

**Gender Expression, Masculinity, and Workplace Discrimination: Understanding the
Experiences of Gay Men**

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Introduction

Even though more people in this day and age are more accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals, discrimination in workplace environments still happens, just in less obvious ways. It is not always someone openly saying they will not hire or promote a person because they are gay. A lot of the time, it shows up through judgements about professionalism, confidence, leadership, communication, and whether someone seems like a “good fit.” This paper argues that those judgements are not neutral because they are often shaped by traditional expectations of masculinity.

I picked this topic because I am quite deep in the LGBTQ+ community and have many gay male friends who have impacted by these expectations. I have also seen this kind of judgement personally, especially as someone who is a woman and can be read as more masculine in school, work, family spaces, and public/social settings. Due to that, this topic is not foreign to me. It shows how people are judged not only for what they do, but for how they present themselves.

To me, professionalism means being cordial, put together, respectful, and looks appropriate for the setting. Although, workplaces often connect professionalism to masculine traits like dominance, confidence, toughness, and authority. This creates a problem for feminine-presenting gay men because they may be viewed as less competent or less professional, not because of their actual ability, but because they do not fit the masculine image that workplaces often reward.

This paper asks: How does gay men’s gender expression relate to their experiences of discrimination in workplace environments that emphasize traditional masculinity? To answer this

question, this paper uses sociological research on gender, hiring, masculinity, and workplace inequality. It then applies feminist interactionist theory and hegemonic masculinity, while using the racial field and intersectionality as support concepts.

Literature Review

Schilt's study is central to this paper and my topic because it shows how workplace inequality can be based less on legitimate skills and more on how gender is perceived. In the article, Schilt studies transmen who worked as women before transitioning and then later worked as men, sometime in the exact same jobs. Their education, experience, and ability did not suddenly change, but the way people treated them did. Once they were viewed by others as men, many of them were given more respect, more authority, and more recognition for the same work (Schilt 2006). This matters because it shows how masculinity itself can be rewarded in workplace settings.

For feminine-presenting gay men, Schilt's findings are important because employers may judge them more negatively not because they are less qualified, but because they do not fit the masculine image that is often tied to professionalism, leadership, and competence. No one has to directly say, "You are too feminine for the job." Instead, the judgement can appear through language about fit, confidence, tone, or leadership presence. That makes this kind of discrimination harder to identify, but does not make it any less real (Schilt 2006).

Kendall's work also helps explain how hegemonic masculinity operates. Kendall shows how masculinity can be defended and performed even in spaces that might not appear traditionally masculine at first. This matters because it shows that masculinity is not only about physical toughness or palpable dominance. It can also be about proving competence, authority,

and status in social interaction. For this paper, Kendal supports the argument that men who do not fit dominant masculine expectations may be seen as less capable or less legitimate (Kendall 2000).

Brenner-Levoy's research adds another layer by showing how queer men who do not match dominant masculine norms can face harassment and judgement in online gaming spaces. This is relevant because it shows that masculinity is still actively policed in day-to-day life. People still act like there is a "right" way to be a man, and when someone does not match that, such as a queer men, they can be punished socially. That same policing can carry into workplace settings, where feminine-presenting gay men may be evaluated through masculine expectations of confidence, seriousness, and authority (Brenner-Levoy 2023).

Strader and Nordmarken directly support the gender nonconformity part of this paper. Their research shows that gender nonconformity among sexual minorities is connected to an economic penalty. This supports the idea that discrimination is not just about sexual orientation by itself, but also about gender expression. For feminine-presenting gay men, this means discrimination can come both from sexuality-based bias and gender-based expectations at the same time (Strader and Nordmarken 2026).

Kuchynka et al. help explain why workplace cultures may reward masculinity. Their work on masculinity contest cultures are built around dominance, toughness, and competition can become valued traits in companies. In that kind environment, feminine-presenting gay men may be seen as not fitting the image of what an ideal worker or leader is supposed to be. This shifts the issue away from only individual bias and toward workplace culture itself (Kuchynka et al 2018).

