emotions triggered by femmephobia in order to remain contained. Ethan alludes to his awareness of his avoidance through his repetition of "*probably*" and "*impact*" followed his lack of "*thought*" as he becomes disengaged from his emotional world.

Ekam, Ethan and Blair discussed their need to ignore others' femmephobic attitudes to resist feelings of rejection.

"It hurts to see, but I feel like all I can do is ignore it". (Ekam, 942)

"Well, if I see that then I just ignore it". (Ethan, 263)

"I just ignore them, because there's no point". (Blair, 535-538)

All participants describe their need to "*ignore*" femmephobic attitudes online in order to safeguard themselves from feelings of rejection. Ekam speaks of his helplessness as suggested when he says, "*all I can do is ignore it*" followed by Blair who speaks of his sense of hopelessness when he says "*there's no point*". The participants' process of 'ignoring' may reflect a habitual process against the emotional distress and feelings of rejection triggered by others femmephobic attitudes. However, it's possible that the process of 'ignoring' may perpetuate their psychological distress and femmephobic attitudes online.

Toby discusses the impact of rejection triggered by others' femmephobia.

"I think it can knock your self-esteem… it lingers on your mind and you think about it like before you to go to sleep or before you wake up in the morning or you are getting dressed" (Toby, 246-250)

Toby appears to be ruminating when he says "*it lingers on your mind*". Toby's use of "*lingers*" describes a haunting and unescapable process of rumination in the context of rejection when he speaks, "*before you...sleep…. wake…getting dressed*". Toby appears tortured by this process which continues beyond GDHAs and appears to have compromised his "*self-esteem"* and sense of self.

Fergus continues this theme of rumination as a result of possible rejection.

"you have a lot of questions, 'Well, what's wrong with me? …What would I do differently?'...Glass of wine...have a think about what's gone wrong" (Fergus, 365-308)

Fergus describes the demoralising and self-critical effects of rumination through his repetitive line of questioning in which he evaluates his own self-worth, as a result of

rejection. Furthermore, Fergus seems overwhelmed by his self-criticism and is soothed through a "*glass of wine*". Fergus seems to accept the onus of negative outcomes to be a result of him and appears to be using alcohol to help cope with distressing emotions and thoughts.

Tanveer and Ekam discuss themes of alcohol to cope with stress.

"I'm especially going out for drinks and I've had a few, and I'm a bit more loose and a bit more carefree". (Tanveer, 50-52)

"I just tone it down when I'm sober ...I don't have that confidence to do it, I feel like I need maybe a couple of drinks, two or three drinks". (Tanveer, 63-66)

"Alcohol probably plays a big role of confidence in me" (Tanveer, 648-649).

Tanveer refers to the role of alcohol several times throughout the interview to enhance his "*confidence*" and/or need to be "*carefree*". Perhaps Tanveer has internalised stigma and shame regarding his effeminacy manifesting as stress, influencing his need to "*tone it down*" on dates in fear of possible rejection. It seems as though alcohol gives Tanveer the permission he needs to overcome his internalised shame and express his authentic self in the context of dating.

Ekam shares similar experiences when he speaks.

"If I don't feel 100% safe, if I don't feel 100% comfortable, there's a dampening that happens… if I'm out with friends and we've had a few drinks, and your inhibitions go away, the dampening kind of lifts". (Ekam, 256-260)

Ekam describes how he recoils and becomes inhibited if he doesn't feel "*safe*" or "*comfortable*" in gay spaces. This lack of safety may be associated with his internalised stress and expectations of rejection and/or negative regard as a result of gender identity, as suggested by his need to '*dampen'* the self. Consequently, Ekam refers to his sense of freedom and ability to cope facilitated by alcohol, as his need to 'dampen' the self "*lifts*". Both Tanveer and Ekam's relationship with alcohol appears

risky as a coping strategy, and may in turn result in a false sense of confidence while invalidation their unique gender identities.

Fergus and Ekam continued this theme of risk-taking and exploring self-worth as result of feeling rejected.

"I did my own little bit of social research when I feeling a bit down in the dumps. I just had a really crap picture, and just put the word 'now', and I had so many messages. "I want to come over" (Fergus, 437-440)

"anyone who shows attention to me… "Why did I do that?" …that felt like the validation" (Ekam, 967-961).

Fergus describes his process of sexually objectifying himself online when he feels *"down in the dumps*". Fergus's use of a *"crap picture"* may reflect his sense of diminished desirability accompanied with the word "*now*", which creates a sense of desperation and invites sexual opportunities. This theme of desperation is continued by Ekam who appears to engage in sex with "*anyone*" who gives him the "*attention*" he craves, only to regret his actions as suggested by his own questioning, "*why did I do that?"* It's possible that Fergus and Ekam may sexualise themselves in order to validate their self-worth as well as fulfil an unmet need and/or distract them from uncomfortable feelings, through sexual risk taking.

Sub-theme: Expectations of rejection

This sub-theme refers to the participants' expectations of romantic and/or sexual rejection as a result of being an EGM accessing GDHAs, triggered by others' femmephobia such as profile framing, language and/or interactions. Throughout this process, the participants share a number of safety behaviours that they have developed to safeguard themselves from anticipated rejection, which may compound and exasperate their difficulties in forming meaningful relationships with other men on GDHAs.

Ekam discusses rejection in the context of discrimination.

"if someone isn't talking to me…I will assume it's because of one of two things… because I'm not white or…I'm not very masculine" (Ekam, 522-525)

Ekam appears to associate a lack of communication with rejection because of his intersecting identities, influenced by racial and gender discrimination. Ekam evokes a sense of being disadvantaged as a result of his intersecting identities, as manifested in his 'assumptions'. It's possible that Ekam anticipates discrimination resulting in cumulative stress in the context of dating.

Fergus and Tanveer discussed themes of non-verbal rejection.

"when you get there and you can tell by the look on their face that you're obviously not who they were expecting or what they would go for" (Fergus, 281-283)

"you can see it in their face, a bit like, "What are you doing that for? What's that about?" (Tanveer, 494-495).

Fergus and Tanveer both discuss non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, as a means to assess and inform their sense of rejection from others, as suggested by their expressions "*their face*". Fergus describes a harsh process of scrutiny and disappointment experienced on dates, which he appears to attribute to being an EGM, as suggested through his language "*expecting*" or "*would go for*". Tanveer describes a process of judgement and disgust experienced on dates as a result of his gender expressions, as suggested through his repetition "*what*". Consequently, Fergus and Tanveer may have learned to be cautious and hyper-vigilant when meeting new dates because they have internalised expectations of rejection which they appear to attribute to being an EGM. This belief and expectation may continue to contaminate their dating experiences as well as inviting possible rejection from others.

Ekam continues this theme of hypervigilance.

"I'll see their picture, and then I'll read their profile…if their profile makes it seem like they're a lot more masculine than me, I'll just assume they won't be interested in me, so I won't approach them" (Ekam, 544-549)

Ekam appears to complete a risk assessment before communicating with potential partners on GDHAs, as he evaluates his own gender identity against other profile users, influenced by photos and language. Ekam may have been rejected in the past from profile users perceived *"more masculine*" leading to the development of this behaviour. This safety behaviour may reflect Ekam's need to maintain control and avoid emotional pain as he anticipates possible rejection as a result of being an EGM, informing his decision to avoid communicating with profile users perceived "*more masculine*" than himself.

Ekam extends this theme of risk assessment.

"I won't always message people… I'll send them a tap, because them ignoring a tap is less confronting than if they ignore a message that I've sent" (Ekam, 549-552)

Ekam describes his strategy to initiate communication with other profile users by sending them a "*tap*" on GDHAs, which appears safer over 'messaging'. Ekam suggests that "*ignoring*" a "*tap*" is less distressing than ignoring "*a message*" as suggested by his expression "*less confronting*". It's possible that Ekam has learned and developed this strategy over time to allow him to take risks and initiate with others in a manner that keeps him contained, despite his expectations of rejection.

Ethan discusses themes of expectations.

"people want a masculine man, or a real man… why would I message … I'm not going to be able to give that perception of what a real man is" (Ethan, 258-266)

Ethan alludes to unrealistic expectations of masculinity on GDHAs resulting in his unwillingness to contact potential partners as a suggested by his expression "*people want a masculine man, or a real man*". Consequently, Ethan's belief that he is not "*a real man*" may be associated with his effeminacy, resulting in his sense of defeat and reluctance to "*message*". Ethan appears to accept possible rejection as a result of not being "*a real man*", as suggested by his expression "*I'm not going…perception*", which may devalue and invalidate his unique gender identity as well as compromise his ability to form meaningful interpersonal relationships with other men.

Toby discusses themes of avoidance as a result of expecting to be rejected by others.

"When you are swiping on apps… he's really hot…he's not going to be interested in me…I am too scared to be rejected by him" (Toby, 494-498).

Toby appears to associate rejection as a result of his effeminacy through his use of negatives "*not*" followed by "*interested in me*", when he speaks about potential partners online. Toby seems to be aware of his fear of possible rejection as suggested through his language "*scared*". Toby's expectations of rejection appear to be manifested by internalised feelings of low self-worth and not being good enough resulting in his unwillingness to initiate communication with potential partners. It seems that Toby is stuck in a self-fulfilling prophecy of rejection that may perpetuate his sense of isolation and low self-worth, as manifested in his avoidance.

Fergus, Ethan and Ekam explored themes of self-disclosure.

"I'm a femme guy. If that's not your thing, don't bother messaging me" (Fergus, 535-537)

"It would normally be a photo of me in drag… to rule out anybody that's going to have an issue with it" (Ethan, 285-295)

"So my profile…"I love Buffy… I do musical theatre…I'm not actively trying to fulfil every gay stereotype, but I somehow keep managing to do it anyway." (Ekam, 611-615)

The participants discuss their need to self-disclose their gender identity online in order to resist expectations of rejection regulated by femmephobia. Fergus describes his friend's profile, which explicitly makes his expectations and boundaries clear to others. Ethan appears to use photos of him "*in drag*" to filter potential partners and "*rule out anybody*" who may have an "*issue*" with his gender identity and expressions. Ekam refers to his own profile in which he appears to be using self-deprecating language against himself in relation to a "*gay stereotype*". It's possible that the participant's act of self-disclosure reflects their need for control as well as

safeguarding themselves from the uncertainty of the rejection they may anticipate as a result of femmephobic attitudes. Furthermore, self-disclosure through profile framing may be the participants attempt to challenge femmephobic attitudes online, using a similar approach to toxic masculinity profiles, which may ironically invite further rejection and extreme forms of marginalisation.

Sub-theme: Diminished desirability

This sub-theme refers to the participants' sense of diminished desirability associated with being an EGM against pro-masculine ideals on GDHAs. Throughout this theme, the participants describe a hierarchy of desirability informed by masculine ideals, resulting in their sense of being unattractive and invisible, characterised by feelings of low self-worth and confidence, resulting in difficulties establishing sexual and/or romantic relationships with other men.

Ethan and Ekam discussed themes of attraction.

"Being seen as sexy…being seen as attractive, it's like being effeminate you're a less attractive person" (Ethan, 202-204).

Ethan describes a process of being unwanted as well as feelings of being unattractive because he is an EGM. Ethan suggests that "*being effeminate*" is not a sexually and/or romantically desired characteristic as suggested throughout his language "*sexy*" and "*less attractive*". Ethan repeats the phrase "*being seen as*" which conveys his feelings of invisibility and alludes to his wanting to be "*seen*" and desired by others as "*sexy*" and "*attractive*".

This theme of feeling unattractive continues with Ekam.

"I feel like it's just not attractive. I feel like I'm not attractive" (Ekam, 348).

Ekam evokes a sense of disgust and shame when he repeatedly describes effeminacy as being 'unattractive'. Ekam appears to suggest that effeminacy is not an attractive characteristic, as suggested by his expression *"it's just not attractive*". Ekam also

alludes to his own feelings of not being "*attractive*" as a result of being an EGM. Ekam continues as he states:

"the pinnacle of male attraction is like the masculine man" (Ekam, 351-353)

Ekam appears to suggest that masculinity is the essence of attractiveness amongst gay men as suggested by his language "*pinnacle*". Ekam's language describes a hierarchy of desirability, which appears to subordinate's femininity against masculinity. It's possible that Ekam's belief continues to perpetuate his own feelings of being "*unattractive*" because he is not a "*masculine man*".

Tanveer, Blair and Ethan discuss themes of "*being seen"* against masculine ideals.

"It's almost like you're invisible sometimes on these dating apps…if they don't see what they want to see it's…next" (Tanveer, 438-422).

"I think straight gays want another straight gays, they don't want someone that looks too gay" (Blair, 312-313)

"it feels like you're on the bottom of the food chain in that most people are looking for people more masculine than you" (Ethan, 252-259)

All the participants describe a sense of worthlessness as a result of being an EGM associated with increasing feeling of diminished desirability against masculine ideals. Tanveer describes his feelings of 'invisibility' on "*dating apps*" as well as being discarded by others as suggested by his use of "*next*". Tanveer conveys a sense of hopelessness in his quest to connect meaningfully with other men. Blair describes the glorification and attraction towards "*straight gays*" and the undesirability of being "*too gay*". Ethan extends this notion by using the metaphor "*you're on the bottom of the food chain*" to reinforce his sense of inferiority and diminished desirability against competing masculinities. This demonstrates how femmephobia continues to devalue and oppress the desirability of femininity over the privilege of masculinity.

Blair discusses themes of body size and desirability.

“I was about three stone heavier…"You're fat!”… everything is about how people look” (Blair, 318-321).

Blair describes a process of fatism characterised by discrimination, prejudice and rejection as a result of his body size, as suggested by *“your’re fat!”* Blair suggests that desirability is informed by aesthetics and evokes a sense of being disadvantaged because of his “*heavier*” body size, which may inform his sense of being undesirable. Blair alludes to his transformation and weight loss, which may reflect his drive and motivation to increase his desirability.

Tanveer and Toby discuss themes of gender expression and diminished desirability.

“I was talking to somebody on one of these dating apps and there were saying, "Oh you look great, you're eyebrows on the other hand not so great" I was like…"What do you mean by that?" He's like, "Oh there a bit too fem" (Tanveer, 239-243).

“I have a lot of handbags, like a lot and a guy was like ‘you’re very hot but why are you wearing a bag, like it is clearly a women's bag” (Toby, 150-152).

Tanveer and Toby describe a process being affirmed and told that they are attractive as suggested by their expressions, “*you look great”* and “*you’re very hot*”. This is followed by an unexpected shift as a result of their gender expressions e.g. “*eyebrows*” and “*wearing…a woman’s bag*”, that appear to diminish their desirability. Tanveer and Toby evoke a sense of shock and personal attack as a result of this evocative experience that appears to be regulated by femmephobia. This suggests that effeminacy as a personal characteristic and/or quality may devalue and diminish an individual’s desirability despite physical attraction.

Toby extends this theme of being undesired as a result of being an EGM.

“I found that guys would message me like oh no you are maybe a bit too gay for me. Like too feminine for me” (Toby, 479-480)

Toby describes a process of communicating with others on GDHAs and evokes a sense of others being condescending and diminishing his desirability, as a result of

his effeminacy, as suggested by his expression, "*oh no you are maybe…too gay…too feminine*". This suggests that gender identities that are "*too gay*" or "*too feminine*" are not desired or wanted, resulting in rejection.

Toby spoke of community expectations.

"I think as an effeminate gay man it can be even harder…there are certain expectations from certain parts of our community about what a gay man should be and if you don't meet that then you are not attractive". (Toby, 264-268)

Toby conveys the pressures and expectation of attraction being informed by masculine ideals within the gay community, which can make it "*harder*" for EGM to be seen as "*attractive*". Toby's emphasis of "*certain*" may allude to those within the community who privilege and glorify masculinity, while rejecting EGM. Toby suggests that femmephobia continues to operate at a societal level within the gay community, reinforcing notions of "*what a man should be*", which makes it difficult to shift and accept alternative masculinities as being equally "*attractive*". This may continue to enhance external and internal stress amongst EGM, making it difficult to form romantic and meaningful relationships.

Chapter 5. Discussion

This study sought to explore the ways in which EGM experience and make-sense of dating using GDHAs, which is currently lacking within research. Throughout this chapter, I will present the findings from this study and discuss the themes in more detail in regards to current literature.

Summary of findings:

This study produced three superordinate themes (the evolving gender identity, the impact of femmephobia, and the effects of sexual and/or romantic rejection) and nine sub-themes. Throughout this study, the themes appear to be underpinned by toxic masculinity regulated by femmephobia, resulting in several key findings emerging from the study.

The findings highlight the relationship between childhood effeminacy and the participants' minority status, which appears to compromise their sense of self as they appear to negotiate and/or re-construct their gender identity against gender ideals throughout youth. This continues to impact on their sense of self into adulthood as well as creating unique and complex relational barriers that can make dating a difficult dynamic to hold and/or navigate.

Overall, the findings capture the role of femmephobia in establishing and maintaining gender-based oppression, which continues to devalue, subordinate and marginalise EGM on GDHAs, making dating a stressful and challenging process as well as contributing to poor emotional and mental health outcomes, as experienced by all participants. In particular, the findings highlight the role and significance of embracing effeminacy to facilitate a process of self-acceptance and authenticity, which may provide a buffer and protective factor against femmephobia, improving emotional and mental health outcomes as well as challenging HM ideals.

In relation to the above, several novel findings emerged from this study that highlight the potentially harmful risks associated with femmephobia in regulating gender-based oppression amongst EGM. Firstly, the participants who did not embrace their effeminacy shared similar accounts of rejecting EGM in the context of dating with a

preference towards masculine partners. Secondly, several participants discussed different intersecting identities that construct and influence their experience of dating other than gender identity, such as race and body stigma, which continues to marginalise and subordinate them against masculine ideals. Finally, some participants describe effeminacy as being fetishized on GDHAs through the enforcement of gender ideals that continue to subordinate and marginalise EGM.

Superordinate theme 1: The evolving gender identity

The participants discussed the impact and stigma associated with their childhood effeminacy, which appears to have exposed them to a range of stressful experiences throughout their youth. For many of the participants, ridicule, discrimination and victimization was a familiar and stressful experience perpetuated by gender policing as result of their gender transgressions. This finding is consistent with previous research and highlights the increased vulnerability associated with boys who are gender non-conforming (Beusekom et al., 2020; Chan, 2022; Zukowska et al., 2022). Consequently, this suggests that the "*effeminate boy*" continues to be a source of anxiety by '*doing'* femininity, which evokes a FOF amongst other boys during the male socialisation process (David & Brannon, 1975; Pascoe, 2007).

The participant's experiences of stress throughout their youth can be supported by Meyer's (2003) minority stress model. The participant's share similar accounts of mental distress as a result of external discrimination and victimization resulting in limited social support as well as peer and parental rejection. Furthermore, the participants experienced internal stress and conflict as a result of being perceived gender atypical. Similar to Cass (1979), the participants experienced a sense of 'identity confusion' as they became aware of their own gendered expressions and lack of identification with masculinity resulting in feelings of stress, fear and inner turmoil.

As result of the discrimination and victimisation associated with effeminacy, the participants engaged in a process of '*defeminisation'*, which is consistent with previous research, as they perform heteronormative gender ideals and adopt a masculine role and self-presentation to avoid stigma, rejection and victimisation (Butler, 1988; Martin & Ruble, 2010; Szymanski & Carr, 2008; Taywaditep 2002).

However, the participants' experience of defeminisation appears incongruent to their true gender identity as suggested by their continued private expressions of femininity. Interestingly, the findings from the current study suggests that the participants may publicly 'defeminise' and conform to masculine ideals in order to avoid external stressors and gain social acceptance, while privately identifying with femininity. This finding can be supported by Cass (1979) and suggests a sense of 'identity acceptance' as the participants privately accept their feminine identity and gendered expressions, while striving to pass publicly by performing masculinity (Butler, 1988).

The findings also highlight the importance of positive gender role models in constructing one's emerging gender identity in youth. For one participant in particular, the role of media was crucial in constructing, normalising and validating their gender identity through their identification with TV characters, leading to a greater sense of 'identity acceptance' (Cass, 1979). Whereas, another participant described his sense of aggression because he lacked masculine role models throughout his youth. Research suggests that hyper-masculine behaviours reflect exaggerated forms of masculine characteristics and/or qualities an individual believes they lack. Therefore, this participant may be rebelling against and/or rejecting femininity in order to validate and assert his own masculinity (Fischgrund et al., 2012).

The findings capture the complex and multifaceted process of "*dulling down*", experienced by some of the participants. According to Meyer (2003), individuals internalise negative social attitudes as well as conceal their sexual orientation as a result of minority stress. The participants described a process of internalising the stigma, shame and trauma associated with effeminacy throughout their youth, which appears to perpetuate their vigilance and expectations of negative treatment and/or attitudes. Consequently, the participants experience of minority stress may manifest in their social anxiety characterised by their need to monitor and/or conceal their identity through a process of "*dulling down*", which may create difficulty forming meaning interpersonal relationships with others, especially in the context of dating (Roberts et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the participants' process of "*dulling down*" can also be supported by Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity, as the participants describe a process of regulating their gender expressions influenced by the context e.g. environment as well as others' expression of masculinity. This supports Connell's (2012) notion of internal hegemony and reinforces the power inequalities amongst men. Therefore, the participants' process of "*dulling down*" may reflect their attempts to avoid risk sanctioned by sexual prejudice (Herek, 2007), while perpetuating their sense of subordination against masculine ideals.

Zubair (2016) found that effeminacy in adulthood can be viewed as unauthentic and "*immature*" as well as being "*a conscious disclosure of homosexuality and suggestive of emotional instability*" (Zubair, 2016, p. 87). The findings from the current study challenge this notion and highlight the importance of embracing effeminacy in achieving emotional and mental stability as well as reinforcing a sense of authenticity.

Some of participants in this study retained their effeminacy and gendered expressions into adulthood, despite community denigration. Many of the participants discussed their sense of resilience and endurance developed throughout the passage of time, which enabled them to develop a deeper understanding of their identity and allowing them to embrace their effeminacy. This is consistent with Davis (2020), who highlights the importance of embracing effeminacy within the narratives of many EGM as being authentic to their identity and fundamentally unchangeable.

The participants also described a sense of 'wholeness' as a result of embracing their effeminacy, validating their gender identity with increased feelings of authenticity and congruence to self. This sense of 'wholeness' may reflect the participant's successful integration of their animus and anima, allowing them to achieve inner emotional and mental stability (Jung, cited in Culbertson, 1993). The participants highlight the importance of self-compassion as being central to developing their sense of 'wholeness'. This finding can be supported by Zubair (2016), who found several positive qualities amongst EGM including compassion and expressiveness. This finding highlights the role and power of self-compassion in developing resilience in achieving a sense of authenticity despite on-going community denigration.

Furthermore, research by Choi et al., (2011) found higher rates of GRC and inner turmoil amongst gay men who identified as masculine over androgynous or feminine identities. These findings highlight 'emotional instability' amongst masculine gay men as opposed to EGM. Consequently, by embracing femininity the current participants contribute and reinforce the notion of 'inclusive' masculinities, which may reduce rates of GRC and promote emotional and mental stability (Anderson, 2009; Choi et al., 2011).

Additionally, Davis (2020) found that EGM remained authentic to themselves by not altering their feminine embodiment by conforming to gender expectations. Some of the participants in this study also shared a sense of resistance in conforming to hyper-masculine gender norms and continued to identify and express their embodiment as authentically feminine men from "*bags of all colours*" (Toby, 189) and "*pink blazers*" (Blair, 276) to "*the way I move*" (Tanveer, 48-55). The participant's ability to remain true to themselves validates their unique gendered expressions, which continues to challenge hegemonic norms and creates room for alternative masculinities to flourish.

Furthermore, the participants described how embracing their effeminacy impacts positively within their line of work and becomes a characteristic strength. For many of the participants, their chosen professions complemented their gender identity and celebrated their effeminacy, which allowed them to flourish and succeed within their place of work and/or industry. This finding is consistent with Zubair (2016), who found positive attributes amongst EGM allowing them to succeed at an individual and societal level, such as work.