The three Social Forces articles strengthen this argument of this paper by showing how discrimination and workplace inequality can operate through hiring systems, employer behavior, and social networks. Racial discrimination in hiring does not stop after an applicant receives a callback, which shows that bias is not just a one-time barrier at the beginning of the hiring process. Bias can continue after someone has already been considered qualified (Quillian, Lee, and Oliver 2020).

Stainback shows that job matching is shaped by social contacts, race, and ethnicity, which supports the idea that job opportunities are not always based only on qualifications or effort. They are also shaped by networks, access, and who is seen as belonging in certain workspaces. For feminine-presenting gay men, this helps explain how workplace access can be shaped by whether someone fits dominant social and professional expectations (Stainback 2008).

Brown shows that employers play an active role in shaping labor market inequality, which makes clear that workplace inequality is not just something that happens naturally or accidentally. Employers help create and maintain the conditions that determine who is valued, hired, excluded, or treated as legitimate (Brown 2000). This connects to my topic because feminine-presenting gay men may be disadvantaged not only because of individual prejudice, but because workplace systems and employer expectations already reward certain identities and behaviors (Brown 2000).

Altogether, these sources show that discrimination against feminine-presenting gay men is not just about sexuality. It is about gender expectations, gender expression, masculinity, employer decisions, and workplace culture. The larger issue is that masculinity is often treated as the standard for professionalism, while gender nonconformity is treated as a weakness or lack of fit.

Theory Application and Analysis

Feminist Interactionist Theory

Feminist interactionist theory helps explain how people perform gender in everyday life and how others interpret those performances. This theory is useful for my topic because discrimination against feminine-presenting gay men often happens through ordinary interactions. It may show up in how someone is read during an interview, how seriously they are taken in a meeting, or whether they are seen as leadership material.

Ritzer and Stepnisky explain gender through interactional processes, which helps show that gender is not only something people “are”, but something that is socially interpreted. This connects to feminine-presenting gay men because their gender expression may be read as less masculine and therefore less professional. These judgements may not be openly stated, but they still shape how people are treated (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2022). Schilt’s research supports this theory because it shows that workplace treatment can change based on gender perception, even when qualification remains the same. The same people were treated with more authority and respect once they were perceived as men. This supports the argument that gender perception matters in workplace evaluation (Schilt 2006).

A strength of feminist interactionist theory is that it explains subtle discrimination at the everyday level. It helps show how small judgements about tone, presentation, appearance, and confidence can add up. A limitation is that this theory does not fully explain why masculinity is valued more than femininity. It explains how people are judged, but hegemonic masculinity better explains why those judgements follow a gendered hierarchy.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity explains how one form of masculinity becomes treated as the ideal. This ideal is usually associated with authority, leadership, control and competence, while femininity in men is often seen as weakness. This theory is useful because it directly explains why feminine-presenting gay men may be judged negatively in workplaces that reward traditional masculinity.

Kendall supports this theory by showing how hegemonic masculinity is defended and performed in social spaces. This matters because masculinity is not just a personal identity. It is something people use to claim status and legitimacy. When feminine-presenting gay men do not fit dominant masculine expectations, they may be read as less capable or less authoritative (Kendall 2000).

Kuchynka et al. also support this theory because masculinity contest cultures reward dominance, toughness, and competition. In workplaces shaped by those values, masculinity becomes tied to leadership and success. Feminine-presenting gay men may be seen as not matching the expected image of a strong worker or leader (Kuchynka et al. 2018).

Brenner-Levoy also supports this framework because queer men who do not match dominant masculine norms can face harassment and judgement. This shows how masculinity is policed and protected. In the workplace, that policing may become less direct, but it can still appear through judgements about professionalism, seriousness, and fit (Brenner-Levoy 2023).

A strength of hegemonic masculinity is that it explains why masculinity is treated as the standard. It shows that workplace inequality is not random; it follows a pattern where certain masculine traits are rewarded and feminine traits in men are penalized. A limitation is that

hegemonic masculinity can be broad on its own. It explains the larger hierarchy, but it does not always show how these judgments happen in everyday interactions. That is why feminist interaction theory is important, because together these two theories explain both the larger system and the experiences people go through.