Eugchi (2011) found that gay men who were secure in their gender identity did not discriminate against or reject EGM. The current study also found that EGM who were accepting of their gender identity were more open to dating other EGM, over those participants who were less accepting of their gender identity. This finding is consistent with previous research and highlights the importance of embracing effeminacy in addressing potential issues related to internalised homophobia as well as femmephobia to improve emotional and mental health (Fischgrund et al., 2012; Riggle et al., 2017; Thepsourinthone et al., 2021).

Several of the participants described a systemic sense of being regarded and/or sexually positioned as bottom as a result of their gender identity. However, throughout the passage of time, the participants described a shift in sexual positioning towards versatility, which allows them to reform and deconstruct the stereotypes associated with effeminacy and sexual positioning as well as validating their identity as authentically versatile feminine men (Johns et al., 2012).

Overall, this theme captures the relationship between childhood gender non-conformity and minority stress as an indicator for future mental health difficulties in adulthood amongst EGM such as social anxiety, low self-esteem, isolation and depressive symptoms, which can make dating a difficult and challenging process (Roberts et al., 2012; Thoma et al., 2021). However, the findings emphasise the need to embrace effeminacy in order to achieve emotional and mental stability, which may provide a protective factor against issues related to femmephobia and homonegativity, as well as challenging hegemonic norms in establishing new platforms for alternative masculinities to flourish (Anderson, 2009; Choi et al., 2011).

Superordinate theme 2: The impact of femmephobia

The findings from the current study illuminates Taywaditep's (2001) notion of "*marginalised among the marginalised*" (p. 1), as the participants continue to experience in-group denigration regulated by femmephobia, resulting in discrimination, marginalisation and subordination on GDHAs. This suggests that users continue to experience intracommunity stigma and may not get to experience and/or benefit from gay online spaces fairly (Hammack et al., 2022; Zervoulis et al., 2020). Furthermore, the participants described varying levels of intracommunity stigma, prejudice and discrimination informed by masculine ideals that denigrate femininity on GDHAs resulting in feelings of isolation and rejection, which can make dating a difficult and challenging process (Hammack et al., 2022).

The findings from this study demonstrate how gender hierarchies amongst gay men privilege masculinity over femininity. The participants' experience of gender policing on GDHAs reinforces ideals of HM and internal hegemony, which allows

other gay men to express power in establishing gender hierarchies that devalue and oppress EGM regulated by femmephobia (Connell, 2012; Hammack et al., 2022; Hoskin, 2019, 2020). Research indicates that gay men who endorse HM ideals use derogatory language such as '*bitchy, fem, sissy, queen'* to secure their position and power within a HM frame (Christian, 2005; Clarkson 2006). The participants discussed the role of language in formulating and maintaining hierarchies of gay masculinities on GDHA, such as '*camp, effeminate, queen, femme, fem'*, against pro-masculine language such as 'masc4masc'. These findings capture and highlight the role of 'mascing' and how it is facilitated by femmephobic language amongst online users to express and/or advertise their own masculinity while subordinating femininity (Hoskin, 2019; 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2016).

The findings suggest that alternative identities associated with femininity such as 'camp', 'queen' and 'effeminate', may experience different degrees of intracommunity discrimination, marginalisation and subordination on GDHAs (Hammack et al., 2022). One participant described 'camp' and 'queen' identities as subordinate to 'effeminate' identities, which may result in extreme forms of marginalisation, prejudice and discrimination. Whereas, another participant interchangeably used 'camp' and 'effeminate' to collectively describe the romantic and sexual limitations amongst alternative masculinities. Interestingly, these findings highlight the need to understand and distinguish between alternative intersecting identities associated with femininity to understand how they experience intracommunity discrimination, marginalisation and subordination on and off GDHAs (Hammack et al., 2022).

As a result of their feminine embodiment and perceived sexual positioning, the participants shared similar accounts of effeminacy being fetishized amongst dominant masculinities on GDHAs, especially within their youth, characterised by feelings of objectification and right to sexual access. This finding can be supported by Vytniorgu (2022), who highlighted the role of effeminacy in the fantasies of those who identify as 'pussyboys', 'boiwives' and 'daddies' in the context of BDSM and domesticated ideals associated with heteronormative scripts. This finding demonstrates how stereotypes of EGM may be associated with increased sexual risk, especially amongst younger gay men who may struggle to assert and negotiate their sexual preference, against dominant masculinities imposing unwanted

heteronormative scripts. Similar to Stacey & Forbes (2021), the participants' feeling of being objectified may compromise their ability to foster healthy and meaningful interpersonal relationships because they are reduced to a stereotype and marginalised in GDHAs

Previous research by Sanchez et al., (2010) highlights the importance of masculinity amongst gay men, with a preference towards masculine partners. The results also found that gay men have a desire to be more masculine, despite already identifying as masculine. The current findings highlight the importance of masculinity amongst EGM, with some of the participants expressing a desire to become and/or present more masculine on GDHAs as a result of romantic and sexual pressures. This finding is consistent with previous research and illustrates how performing a masculine identity online may be associated with increased sexual and/or romantic desirability through a process of 'mascing' (Granath, 2019; Sarson, 2020).

The participants described their internal stress and pressure to conform to masculine ideals influenced by the branding of GDHAs, such as "*Grindr*". The participants described the branding of Grindr as promoting the glorification and sexualisation of muscle as the embodiment of masculinity. This finding can be supported by Halkitis (2001, 2004), who found that gay men associate masculinity with physical appearance, such as toughness, vitality and health. Similar to this, the current participants reported increased pressure to obtain muscularity through self-enhancement, such as going to the gym and/or dieting, in order to be seen as more attractive and/or to compete against other masculinities on GDHAs. This suggests that the branding of GDHAs may create, maintain and promote a 'mascing' culture, that can alter an individual's sexual script because of the pressure to perform a hyper-masculine self-online (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Granath, 2019; Sarson, 2020).

Fischgrund et al., (2012) found that masculinity threat would result in individuals engaging in hyper-masculine behaviours and/or activities. This sense of threat is evident amongst some of the participants as they engaged in activities and/or behaviours to enhance their masculinity on GDHAs. For one participant, the threat of sexual rejection and desire to be accepted as a 'top' influenced his decision to shave his hair. This finding can be supported by scripting theory because all three levels are enacted in the above process. This participant appears to understand that masculinity

is a desirable characteristic (social level), he wants to be seen as a 'top' and desirable online against other masculinities which alters the social situation and impacts on his script (interpersonal level), and the participant has internalised images of masculine ideals informing his decision to shave his hair (intrapsychic level). Therefore, in order to increase his desirability and opportunities to sexual access as a result of masculinity threat, he altered his script to perform a hypermasculine self on GDHAs (Fischgrund et al., 2012; Gagnon & Simon, 1973).

The current findings suggest that femmephobia may enhance the participants' rejection of effeminacy, in self and others, in the context of dating and/or intimate relationships, with a preference towards masculinity (Schwartzberg & Rosengerb, 1998, cited by Sanchez et al., 2010). This finding can be supported by Zubair (2016), who found that 'non-masculine' participants would romantically reject EGM with a preference towards masculinity. The participants preference towards masculine partners reinforces Duggan's (2002) notion of homonormativity in constructing the participants sexual scripts, which continues to reject, devalue, subordinate and marginalise EGM who do not conform to mainstream sexual scripts (Gagnon & Simon, 1973).

Consistent with previous research, some of the participants displayed femmephobic attitudes towards other EGM through the use of derogatory language, such as '*bitchy'*, '*queen'*, '*poofy'* and '*camp'* (Clarkson 2006; Christian, 2005), as they implicitly reject femininity in others on GDHAs. This finding highlights the internal power inequalities amongst EGM, and further reinforces the role of status and privilege amongst EGM who favour homonormative scripts, resulting in further 'marginalisation within the marginalised' for those EGM who do not conform to such scripts (Connell, 2012; Duggan, 2002; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Taywaditep 2001).

Furthermore, research suggests that gay men who have higher rates of internalised homophobia tend to react more negatively towards EGM (Salvati et al., 2016). The current findings suggest that the participants who were least accepting with their gender identity experienced increased pressure to conform to masculine ideas as well as rejecting effeminacy in self and others, with a preference toward masculine partners. This may suggest that EGM who are not accepting of their gender identity

may be at increased vulnerability of developing higher rates of homonegativity and/or internalised homophobia (Riggle et al., 2017; Thepsourinthone et al., 2021).

Interestingly, one participant discussed the role of gay geographies on GDHAs, which provides further insight into the development of femmephobia. This participant was raised in a rural setting described his difficulties psychologically adjusting between rural and urban settings, which contributed to his reluctance to connect or engage with the gay community as well as causing him difficulties with dating (Fischgrund et al., 2012). Consequently, this participant appears to sabotage his dates through the use of derogatory jokes and humour that devalues and rejects femininity, whilst asserting his own masculinity. This finding can be supported by Annes and Redlin (2012), who found higher rates of effeminophobia amongst gay men raised in rural settings. This suggests that EGM raised rurally may be more vulnerable to developing feelings of femmephobia and homonegativity perpetuated by HM ideals, making dating in rich and diverse urban cities a difficult and challenging process (Riggle et al., 2017, Thepsourinthone et al., 2021).

Overall, this theme demonstrates how EGM continue to experience intracommunity stigma, discrimination, marginalisation and subordination on GDHAs as a result of toxic masculinity regulated by femmephobia and homonormative scripts, making it difficult for EGM to establish romantic and/or sexual relationships as well as embracing their unique identities. Importantly, the findings highlight the power inequalities amongst EGM who reinforce and perpetuate mainstream ideals, which further marginalises other EGM on GDHAs who do not conform to such ideals.

Superordinate theme 3: The effects of romantic and sexual rejection

Consistent with previous research, the findings from the current study suggest that EGM continue to experience poor mental health outcomes, which may be exasperated as result of romantic and sexual rejection regulated by femmephobia on GDHAs (Sandford et al., 2007; Skidmore, Linsenmeier, Bailey, 2006). The participants described a vicious cycle of inner turmoil resulting in low self-esteem, psychological distress and a sense of demoralisation and isolation, which appears to perpetuate and reinforce negative feelings about their gender identity triggered by the

femmephobic attitudes of others on GDHAs (Cadwell, 2009; Salvati et al., 2016; Zervoulis et al., 2020).

The participants described a sense of '*helplessness'* in their ability to respond and/or challenge rejection regulated by others' femmephobic language on GDHAs characterised by rumination, self-loathing, loneliness and poor self-esteem. Research suggests that gender non-conforming gay men may receive limited social support because of negative attitudes towards their gender non-conformity resulting in increased vulnerability to psychological distress (Skidmore et al., 2006). The lack of support, as experienced by all the participants, reinforces their minority stress status and increased need for social support to make sense of difficult emotions and/or experiences triggered by GDHAs (Meyer, 2003).

Furthermore, the participants report having poor coping strategies characterised by a process of *'avoidance', 'suppressing', 'deflecting'* and/or '*ignoring'*, to escape uncomfortable feelings of rejection triggered by femmephobic attitudes on GDHAs. Some of the participants discussed their relationship with alcohol to cope with painful emotions of perceived or actual rejection, which is consistent with previous research (Obarska, et al., 2020). These findings emphasise the need for enhanced social support to develop healthy coping strategies amongst EGM, in managing risk and complex emotions triggered by femmephobia and rejection on GDHAs.

The participants described a sense of desperation and deprivation as a result of romantic and sexual rejection triggered by others' femmephobic attitudes online, which appears to increase their vulnerability and sexual risk taking facilitated by GDHAs. This finding can be supported by previous research and further highlights the relationships between sexual risk taking and GDHA usage (Obarska, et al., 2020). The participants sense of rejection and/or desexualisation may be a predictor of increased sexual risk taking as a means to assert their masculinity, evaluate their self-worth, disconnect from uncomfortable emotions or respond to unmet needs (Zervoulis et al., 2020). This is consistent with previous research and suggests that GDHAs provide alternative and advanced scripts that enable users to engage in sexual prowess and adventurism, which has often been associated with hyper-masculinity amongst gay men (Fischgrund et al., 2012; Gagnon & Simon, 1973).

The findings indicate that EGM continue to experience increased sensitivity and expectations of rejection on and off GDHAs. In particular, the participants discussed their hyper-vigilance to non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and body language, on real life dates which appears to inform and reinforce their perceptions of rejection. This finding supports Meyer's minority stress model (2003) and suggest that prolonged exposure to external stress and threat of rejection, may manifest in the participants heightened vigilance and rejection sensitivity, in the context of dating.

Consequently, the findings suggest that EGM continue to avoid initiating communication with potential partners on GDHAs as a result of fear and expectations of rejection. Many of the participants described a process of avoidance to manage uncomfortable feelings of possible rejection. This coping strategy appears to create and maintain a vicious cycle of rejection manifested by feelings of worthlessness and defectiveness. The participant's avoidance to use GDHAs to date appears to perpetuate their sense of isolation and diminished desirability.

The findings capture the unique and complex role of self-presentation amongst EGM in managing expectations of rejection on GDHAs. Miller (2015) found that none of his participants described themselves as 'feminine' online despite having the option to do so. In contrast to this, several participants discussed deliberately framing their profiles using photos and/or self-descriptors that emphasise their effeminacy through language and/or hyper-feminine photos such as being "*in drag*". Consequently, the participants' self-presentation online provides a unique and alternative script that challenges mainstream homonormative scripts on GDHAs by increasing the visibility of feminine identities online. Furthermore, such scripts offer a useful context to understand relationships that do not conform to prevailing social norms e.g. reflecting the participants need for control in evaluating and filtering out potential partners who may have issues with femininity in order to form meaningful relationships with other online users (Duggan, 2002; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Gurney, 2020).

Research by Miller and Behm-Morawitz (2016) found that femmephobic language negatively altered perceptions of intelligence, sexual confidence and dateability amongst profile users. Moreover, the participants reported being less interested interacting and/or meeting femmephobic profile users for friendship or romantic

purposes. Similar to this, the participants' profile framing and self-presentation may be perceived negatively as mirroring that of anti-effeminacy profiles, which may continue to marginalise and/or reinforce negative stereotypes of EGM that diminish desirability as well as perpetuating a culture of toxicity on GDHAs (Granath, 2019; Zervoulis et al., 2020). Consequently, this finding highlights the sensitive balance of self-presentation and profile framing on GDHAs for EGM against prevailing norms, making it difficult to navigate online spaces to form healthy connections with other users.

The findings from the current study also indicate that EGM continue to experience a sense of diminished desirability perpetuated by romantic and sexual rejection on GDHAs. Research found that gay men tend to describe themselves and their desired partners using masculine descriptions, such as straight acting, dominant, muscular and athletic, with the rejection of effeminacy e.g. "*no femmes*" (Bailey et al., 1997). Similar to Bailey (1997), the current participants described the role of anti-effeminacy language used to formulate and frame profiles that desires masculinity and rejects effeminacy on GDHAs e.g. "*Masc4Masc*", "*Don't message me if your camp*", "*no fems*", "*no camp*". Research by Cascalheira & Smith (2020) found that racism continues to be a significant challenge across many GDHAs resulting in a 'hierarchy of desire' that privileges heteronormativity. In relation to the above, the current findings capture the role of language in creating and maintaining a 'hierarchy of desire' that positions effeminacy as undesirable against masculinity.

Furthermore, previous research suggests EGM elicit more negative emotions amongst gay men resulting in less desirability to interact with EGM (Glick et al., 2007; Hunt et al., 2016; Salvati et al., 2016). This finding may cast light on the participants' systemic sense of feeling undesirable and unwanted, which appears to impact on their self-esteem and confidence in initiating and/or approaching potential partners. It's possible that EGM may threaten other gay men in their romantic and/or sexual attempts on GDHAs, resulting in rejection and/or a distancing from femininity in the context of dating (Glick et al., 2007; Hunt et al., 2016; Salvati et al., 2016). Consequently, this suggests that EGM may have increased difficulties in establishing sexual and/or romantic relationships on GDHAs, increasing their susceptibility to psychological distress and loneliness (Zervoulis et al., 2020).

Overall, the findings from this theme capture the romantic and/or sexual rejection experienced by the participants informed by a hierarchy of desire on GDHAs regulated by femmephobia, which positions EGM as unattractive, unwanted and undesirable against masculine ideals and creating barriers to dating online. Furthermore, the findings highlight the poor emotional and mental health outcomes amongst the participants characterised by a feeling of diminished desirability informed by this hierarchy of desire, which further creates barriers to dating manifesting in the participants avoidance, self-fulfilling prophecies of rejection and poor coping skills.

Intersectionality:

The theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991, cited by Dunlop & Lea, 2022) recognises that people hold multiple identities that intersect and interact with one another creating unique experiences of privilege and oppression, such as, but not limited to, race, gender, sexuality, class, ability and religion. According to intersectionality theory, marginalised identities have nuanced and complex experiences of discrimination and marginalisation that cannot be isolated to a single factor (Dunlop & Lea, 2022). The literature review, analysis and findings effectively demonstrate how EGM living with multiple intersecting identities experience increased intracommunity stigma as well as intersectional minority stress on GDHAs through explicit expression of personal preferences such as "*No Fats, No Femmes, and no Blacks or Asians*", creating barriers to dating (Connor, 2021; Hammack et al., 2022; Robinson, 2015).

Holding the importance of intersectionality in mind, although this was not the focus of the current research, it was necessary to recognise and acknowledge how the participants' multiple identities created nuanced experiences of discrimination, oppression and marginalisation on GDHAs making dating a difficult, stressful and challenging experience.

Ekam and Tanveer both discussed themes of self enhancement influenced by the branding of GDHAs and other profile users' photos. Ekam and Tanver appear to compare their bodies against ideals influenced by GDHAs, which has been found to privilege bodies that are white and muscular over other racial and ethnic bodies

(Cascalheira & Smith, 2020; Connor, 2021; Hammack et al., 2022). Therefore, Ekam and Tanveer may continue to experience increased body, racial and ethnicity stigma related stress as a result of their marginalised identities informing their desire to conform to a lean and muscular physical ideal associated with whiteness.

Themes of body and intersecting identities continue with Blair, who discusses alternative bodies against masculine ideals. Blair alludes to his transformation and weight loss, which may reflect his attempts to conform to ideals that privilege white masculine bodies that are thin, lean or muscular and associated with increased desirability on GDHAs (Cascalheira & Smith, 2020; Hammck et al., 2022; Millar, 2015; Rodriguez et al., 2016). Seemingly, Blair holds multiple identities resulting in his unique experiences of discrimination and marginalisation, in the context of fat shaming and anti-effeminacy values. This finding can be supported by previous research, which highlights the role of fatphobia and femmephobia as complex and intersecting structures of oppression impacting the lives of gay men who identify as fat and femme (Austen et al., 2022; Conte, 2018).

Ekam and Tanveer both spoke of their discomfort and lack of attraction towards EGM. As a result of holding multiple marginalised identities, this may increase their vulnerability to engage in 'mascing' on GDHAs and desire to align themselves with mainstream heteronormative and homonormative structures of oppression that discriminate, devalue and subordinate EGM, in attempts to secure their own position and power within a HM frame, with a preference to masculine partners, regulated by femmephobia (Connell, 2012; Gerrard et al., 2023; Hoskin, 2019; 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Taywaditep, 2001).

Ekam explicitly discusses his anticipated sense of sexual and/or romantic rejection. Ekam's multiple identities seemingly enhance his experience of discrimination and marginalisation which exasperates his difficulties in forming romantic and/or sexual relationships using GDHAs. This finding is consistent with previous research, highlighting a 'hierarchy of desire' that sexually privileges masculinity and white bodies on GDHAs (Cascalheira & Smith, 2020; Hammack et al., 2022; Wade and Pear, 2022; Sarson, 2020). This suggests that Ekam may continue to experience intersectional minority stress perpetuated by racial, ethnic, body and gender stigma,

discrimination and marginalisation, which may compromise his ability to form meaningful interpersonal relations on GDHAs.

Importantly, some of the participants discussed positive outcomes associated with their intersecting identities which validates and affirms their sense of self, despite intracommunity denigration on and off GDHAs. Toby spoke about his self-expression and interests which align with his work increasing his feelings of authenticity. Toby appears to have constructed a unique gender expression that affirms his intersecting identities and provides an anchor within his line of work as well as challenging masculine ideas, which creates a platform for alternative masculinities to flourish (Davis, 2020). This finding is consistent with Zubair (2016) who found effeminacy to be a strength at an individual and societal level, such as work.

Furthermore, Ethan spoke of intersecting identities and sexual positioning, such as being a versatile drag queen. Ethan's intersecting identities as a versatile EGM and drag queen challenges stereotypes of effeminacy being associated with 'bottom' as well as deconstructing ideals of 'tops', which creates space for alternative masculinities to gain sexual access and 'top' (Davis, 2020; Johns et al., 2012).

By applying an intersectional framework to the current study and considering the structures and systems of oppression that simultaneously overlap amongst the participants holding multiple identities, it is hoped to promote inclusivity as well as enhancing our understanding of the diverse experiences that creates barriers to dating on GDHAs amongst EGM holding different intersecting identities (Dunlop & Lea, 2022).

Observations emerging from the findings:

Throughout this study, there was a clear contrast between the participants who embraced their effeminacy over those who struggled. For some of the participants, embracing their effeminacy was facilitated through a process of self-compassion, leading to a sense of 'wholeness', which validated their unique gendered expressions with increased feelings of authenticity and congruence to self. In particular, these participants appear to be comfortable and secure within their gender identity, with an

openness to dating EGM. Therefore, embracing effeminacy may be a protective factor against complex emotions and stressors associated with femmephobia.

In contrast, other participants described an inherent sense of defectiveness or incongruence against masculine ideals being engrained within their identity, which seems to make it difficult for them to embrace their effeminacy. Sadly, these participants appear to have developed a fragile self-concept as they continue to negotiate, monitor and adjust their identity, influenced by internal and external stressors. In particular, these participants expressed a preference towards masculine partners, while romantically and/or sexually rejecting EGM. This finding supports previous research and suggests that gay men may continue to reject feminine traits within themselves through the rejection of femininity in other gay men. Previous research suggests that 'straight acting' gay men who are secure in their gender identity do not discriminate or reject EGM (Eguchi, 2011). This implies that individuals who are not secure of their gender identity may be particularly vulnerable and need access to wider support networks to manage or make sense of complex emotions associated with femmephobia, gender, gender identity, romantic and/or sexual relationships.

All the participants described a process of marginalisation and subordination regulated by femmephobia online, from the branding of the GDHAs to profile users' photos and anti-effeminacy language. In particular, the participants described '*Grindr'* as glorifying and sexualising muscle as the embodiment of masculinity, which appears to evoke a sense of inadequacy and diminished desirability amongst the participants as they compete against superior masculinities to be seen or wanted. Consequently, some of the participants conformed to gym cultures to enhance their masculinity and desirability as well as gain online acceptance (Hutson, 2010 cited in Davis 2020). Additionally, many of the participants reported consistent romantic and/or sexual rejection through the use of derogatory femmephobic language, which continues to create and maintain a gender hierarchy online that privileges masculinity, e.g. "*masc4masc*", while marginalising and subordinating EGM, e.g. *"No Fems!"* The use of language online informs connotations of desirability with descriptors that glorify masculinity and positions femininity as undesirable.

The findings also highlight how the participants in this study have poor coping skills in their ability to regulate and make sense of complex emotions in the context of dating. The findings indicate that the participants' expectations of rejection manifests in their avoidance to initiate and/or make attempts to date, and also biases their interpretations and/or causes them to misattribute negatives experiences with their gender identity over other factors. Moreover, the participants' hyper-vigilance and preoccupations with possible rejection and/or self-monitoring may contaminate the dating experience, which may invite rejection from others. The findings suggest that the participants are stuck in a self-fulfilling prophecy of rejection, which negatively impact on their ability to date healthily. This sense of 'stuckness' and fear of rejection may continue to reflect the participants' minority stress as a result of prolonged exposure to marginalisation and subordination, amongst heterosexual and gay men (Meyer, 2003).