Supporting Concept: Racial Field

The racial field supports this paper because it helps explain how workplaces assign value to different identities and behaviors. Ritzer and Stepnisky describe a field as a structured social space where some identities and traits are given more value and power than others (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2022:279). Brown supports this structural argument because employers actively shape inequality within labor markets, reinforcing which traits are valued and who is seen as legitimate (Brown 2000). Quillian, Lee, and Oliver further show that discrimination can continue through multiple stages of hiring (Brown 2000; Quillian, Lee, and Oliver 2000).

This concept also helps explain why race matters, especially for Black gay men, who may face both racialized and gendered expectations at the same time. Professionalism is often treated like it is neutral, but it is shaped by dominant cultural expectations. Black gay men may face both racialized expectations, gendered expectations, and if they are feminine-presenting, it creates an even more nuanced discriminatory layer. This does not mean every gay man experiences discrimination in the same way; it means that sexuality, gender expression, race, and workplace norms can overlap. This supporting concept strengthens the paper because it shows that workplace discrimination is not only interactional or cultural, it is also structural. Workplaces assign value to certain traits, and those traits are often tied to traditional masculinity and dominant expectations of professionalism.

Supporting Concept: Intersectionality

Intersectionality is also useful for this paper because it helps explain why discrimination against feminine-presenting gay men is not just about one identity. Intersectionality focuses on how people's experiences are shaped by their social location within larger systems of power and inequality, rather than by just one category at a time (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2022:223). This matters because feminine-presenting gay men are not only judged because of sexuality. They are also judged through gender expression, masculinity, race and workplace expectations at the same time. Their femininity can make them seem "less masculine", and because masculinity is often treated as the standard for how men are supposed to appear, that difference can become a disadvantage.

Intersectionality also helps explain why Black gay men may experience this issue differently. They may face racialized expectations and gendered expectations at the same time. The discrimination is not only homophobia or only gender bias. It can also involve racial bias, especially when professionalism is shaped by dominant white masculine expectations. This framework makes clear that gay men's workplace experiences are not all the same.

Schilt's study supports this concept because her study shows that gender perception changes workplace treatment even when qualifications remain the same. Quillian, Lee, and Oliver also support the broader point that discrimination can continue through hiring even after a person has already received a callback. Together, these sources show that workplace discrimination can be layered, subtle, and ongoing (Schilt 2006; Quillian, Lee, and Oliver 2000).

Professionalism, Whiteness, and Masculinity

One point my professor raised that I believe matters a lot is that workplace professionalism often comes from dominant white masculine cultural frames. That connects directly to this paper because professionalism is usually presented as neutral, but it is not always neutral in practice. People may say professionalism is just about being respectful and put together, but the way it is judged can still reflect racialized and gendered expectations.

This matters for Black gay men in particular because if a workplace already values traditional masculinity, and if professionalism is also shaped by white cultural norms, then Black gay men may face a more complicated form of judgement. They may be judged through racial stereotypes, through expectations of masculinity, and through assumptions about sexuality or gender expression at all once.

This is why it is important not to treat gay men as one single group with identical experiences. This is where the idea of professionalism becomes the most invalidating, because on the surface, it sounds neutral, but in practice it often reflects specific expectations about how people should act and present themselves. When someone does not match that image, they are not always told directly, but they can still be treated as if they do not belong.

Conclusion

This paper shows that workplace discrimination against feminine-presenting gay men is not just about sexuality. It is about how gender is performed, how masculinity is treated as the standard, and how workplaces reward people who fit that standard. Feminist interactionist theory explains how these judgements happen in everyday interactions, while hegemonic masculinity explains why masculinity is valued in the first place.

The supporting concepts of the racial field and intersectionality strengthen this argument. The racial field shows that workplaces are structured environments where certain traits are rewarded more than others, and intersectionality shows why these experiences are layered differently depending on sexuality, gender expression, and race.

What stands out the most is that this kind of discrimination is often dismissed because it is subtle, and just because it is subtle, it does not take away from the real impact it has on people. It still affects how people are hired, promoted, and treated. Understanding this matters because it shows that workplace inequality is not just about obvious discrimination, it is also about everyday expectations that make masculinity seem like the standard for professionalism, competence, and leadership.

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