As a result of anticipated or actual rejection, the participants continued to experience inner turmoil characterised by an engrained sense of defectiveness, deprivation and desperation. Consequently, the participants discussed themes of avoidance, suppressing and ignoring painful emotions and/or thoughts in order to cope or disconnect from their emotional world. This need to disconnect appears to be associated with their risk taking, such as substance misuse and/or sexual risk taking. The participants need to risk take appears multifaceted and may reflect their attempts to distract themselves from uncomfortable feelings, evaluate their self-worth and/or fulfil unmet needs. These findings capture the emotional and mental distress experienced by the participants, which continue to make dating a stressful and difficult process.

The findings throughout this study highlights the challenges, vulnerability and sense of exposure amongst the participants in the context of romantic and/or sexual relationships using GDHAs. The findings capture the role of femmephobia in creating and maintaining gender-based oppression amongst all the participants, which continues to make dating and self-acceptance a difficult process, while compromising the emotional and mental wellbeing of the participants. Finally, the findings highlight the need to embrace effeminacy to improve emotional and mental stability as well as validating one's identity as authentic feminine men, which may

continue to challenge HM norms while creating new platforms for alternative masculinities to flourish.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I will provide a summary of the findings that emerged from this research and the possible implications for professional and clinical practice. This will be followed by an evaluation of the methodology and research limitations with suggestions for future research. Finally, I will conclude with a closing post reflexive statement detailing my overall experience conducting this research and consider how this has impacted on me, both professionally and personally.

Summary:

This study explored EGM experiences of dating using GDHAs and produced three superordinate themes (the evolving gender identity, the impact of femmephobia, and the effects of sexual and/or romantic rejection) and nine sub-themes in addressing the RQ informed by three main objectives.

Importantly, this study aimed to bridge the research gaps in literature by generating new knowledge from the lived experiences of EGM, which is currently overlooked within research. To date this is the only empirical study which has qualitatively explored EGM experiences of dating using GDHAs. With this in mind, the current study provides a positive step towards better representing EGM, holding multiple intersecting identities, within research by acknowledging and highlighting their lived experiences in the context of dating using GDHAs.

Secondly, the study aimed to facilitate an understanding of the role and significance of effeminacy within the lives of gay men more broadly, which is currently underrepresented within research. Importantly, the study highlights the relationship between childhood effeminacy and minority stress and how this can contribute to future mental health difficulties amongst EGM in adulthood such as social anxiety, low self-esteem and/or confidence, isolation and depressive symptoms, that can create barriers to developing romantic and/or sexual interpersonal relationalities with others, especially in the context of using GDHAs (Roberts et al., 2012; Thoma et al., 2021).

Finally, this study aimed to develop a better understanding of the role and significance of effeminacy within the context of dating using GDHAs and its relationship with femmephobia amongst EGM, which is currently lacking in research. The findings indicate that femmephobia on GDHAs continues to perpetuate the participants' experience of gender-based oppression resulting in sexual and/or romantic rejection (perceived or actual) as well as poor emotional and mental health. These findings support and contribute to Hoskin's (2021) application of femmephobia as a theoretical framework and lens to understand gender-based oppression across different social groups. In particular, the current findings highlight the multifaceted ways in which femininity is devalued, subordinated and marginalised amongst EGM, making dating a difficult, stressful and challenging process to navigate on GDHAs.

The findings also support the need to implement an intersectional framework to recognise and consider the alternative structures and systems of oppression that overlap simultaneously alongside femmephobia. This would enable a better understanding of and response to the needs of EGM holding multiple identities that create further barriers to developing healthy interpersonal relationships with other gay men; romantically and/or sexually (Dunlop & Lea, 2022).

A key finding from the study highlights the role and significance of embracing effeminacy to facilitate a process of self-acceptance and authenticity, which may provide a buffer and protective factor against intersectional minority stress and femmephobia by improving emotional and mental health outcomes as well as challenging HM ideals.

A novel finding captures the power inequalities amongst EGM who reject effeminacy in self and others, in favour for traditional homonormative scripts in the context of partner preference and selection, resulting in further marginalisation for those EGM who do not conform to such scripts (Connell, 2012; Duggan, 2002; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Taywaditep 2001). This highlights the potential risk of femmephobia contributing to the development of homonegativity and/or internalised homophobia for those EGM who value and adhere to traditional masculine ideals.

Another nuanced finding highlights the fetishization of effeminacy on GDHAs characterised by objectification, erotic subordination and imposing unwanted heteronormative scripts that emasculate and disempower EGM. Importantly, research demonstrates how some EGM welcome and sexualise their effeminacy online (Vytniorgu, 2022). However, such fantasies may increase sexual risk amongst EGM who reject such notions and/or struggle to assert or negotiate their sexual preferences against dominant masculinities. This finding highlights the sensitive balance that must be maintained by EGM when having their effeminacy fetishized, to reduce risk and/or being reduced to a stereotype and further marginalised on GDHAs making it difficult to foster healthy and meaning relationships online.

Implications for counselling psychology training and practice:

The research findings capture the unique and complex experiences of femmephobia as a '*stressor'* amongst EGM at an individual and societal level, exacerbating intracommunity discrimination, marginalisation and subordination, making dating a difficult, challenging and stressful process on GDHAs. However, research suggests that psychology training institutions tend to be heteronormative with limited teaching in gender and sexuality diversity and/or inconsistencies in course context (Dunlop & Lea, 2022; Montenegro, 2015). This emphasises the need for education and training within psychology and health care professional programmes to increase awareness of the intersectional minority stress perpetuated on GDHAs regulated by femmephobia amongst the heterosexual and LGBTQ+ community.

It is hoped that this study will enhance the understanding of how femmephobia is regulated on GDHAs to allow clinicians to make more accurate formulations and enhance their therapeutic work amongst gay clients, which may contribute to better health outcomes. By integrating these findings into Meyer's (2003) minority stress model, clinicians may be able to support EGM at an individual level i.e. mental health, identity and self-acceptance, as well as, at society level through community and psychoeducation approaches. This could address issues of intersectional minority stress and femmephobia, which appear to impact across the lives of EGM far beyond dating.

The current research captures the ways in which EGM continue to navigate expressions that are authentic and congruent with their gender identity against masculine ideals. As counselling psychologists, it's important to recognise the diversity in EGM identities and lived experiences as well as acknowledging the unique challenges and needs of EGM from different cultures and communities in order to affirm our client's identities. Therefore, it is important to understand the significance of '*effeminacy'* within the intersecting lives of gay men, especially within the context of forming interpersonal relationship on GDHAs, to establish best practice guidelines that better represent EGM without pathologising effeminacy against masculine ideals.

The findings suggest that EGM continue to be evaluated negatively, deemed incongruent against masculine ideals amongst heterosexuals and in-group denigration, which may present a barrier to accessing therapy. Research suggests that sexual minorities continue to experience micro-aggressions and covert expressions of discrimination, making therapy a threatening and hostile experience (Delgado-Romero & Shelton, 2011). Therefore, in order to practice affirmatively, clinicians may need to reflect deeper on their own sexuality, gender identity, personal assumptions and biases when working with EGM.

Evaluation of methodology and limitations:

IPA was used to capture and provide an in-depth exploration of how EGM experience dating using GDHAs. Through the use of IPA, this research extends our understanding of EGM experiences, which is currently lacking within literature. The use of a small sample size provided a lens to focus and capture the unique experiences of EGM in the context of dating, which is consistent with the researcher's aim and ideographic nature of IPA. However, using a small sample cannot allow substantive conclusions or generalisations to be drawn from the data (Smith et al., 2022). The study may be used to develop an enhanced understanding of this particular client group; however, the findings should be considered within the context from which they were experienced.

To generate interest within the study, a research poster was established and distributed amongst LGBTQ+ charities and university societies. This contributed to the

recruitment of diverse participants, which enriched the data and emerging themes. However, the interview data may be biased and reflect the participants' own preoccupations, judgements and/or assumptions in regards to the research focus, which may not be reflective of all EGM.

A limitation within the current study may be associated with risk management. All appropriate measures were taken to reduce and/or monitor issues related to risk throughout this study as outlined in the methodology. However, given the increased mental health needs amongst EGM, implementing relevant psychometrics to assess potential participants levels of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation, may provide useful outcomes to enhance risk management and avoid any unforeseen distress and/or risk.

Although I did not disclose my gender identity, there was a sense of sameness and comfortableness between myself and the participants, which I believe contributed to development of a positive rapport and richness of the participants' responses throughout the interview. However, this sense of sameness may have influenced and/or biased the data in their attempts to '*please'* the researcher. On reflection, I wonder how the intersectional identities of other researchers' gender may impact the research process, focusing on this area of research and client group.

The research maintained a homogenous sample through the recruitment of EGM (with diverse personal variables such as age, ethnicity, social and economic backgrounds) accessing GDHAs. However, there was a lack of narrative informing how these variables may have interacted and informed the participants' gender identity and experiences in the context of dating using GDHAs. Additionally, the exploration of experiences across GDHAs provided rich material of unique lived experiences, however, I wonder if focusing on specific GDHA within this research area as well as providing room to exploring identity intersections may provide more fruitful outcomes.

As a researcher, I was motivated to collaborate and support the participants in accessing the study in ways that were comfortable, safe and convenient for them. This allowed interviews to be completed in different settings as well as using alternative modalities, which may be considered a limitation within this study. However, all

reasonable steps were taken to ensure privacy, confidentiality and safety for participants as well as the researcher. Although this approach did not affect the rapport building, quality or depth of data gathering, it was a time consuming and anxious process trying to manage and accommodate all the participants' needs.

The findings throughout this research are informed by the researcher's interpretations, which creates room for variability. Within this in mind, critiques of IPA highlight the researcher's difficulty in bracketing off his/her/their own assumptions about the topic (Smith et al., 2022). Inevitably, the emerged findings may be different amongst alternative researchers and I'm aware that my own professional and personal experiences within this area have influenced and shaped the research process. Furthermore, the researcher employed four principles proposed by Yardley (2008) to ensure the highest standards of quality and validity within qualitative research. This was accompanied by on-going engagement within reflexive practice facilitated by supervision and peers to enhance my process of bracketing as well as verifying themes and interpretations.

Future research:

Throughout this study, several questions emerged that may be relevant for future research. The participants had diverse and rich intersecting identities, which was evident throughout the study but was not the focus of this research. For example, several of the participants reported increased difficulties dating as a result of their race, culture and/or body size as well as their gender identity. Therefore, future research may aim to explore the intersecting relationship between effeminacy and race, culture and/or body size, to consider how this may impact upon the lives of EGM in establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Additionally, future research may wish to better understand the femmephobia amongst alternative feminine identities in order to understand how this is experienced. This may provide best practice guidelines for specific client groups with alternative feminine identities that may be vulnerable. In particular, more research is required to better understand the fetishization of effeminacy to avoid risk and/or marginalising amongst EGM, especially for EGM who sexualise their effeminacy as well as being desired from others.

Additionally, further research may wish to explore EGM experience femmephobia within rural areas and how this impacts across their lives. This may provide fruitful material that may reduce risk and/or psychological distress amongst a vulnerable client group within vulnerable settings.

Furthermore, research may wish to explore how EGM experience the therapeutic process in order to understand and improve health and wellbeing services for EGM. This may allow EGM to be recognised and integrated more into the LGBTQ+ community and wider society, which may challenge issues of femmephobia. Moreover, research may benefit from understanding how heterosexual and homosexual men experience the therapeutic process having a gender non-conforming therapist. This may cast light onto the potential issues needed to be addressed related to masculinity, power inequities and micro aggressions, with a view to support, safeguard and enhance supervision opportunities for such therapists.

Finally, further research may benefit from better understanding the role and impact of femmephobia within the wider intersecting lives of LGBTQ+ individuals and its relationship with internalised homophobia. This may provide a framework to understand and manage issues related to gender based oppression as well as internalised homophobia.

Post-study reflexive statement:

The research process has been a rich and invaluable journey, which has contributed and enhanced my identity as a counselling psychologist within the role of scientific practitioner. Throughout the research process, I have been able to personally reflect deeper on my own intentions and preoccupations associated with this area of research. This research does not intend to impose or police my own views or others, but rather, provide a platform to better represent EGM within research as well as learning from rich and diverse lived experiences. Importantly, I acknowledge my own journey of becoming and transforming throughout the research experience (Etherington, 2004). This study has enhanced my understanding of the complexities associated with gender and gender identity amongst gay men, as we navigate and construct identities against prevailing structures and systems of oppression

influenced by heteronormative values and ideals. This new knowledge and understanding has allowed me to transform and develop a deeper sense of curiosity, empathy and compassion towards gay men in the community more widely, that was not fully present at the start of this research. I believe this study has and will continue to enrich my clinical practice and personal development.

Through a process of personal therapy as well as maintaining a reflective diary, I have been able to bracket my own assumptions and consider how this may impact and/or influence the current research (Smith et al., 2009, 2022). Additionally, my themes and notes were reviewed by colleagues and supervisors to ensure validity as well as maintaining recorded evidence of my analytic process.

Despite best practice to ensure validity, I'm aware that I may have affected the research in various ways. I have approached this research through the lens as a self-identified EGM as well as being able to identify with previous research and many of the experiences the participants shared.

Inevitability, this would have influenced all stages throughout the research process. On reflection, this influence appears to be positive, as the research was centred on my participants in giving them a voice and working ethically. Reflecting deeper on my role throughout the analytic process allowed me to reframe and capture moments where I may have misinterpreted, overlooked or overemphasised the participant's material as an EGM myself. For example, my assumption that the participants' rejection of EGM reflects issues of internalised homophobia influenced by my own defensive reactions and/or anger sitting with this material. Moreover, I found myself having to bracket more often by internally checking-in and recording my own processes in my reflective diary associated with themes of projection identification and sense in the context of rejection, diminished desirability and feelings of helplessness and/or change against masculine ideals (Smith et al., 2009, 2022).

Throughout this study, I acknowledge the role and significance of difference between myself and the participants and how this may have affected the study. In particular, the participants differed from me in many ways and were rich in diversity from age, race, and religion, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Consequently, I wonder if and how these differences influenced perceptions between our roles as well as producing potential barriers throughout the interview process.

The overall research experience has been a rollercoaster of emotions that encompass themes of inspiration to despair. Nonetheless, this has been an invaluable and challenging process that has provided fruitful material and learning outcomes that will continue to enrich my life as I move forwards, professionally and personally. I believe that this research has provided a platform for EGM to be heard and it is hoped that it will contribute positively within the field of CoP research and practice.

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Appendix 1: Ethical approval

---------- Forwarded message ---------
From: **Mark Wheeler** <m.wheeler@londonmet.ac.uk>
Date: Fri, 8 Feb 2019 at 17:01
Subject: Re: Ethics form for approval
To: Angela Loulopoulou <A.Loulopoulou@londonmet.ac.uk>

Approved. Please find the signed off form attached.

On Fri, 8 Feb 2019 at 16:12, Angela Loulopoulou <A.Loulopoulou@londonmet.ac.uk> wrote:

> Dear Mark,
>
> please find attached an approved Ethics form for your review
>
> --
> Kind Regards,
>
> Angela
>
> ***Dr Angela Ioanna Loulopoulou, PhD; AFBPsS; FHEA***
>
> **Principal Lecturer in Counselling Psychology**
> **Programme Director of the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology**
> **School of Social Sciences**
> **Chair of Subject Standards Board for PG Psychology**
> **Chair of Ethics Review Committee for PG Psychology**
>
> **Office hours 9.30-17.00 Tuesday to Thursday**
>
> **Please email me if you would like an appointment, as I am not often at my desk.**
>
> Read my article at: http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/banners/readmyarticle/ccpq.gif
>
> Contact address:
>
> London Metropolitan University
> Room T6-20
> Tower Building
> 166-220 Holloway Road
> London N7 8DB
> Tel: 0207 133 2667

Appendix 2: Recruitment poster

Volunteers required for research study

Do you consider yourself to be effeminate, fem, camp or non-masc?

Do you have experience using gay dating and hook-up applications?

I'm a trainee counselling psychologist conducting research within this specific area. Your experiences will contribute to our understanding of effeminate gay men's (EGM) experience of dating using gay dating and hook-up applications (GDHAs).

Your contribution to this research will increase our understanding and awareness of the potential issues effeminate and/or non-masculine gay men may experience as a result of using GDHAs to meet other men

Your contribution may also challenge the stigma, discrimination and marginalisation that many effeminate and non-masculine gay men experience within gay culture.

Participants are required to be 18 years and over.

Participants will partake in an interview (face to face or via Skype) discussing your experiences of being an EGM, experience of GDHAs and experience of dating via use of GDHAs.

If you would like to take part in the current research or require additional information, please contact:

Stewart Neill
stn0157@my.londonmet.ac.uk

This research study has been approved by the London Metropolitan University Research Ethics Review Panel.

Appendix 3: Email template sent to organisations for recruitment support

Subject bar: Doctoral Research Study exploring effeminate gay men's experience of dating using gay dating and hook-up applications.

Dear X,

I am Stewart Neill, a trainee Counselling Psychologist studying at London Metropolitan University. As part of the Doctorate qualification I am required to complete a research project for my thesis. I have designed a research project that involves exploring effeminate or non-masculine gay men's experiences of dating using gay dating and hook-up applications.

My research focuses on effeminate and/or non-masculine gay men only as this client group continues to be significantly underrepresented within research and literature. Therefore, I am particularly keen to recruit participant that meet the following criteria:

- Gay men aged 18 years and over.
- Gay men who identify as effeminate or non-masculine.
- English speaking.
- Experiences of accessing and using gay dating and hook-up applications in the UK only.
- Current or past experience of using GDHAs within the last 6 months.

At this stage in my research process I am contacting organisations like yourselves in order to enquire if you are able to help in my recruitment process. Any help that you are able to give in me accessing my desired population would be greatly appreciated.

Yours thankfully,

Stewart Neill
Email: stn0157@my.londonmet.ac.uk
Tel: xxx

Appendix 4: Organisations contacted

Third sector organisations:

Diversity role models
LBGT Health and wellbeing glasgow@lgbthealth.org.uk
London Friends
Metro charity hello@metrocharity.org.uk
Positive East
Stonewall info@stonewall.org.uk
Terrance Higgins Trust

LGBTQI+ social networking clubs:

Go sling Badminton London committee@goslingslondon.com
Ku-Bar London info@ku-bar.co.uk
London Gay man's singing choir info@lgmc.org.uk

LGBTQI+ student unions groups:

University art London uallgbtsociety@gmail.com
University of Bedfordshire beds.su@beds.ac.uk
University of Brighton brightonlgbtq@gmail.com; d.ashley2@uni.brighton.ac.uk
University of Bristol president@lgbtplusbristol.org.uk
Brunel University London Student.Activities@brunel.ac.uk
University college London uclu-lgbt.officer@ucl.ac.uk
University of Dundee dulgbtsociety@gmail.com
University East London
University of Exeter LGBTQplus@groups.exeterguild.com
University of Glasgow
Goldsmith's University London goldsmithslgbtq@gmail.com
Imperial college London iq.welfare@imperial.ac.uk
University of Liverpool LGBT@liv.ac.uk
University of Manchester uomlgbtqsociety@gmail.com
Royal Holloway University of London LGBTSociety@su.rhul.ac.uk
London south bank University lgbtofficer@lsbsu.org
University of surrey ussu.lgbtplus@surrey.ac.uk
Queen Mary University LGBT@qmu.ac.uk
Queen University Belfast president@qublgbt.com
University of Warwick hello@warwickpride.org

Appendix 5: Instagram page with hashtags

Appendix 6: Interview schedule

1) Consent form and information

I would like to thank you for expressing an interest in my research. Prior to the interview, can I ask you to read and sign the consent form.

2) Introduction

I would like to start the interview by asking you tell me your name, age and what your line of work. I also invite you to share anything else you think is important for me to know.

3) Interest in the study

Can you tell me a little about your interest in the study? Was it about the topic area or yourself?

4) Overview

The interview will last 60 minutes and I'm going to ask you 5 questions in total. I have some prompt questions to help elaborate or extend on your initial responses. I would like to remind you that all information shared today is confidential and anonymized, so please feel free to speak openly and honestly about your experiences. If you need me to repeat any questions or require a short break, please let me know. If you feel uncomfortable with any of the questions, you do not need to respond and we can move onto the next question. If you want to end or exit the interview at any point you can.

5) Research questions

Can you tell me what 'effeminacy' means to you as a gay man?

Prompts:

- How would you define 'effeminacy'?
- What role did 'effeminacy' play in your childhood?
- How has being effeminate impacted on your understanding of yourself today?

What is it like for you being an EGM within the gay community today?

Prompts:

- Can you identify the positives to being an EGM within the gay community?
- What are the challenges of being an EGM within the gay community?

- If experienced, how do you respond to such challenges?
- How does this impact on you?

How do you experience dating as an EGM?

Prompts:

- How has your gender identity influenced your experience of dating?
- If experienced, how do you respond to such challenges?
- How do such challenges impact on your sense of self?
- How would you feel dating another EGM?

How do you experience using gay dating and hookup applications as an EGM?

Prompts:

- How does the branding of applications influence your own profile framing?
- How do you experience other profile user's anti-effeminacy attitudes?
- How do you respond to profiles users anti-effeminacy?
- How does anti-effeminacy online affect you and in what ways?

6) Ending

We have come to the end of our interview.
I will now provide you with a debrief sheet (and distress protocol if required) and you now have the opportunity to discuss your experience of the interview and/or ask me any questions regarding the current research.
Many thanks for your participation!

Appendix 7: Participant information sheet

Title: Exploring effeminate gay men's experiences of dating using gay dating and hook-up applications: An Interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Dear reader,

Many thanks for your kind interest in participating in my doctoral research. I would like to discuss with you the rational and procedure regarding this research.

Purpose:

My name is Stewart Neill and I am a trainee counselling psychologist at London Metropolitan University. The current research is being conducted as part of my doctoral qualification which is being supervised by Dr Catherine Athanasiadou-Lewis.

This research aims to explore the experiences of effeminate or non-masculine gay men who use gay dating or hook-up applications (GDHAs) in order to date or meet other men.

Research Benefits:

Your contribution to this research will increase our understanding and awareness of the potential issues effeminate and/or non-masculine gay men may experience as a result of using GDHAs to meet other men.

There is very little research specifically exploring effeminate or non-masculine gay men's experience of dating using mobile applications. Therefore, your participation will contribute to the growing research within this particular area.

Your contribution may also influence and support the development of therapeutic interventions, professional guidelines and best practice to meet the well-being needs of effeminate and/or non-masculine gay men accessing psychological support.

Your contribution may also challenge the stigma, discrimination and marginalisation that many effeminate and non-masculine gay men experience within gay culture.

Participant criteria:

In order to be eligible to take part in the current research all participants need to meet the following criteria:

- You must be 18 years or over.
- You must be using GDHAs currently or have experience of using GDHAs within the last 6 months.

If you wish to take part in this study, you will be asked to read and sign a consent form. Participants will take part in a 1:1 interview lasting 60 minutes and will be recorded. Participants will be provided with an additional 30 minutes to ask any questions and debrief at the end of the interview procedure. The focus of the interview will be on your own personal experiences. The information presented will be confidential and will contribute to a body of research with some examples of data taken to support the final write-up of the current research. As a participant, you can request a summary of the main findings by providing me with your contact details.

Participation:

Your participation is voluntary and you are able to end the research at any time or refuse to respond to any questions without giving any reasons to justify your actions and/or decisions. You can withdraw yourself and data from the research within 6 weeks of interviewing, after which your data will be used within the research. Furthermore, you can contact me or my university supervisor if you have any queries or concerns following your participation. The interview will be scheduled on a convenient date that suits your needs and will take place within a quiet and confidential setting within the university grounds. If alternative requirements are needed for your assistance please inform me and this can be taken into account in order to support your involvement within the research.

Confidentiality:

In adherence to the British psychological Society guidelines on ethical principles for research with human participants, all information you provide will be kept strictly anonymous and confidential as well as being stored in a secure location. However, confidentiality may be breached in some circumstances i.e. disclosure of harm to yourself or others; or if you reveal details of practice that highlight serious ethical concerns in accordance to the BPS Code of Ethics & Conduct (2014).

The results of my research may be published to inform practice. Therefore, the anonymised transcripts of our interview will be kept for 5 years and then destroyed. Once my research is complete, a copy will also be placed in the London Metropolitan University library and will be accessed by other researchers or students.

Risk:

This research focuses on your personal experiences which may possibly be distressing. Throughout the interview, risk will be monitored, and you can refuse to respond to any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. Additionally, short breaks will be offered if you require space and time to process any difficulties experienced. If the interview becomes too distressing; as a safeguarding measure both you and the researcher have the right to terminate the interview at any point.

Following the interview, you will be given a debrief sheet providing will be provided more information about the research as well as having the opportunity to discuss your experience of the interview with the researcher. Information will also be provided regarding additional support following the interview if required.

Concerns:

If you have any concerns regarding this research project or the researcher, please contact my supervisor:

Dr Catherine Athanasiadou-Lewis
London Metropolitan University
_____@londonmet.ac.uk

If you are interested in participating in the above study or have any further questions then please email me at:
stn0157@my.londonmet.ac.uk

Many thanks for taking the time to read this information.
Yours faithfully,
Stewart Neill
Trainee Counselling Psychologist

Appendix 8: consent form

Research title: Exploring effeminate gay men's experiences of dating using gay dating and hook-up applications: An Interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Researcher: Stewart Neill, Trainee Counselling Psychologist

Many thanks for your kind consideration in participating in this study. Prior to interviewing, all participants are required to read and sign a consent form. It is essential that you understand and agree to all the terms and conditions of this research by ticking the boxes. By ticking and signing this form, your indicating an understanding and willingness to partake in the study and are aware of your rights as a participant. If you need additional clarification, please do not hesitate and approach the researcher.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet regarding this research and have had the opportunity to ask the researcher questions.

- I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I can refuse to answer questions freely, without giving a reason. I am also aware that I can withdraw my data entirely from the study until six weeks after the interview.

- I understand that I will be asked a series of questions regarding my experiences and that the interview will be recorded for the data analysis using an encrypted Dictaphone which will be stored in a safe location.

- I understand that the data and transcripts will be anonymised with all identifying information being removed and will be used in a doctoral thesis and possible future publications.

- I understand that the tapes and anonymised transcripts will be kept for up to 5 years and then destroyed. A copy of the doctoral thesis will be kept in the London Metropolitan University library.

- ☐ I understand that my confidentiality will be maintained wherever possible, however, this may be breached if I disclose harm to myself or others; or if I reveal details of practice which raises serious ethical concerns, according to the BPS Code of Conduct & Ethics (2006).

- ☐ I understand that a debriefing sheet will be provided which contains additional information about the study and I will have the opportunity to discuss my experience of taking part in the study.

- ☐ I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and I believe these questions have been answered fully and honestly.

- ☐ **I agree to participate in the research.**

Name of Research Participant Date

Signature

_____ _____/_____/_____

_____

Name of Researcher Date

Signature

I would like to receive a summary of the research findings: YES / NO (please circle)

Address to which details should be sent:..... .....

E-mail address:.....

Appendix 9: Debrief

Many thanks for taking part in the current research, you have the right to withdraw your data any time in the next 6 weeks (date ___/___/___).

If you want to remove your data, please contact me via email if you wish to do so.

Concerns:

If you have any concerns regarding this research or towards the researcher, please contact my supervisor

Dr Catherine Athanasiadou-Lewis

London Metropolitan University

_____@londonmet.ac.uk

Risk:

If you experience any unforeseen distress as a result of your participation within the study, please contact London Metropolitan University or contact any of the people listed below for further advice and support:

Stewart Neill

Stn0157@my.londonmet.ac.uk

University Address:

Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology

London Metropolitan University

166-220 Holloway Road

London N7 8DB

Support organisations:

Samaritans · telephone advice and support

53-55 Felsham Road, Putney SW15 1AZ

020 8789 9121

Provides a 24 hour support help-line service.

Mind

15 – 19 Broadway, London, E15 4BQ.

Tel: 0300 123 3393 / 020 8519 2122

Email: contact@mind.org.uk

Website: www.mind.org.uk

This service provides a confidential helpline, face-to-face counselling, advocacy, support and befriending for a broad selection of mental health difficulties.

Your GP can provide additional information about support services.

Appendix 10: Distress protocol

This distress protocol has been designed to ensure the safeguarding of all participants and to manage any harm in response to taking part in current research.

Within the current research, extreme levels of distress are unlikely to occur because all efforts have been taken to ensure all participants understand the nature of the study and are made aware of their rights as participants and/or any potential risk.

Possible signs of distress:	Possible actions to reduce / manage distress:
• Tearfulness • Changes in voice i.e. chocked, fillers, • Signs of anxiousness i.e. change in body language / metacommunication.	• Check in with participant • Offer a break from the interview • Provide tissues and water • Remind participates of their rights i.e. terminate the interview, move onto other questions.
• Uncontrollable crying • Increased body activity • Verbal or physical aggression • Panic attack • Intrusive thoughts • Suicidal thoughts	• terminate interview • Use relaxation • Debrief participant & provide appropriate appendixes. • Maintain their safety i.e. reassurance, protective factors. • Provide contact details of support organizations given • Contact appropriate organization if concerned about participant's welfare.

Appendix 11: Sample transcript for Ethan – notes, comments and emerging themes

Preliminary Ideas:		Participant 2	Emerging themes:
	1	**So the first question that I would like to ask you is, can you tell**	
	2	**me what effeminacy means to you as a gay man?**	
Effeminacy associated with expression of self opposite of masculine ideals (4-5) Effeminacy and fluid expression of self from clothing, gestures and make-up (6-7) gender nonconformity attracts comments from others (7).	3		
	4	Well, I think for me it's often expressing myself in a very different	Effeminacy and expression
	5	way to what maybe heterosexual men or masculine men would. It's	
	6	wearing what I want to wear, it's using my hands in certain way,	Fluid gender identities and expression
	7	that seems to be something that quite a lot of people comment on.	
	8		
	9	**Okay.**	The feminine man
Subjective belief that make-up informs effeminacy and gender identity (11-13)	10		
	11	And also just like makeup and things like that, I tend to wear a lot of	Freedom of expression
	12	that sometimes. And I would consider that part of effeminacy for	
"Makeup...I tend to wear a lot" (11) and "Clothing and I use my hands a lot' (23)- feminine stereotypes inform self and gender identity.	13	me.	Gender non-conformity and negative attention
	14		
	15	**I'm getting real sense of the way that you experience it is just**	
	16	**how you express yourself?**	
	17		
	18	Yes.	
	19		
	20	**Yes, okay. And then when you express yourself that's through**	
	21	**makeup also?**	Dancing and gender identity
	22		
Subjective like to perform and do feminine through dance "I like to dance...effeminately" (23-24). Effeminacy visible to others in non-gay spaces (24-25).	23	Clothing and I use my hands a lot, I suppose. Dancing, I like to	
	24	dance quite effeminately, which can be really highlighted when	Gender stereotypes inform gender identity
	25	you're not in queer-friendly space.	
	26		
	27	**When you say highlighted, what do you mean by that?**	Gender dissidence in non-gay spaces
	28		
Subjective feelings of being exposed and judged/criticized by others (29)	29	Because you notice people looking at you more.	
	30		Effeminacy and Exposure in non-gay space
	31	**Okay. So am I right thinking that there's as aspect to you**	
	32	**through effeminacy that you stand out?**	
"Speak to you differently...stare or look" – Effeminacy attracts negative attention from others. Subjective feelings of possible threat (34/35)	33		Vulnerability and self-consciousness in non-gay spaces.
	34	Yes. Or people speak to you differently. Yes normally they speak to	
	35	you differently, or they stare or look.	
	36		Gender transgressions
	37	**Right, okay. And I am right in thinking that can be received**	
	38	**negatively in your experience?**	Gender policing
Negative responses from others through expressing true self (40)	39		
	40	Yes, yes, negatively.	Vulnerability and risk in non-gay space
	41		
Subjective feelings of wanting to wear a skirt/dress over typical school clothes for boys (45-46) Subjective identification with girls via clothing i.e. Skirt/dresses (46) subjective feelings of limitation in expression due to gender binaries informed by clothing (46).	42	**Thinking of your childhood, what role did effeminacy play in**	
	43	**your childhood?**	EGM and negative attention
	44		
	45	Well, I always wanted to wear dresses, I hated wearing my school	
	46	clothes, because I couldn't wear a skirt or ... I wanted to dress like the	Clothing and gender identity
	47	girls basically.	
	48		The boy in a dress
			Gender dissidence

Preliminary Ideas:		Participant 2	Emerging themes:
"They [girls]...options....I didn't have" (51) – early understanding of gender roles and expectations. Subjective feelings of limitations and self-expression – "They [girls]...a summer...and a winter dress" (51-52). Conflicting parental views (53) True self denied and rejected by parent (54-55)	49	**Yes.**	Gender expectations
	50		
	51	They also got options that I didn't get. They got to wear a summer	Gender identity and self-expression
	52	dress and a winter dress. But it just wasn't accepted in my home	
	53	town and I had one supportive parent and one unsupportive parent.	Gender non-conformity and parental acceptance / rejection
	54	And that unsupportive parent won't let me wear a dress to school or	
	55	you know.	
	56		
Subjective feelings of rejection form dad (61) Subjective belief that dad was 'embarrassed' of his gender non-conformity (61-62) Gender non-conformity acceptable in private over public spaces (62-64)	57	**Okay. So when you say unsupportive, is that really key to the**	
	58	**gender non-conformity and how you express yourself, you're**	Rejection of gender non-conformity in public spaces
	59	**wanting, your needs and likes.**	
	60		
	61	Yes, well I think it was mainly that my dad was just embarrassed to	
	62	be seen with a son who was wearing a dress or makeup. So there	Public Vs private expression of self
	63	were certain spaces that I could do it, if I was in public that would be	
	64	not allowed.	
	65		
Subjective need to 'repress' childhood experiences in order to avoid emotional pain (68-72) Subjective difficulties reflecting on 'impact' upon self (69-72)	66	**Okay. And how did that impact on you?**	
	67		
	68	It's hard to say, my childhood was quite repressed for various	Repression and self
	69	different reasons, not just particularly this one. So I don't really	
	70	remember vividly it impacting on me. It probably has done, but just I	Emotional defences against pain
	71	can't say, because I can't really remember it being an active thought	
	72	that I had.	
	73		
	74	**What did it mean to you then to have almost like a separate**	
	75	**identity? You could do this in private, but you couldn't do it in**	
	76	**public. How did you make sense of that?**	
	77		Self-expression and congruence
Hesitation reflecting on childhood experiences (78-79). Subjective feelings of liberation being able to express true self within a safe space– Dress congruent with self (79-82)	78	I suppose that's another hard one to remember with having quite a	
	79	hazy childhood…all of my dresses were from my friend, she wasn't	Safe space and true self
	80	into wearing them at all, so I was often at her house where I could do	
	81	that. And I definitely felt more comfortable, maybe not comfortable,	Freeing the self
	82	it's the wrong word. Just freer.	
	83		
	84	**Right, okay, free.**	
Subjective feelings of being uncomfortable or oppressed by binary and gender expectations (86-88) Gender performance reinforced by clothing.	85		Gender and binary expectations and limitations of self
	86	Yes. Because I was uncomfortable in boy's clothing, but I was	
	87	uncomfortable with the fact that I couldn't just, if I wanted to, go and	Gender performativity and clothing
	88	wear something different. Or go and wear something girly.	
	89		
Subjective feelings of 'happiness' being in a safe space and being congruent with self (93-96) safe space away from criticism and shame (99-100) 'weird' - confusion over clothing boundaries of gender expression: private and public self-presentations (97-101)	90	**You said you didn't have the option and I just wondered what**	
	91	**that felt like?**	Safe space and authenticity
	92		
	93	I suppose really in basic terms, it was just I knew that going to my	
	94	friend's house I was going to have a better time, because I was going	Confusion of public and private boundaries of expression
	95	to be able to do what I wanted. So I suppose in basic terms it was	
	96	just like happiness. Going round and just being able to do that and	Self-presentation and gender non-conformity

Preliminary Ideas:		Participant 2	Emerging themes:
Subjective need to challenge traditional gender norm through clothing and self-expression (99-100)	97	not having any comment about it. I wasn't allowed to wear it outside	Challenging gender stereotypes and expectations
	98	of my friend's house, that I thought it was weird, like I didn't, it was	
	99	just a piece of clothing to me that I liked the look of. It wasn't that I	
	100	didn't know what gender it had really, gender in air quotes.	
	101		
	102	**So am I right in thinking that there was a sense of boundaries for**	
	103	**gender from a young age, what was acceptable, what wasn't**	
	104	**acceptable?**	
Hesitation reflecting /formulating expression (106) early socialisation of gender roles and binary expectations/ boundaries (107-109)	105		Gender roles and early socialisation
	106	Definitely. It was…it wasn't like … I'm making it sound as if it was	
	107	something like this really rigid thing, but it was definitely made	
	108	aware that there was boy's and girl's clothing and I couldn't wear the	
	109	latter outside.	
Subjective feelings of control i.e. turning effeminacy on/off (119) "try to turn it off" suggests uncertainty of control (119/220) – attempts to reject / deny parts of self. Subjective need to control effeminacy in order to be accepted (120-121) – Awareness of potential rejection (120-121)	110		Strive for acceptance
	111	**Right, so again am I right in thinking that expectations were**	Effeminacy and gender performativity
	112	**made quite clear about what was expected from your gender?**	
	113		
	114	Yes.	Effeminacy and Self-monitoring
	115		
	116	**If we move onto my next prompt question, how has being**	Effeminacy and illusions of control
	117	**effeminate impacted on your sense of self today?**	
	118		
	119	I think at times I can turn it off or I think I can turn it off, or try to	Effeminacy and rejection
	120	turn it off, because it makes me feel more accepted in certain	
	121	situations.	
Effeminacy accepted specific spaces amongst 'likeminded people' (125-126) "which one am I…I seem…flipping it on or off" – gender identify and confusion, conflict with self and split self (127-128) spectrum of effeminacy and self-identification (129-130) Subjective feelings of having to 'change it [effeminacy] for others – not for self (130-131)	122		
	123	**Right, okay.**	
	124		
	125	But then there's also the flip side where you're more accepted for	Gender performativity and conflict with self.
	126	being more effeminate in certain spaces around like-minded people.	
	127	And I suppose for my sense of self, it's a bit like which one am I,	Splitting identities and confusion of self
	128	because I seem to be doing … I seem to be flipping it on or off, it's	
	129	hard to know, like am I ridiculously effeminate all the time or am I	Fluid effeminate identities
	130	not so much that it's hard to know, because I change it for other	
	131	people not for myself.	
	132		
	133	**Right, okay. So I'm getting a sense that you're quite aware of**	Self-monitoring and acceptance
	134	**when you can almost be fully relaxed in terms of the self in**	
	135	**context.**	
	136		True Vs false self and acceptance
	137	Yes.	
	138		
	139	**How much of the self can I reveal?**	
	140		
	141	Yes.	
	142		

that if you didn't act the way that you do then you might be accepted by more people.

So am I right in thinking that you still feel that there's a lack of acceptance for effeminate gay men?

Yes, definitely, yes.

Okay. What challenges do you think effeminate gay men experience within the gay community?

I think challenges of being accepted. Being seen as sexy as well, like still being seen as attractive, it's like being effeminate you're a less attractive person. I don't know, I'm obviously only speaking for just one person, but that's definitely something that I've encountered.

Okay. So am I right in thinking that there's a real sense of being romantically accepted or rejected, based on being effeminate?

Yes. Yes, I have had for myself that, where people have met me, having a different perception of what I was going to be like. And then they got the real story and that was it, kind of door closed kind of thing.

And how did that impact on you?

I suppose I haven't really thought about it, because I was just ... I suppose I just, at the time I probably just brushed it off and didn't really give a second thought. I suppose if I were to really think about it, I suppose it just made me feel like I wasn't ... like I could have maybe ... at the time I think I was like, I need to work on this then, I need to become more masculine, because that's the only way that people are going to accept me or the way that I'm ever going to sleep with anyone ever again. Or go on a date with anyone ever again. But I think that was then and I don't think I'm doing that anymore.

So, there was a sense that you needed to change the self in order to become accepted?

Yes. Yes, to conform, I suppose, to conform, yes.

Okay. Would you say there's any positives to being an effeminate gay man within the gay community?

I suppose the biggest positive is just not putting yourself in a box and being like everyone else, because I've now realised that's really dull. I suppose that's the biggest one, being true to yourself, because ... but

Subjective feelings of 'tough' and perceived pressure to change self in order to be accepted by others and society (190-192). Language: acting/act – gender is behavioural.

Subjective belief that EGM are not accepted within the gay community (197).

Subjective belief that challenges are associated with increased acceptance (202) Subjective belief that EGM are seen as less desirable/sexy or attractive (202-203) Subjective experience of feeling unattractive / unwanted because of effeminacy (204-205). Effeminacy is not an attractive quality (203-204)

Subjective experience of romantic rejection based on others pre-conceived ideas and expectations regarding gender identity (210-213).

Subjective need to avoid reflecting on painful material by 'brushing it off' (217-218) Increased uncertainty how to respond /make sense of rejection "I suppose" x4 (217-220) Subjective feelings of needing to be 'more masculine' in order to be accepted, attractive and sexually successful (222) Catastrophizing outcomes (223-224) Subjective feelings of growth and understanding of self (225)

Subjective feeling of having to conform to masculine (230)

Subjective feelings of individuality and uniqueness amongst EGM (235-236) Authenticity amongst EGM (237) Subjective feelings of limited positives (238-239)

EGM and gender performativity

EGM and Minority stress

EGM and community acceptance

Partner preference

Hierarchy of gay sexualities

EGM and subordinated sexualities

EGM emasculated

Gender identity and partner preference

Partner preference: ideals and expectations

Effeminacy and romantic rejection

Cognitive avoidance

Incongruence: true Vs false self

Conforming to masculine ideals

Masculinity and acceptance

Masculinity and eroticism

Catastrophizing

Passage of time and self-compassion

Pressure to conform

EGM: fluid and inclusive identities

EGM and true self expression

Preliminary Ideas:

Emerging themes:

Participant 2

Subjective feelings of difficulty dating as an EGM (243) Positive and contained feelings regarding dating when the other has an understanding of ones gender identity (243-245) Subjective need to self-disclose gender identity to dates in order to avoid possible romantic rejection, surprising and/or expectations (246-248) Subjective feelings of being camp and non-masc (247-248).

Slow progressive changes

I can't, it's hard to see many positives, because I don't think there are an awful lot at the moment. Although it is getting better.

So how do you experience dating as an effeminate gay man?

EGM and self-disclosure

EGM and projections of rejection

Self-fulfilling prophecy

EGM and gender norms

Not great on the whole. I suppose the dates that I have had have tended to be okay, because I think they've had an understanding of who I am already. So it's not like a surprise when they meet me, because I realised very quickly that I was going to have to do that, was going to have to make it very apparent that I am slightly camp or non-masc.

Right

Hegemonic masculinity

EGM and subordinate gender identities

Masculinity and attractiveness

Partner preference

Subjective feelings of being evaluated as a potential partner 'vetted' informed by masculine ideals (252-254) Subjective feelings of subordination 'bottom of the food chain" (253).

So I suppose there's a vetting process, as it were. But it feels like you're on the bottom of the food chain in that most people are looking for people more masculine than you.

Okay.

EGM and emasculation

EGM and gender role stress

Subjective feelings of not being a 'real man' – language and stereotypes (259) Subjective feelings of inferiority and not being good enough – 'constantly reminded' (258).

And you're constantly reminded of that as well, that people want a masculine man, or a real man, as they often say.

Okay. And how do you respond to such challenges like that?

EGM and avoidance

EGM failing at gender ideals

Language and stereotypes

Subjective need to ignore others who may want a masculine partner (263) Subjective feelings of inadequacy and gender failure "I'm not perception real man is" (265-266) Language and stereotypes 'real man' (266)

Well, if I see that then I just ignore it, it's just obviously not the right ... why would I message that person, or if I speak to the person if that's what they want, because I'm not going to be able to give that perception of what a real man is. So I suppose I just ignore it.

You ignore it.

Self-esteem and confidence

Emotional health

Subjective need to engage with emotions 'flippantly' to avoid emotional upset (270). "chips away" – continues exposure/reminders impacts on emotional health (271).

Whether I actually do or I just flippantly brush past it. I think that each time you read it, it does have a little ... you know, it chips away, so.

So am I right in thinking that each time you're exposed to challenges like that, it just impacts the self-esteem and confidence?

Yes.

You said something really interestingly about vetting yourself. The way that I took that was that you almost disclose or make it apparent about being effeminate before dating? Am I right in that?

Appendix 12: Superordinate and Subordinate themes for Ethan

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate theme	Quote
1. Gender identity	The need to defeminise	*"I need to become more masculine…if I'm ever going to sleep with anyone ever again…or go on a date"* (221-224).
	Gender confusion	*"I seem to be flipping it on or off, it's hard to know, like am I ridiculously effeminate all the time" (128-129)*
	internalised homophobia	*"I feel like I'm subconsciously against it in other men, their effeminacy" (328-329).*
2. The impact of femmephobia	Community and online subordination	*"you're constantly reminded…that people want a masculine man, or a real man" (258-259)*
	Community and online marginalisation	*"I think it's difficult because you're often reminded that it's not okay by quite a lot of people, often strangers" (187-188)*
	Emotional health	*"every time I make a breakthrough of just being able to be who I am, it's like when you read that again, it takes you a step back" (465-467).*
3. The impact of romantic and sexual rejection	Diminished desirability	*"Being seen as sexy as well, like still being seen as attractive, it's like being effeminate you're a less attractive person"* (202-204).

The need to vet and self-disclose	*"It would normally be a photo of me in drag… to rule out anybody that's going to have an issue with it" (285-295).*
Romantic and sexual passivity	*"I suppose I always pander to whoever it is, anyway, because that's what I would do" (376-377)*

Appendix 13: Finalised Superordinate themes and subthemes with quotes

Superordinate Theme	Subtheme	Quote	Interview	Page/line
The evolving gender identity	Gender ideals in youth	*"I tried to butch up at one point and pretend that I wasn't so feminine. I remember my mum used to paint my nails and stuff when I was younger. I went to school one day and I remember this guy teasing me...And then from that point on I was like mum, I don't want nail varnish on my finger nails, only my toenails because no one will see it....It was never kind of putting it aside, it was always hiding it, and I think that's quite telling from putting it on my toenails rather than my nails"*	Toby	2/51-59
	The art of dulling down	*"I seem to be flipping it on or off, it's hard to know, like am I ridiculously effeminate all the time or am I not so much that it's hard to know, because I change it for other people not for myself".*	Ethan	3/128-131
	The authentic feminine man	*"I have a beard and I'm quite hairy at the moment, so to look at most guys are probably thinking, "Oh, yes, butch guy." And then they hear my voice… I am quite feminine, especially the way I move, the way I probably walk… in my wardrobe.... definitely something more effeminate"*	Tanveer	2/48-55
The impact of femmephobia	Marginalisation and subordination of EGM	*"You'd see on their profile, 'masc for masc' or 'Don't message if you're camp'"*	Fergus	11/517-519
	Pressure to conform	*"you're constantly reminded…that people want a masculine man, or a real man")*	Ethan	6/258-259
	Rejecting effeminacy	*"I don't really like to admit it, but I guess I'm not really attracted to effeminate guys"*	Ekam	16/735-736

	in self and others			
The effects of romantic and sexual rejection	Poor emotional health enhancing risk taking behaviours	*"I feeling a bit down in the dumps. I just had a really crap picture, and just put the word 'now', and I had so many messages. "I want to come over. I want to come over."*	Fergus	10/438-441
	Expectations of rejection	*"I think when you are swiping on apps a lot of the time like oh god he's really hot, and then you look at more pictures and like he's not going to be interested in me…I am too scared to be rejected by him".*	Toby	11/494-498
	Diminished desirability	*"I feel like it's just not attractive. I feel like I'm not attractive"*	Ekam	8/348