



## Narcissism, self-evaluations, and partner preferences among men who have sex with men

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### ABSTRACT

Larger or more prominent male body attributes—increased muscularity, penis size, height, etc.—may be associated with differences in narcissism in men who have sex with men (MSM). This may be due, in part, to physical appearance, which tends to be disproportionately revered by MSM. An Internet survey ( $N = 649$ ) was employed to test this and other hypotheses. Our results indicated that MSM who reported being taller, more muscular, and having large erect penises were more likely to be narcissistic. Such narcissistic men also reported wanting partners with these attributes. Finally, narcissistic MSM were significantly more likely to reject partners on body attribute criteria. Among MSM, appearance may play some role in the development and maintenance of narcissistic attitudes. Alternatively, narcissism may drive some MSM to overestimate body attributes that are positive or attractive. Regardless of explanation, the strength of narcissistic attitudes seems to influence men's romantic and sexual attractions towards other men and may ultimately guide partner selection.

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### 1. Introduction

Narcissism includes a grandiose sense of self-importance, a tendency to exaggerate one's talents, and a preoccupation with unlimited success and brilliance (American Psychological Association, 2001). Individual differences in narcissism have been found across cultures and age (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003), and between the genders (i.e., increased narcissism in men relative to women; Wright, O'Leary, & Balkin, 1989). Though there is abundant research on most aspects of narcissism, very little literature (chiefly Alexander & Nunno, 1996) has been written on its prevalence among men who have sex with men (MSM) and the potential reasons for its emergence as an individual difference. It is known that masculine or gender-emphatic attributes (e.g., muscularity, penis size) are highly valued by MSM (Bailey, Kim, Hills, & Linsenmeier, 1997; Filiault & Drummond, 2007). It may thus be reasonable to examine how narcissism influences the presentation of these attributes. Therefore, we explored the degree of narcissism within a sample of MSM, the potential influences that contributed to increased narcissism, and how narcissism might be associated with partner selection.

Male body attributes—being taller, more muscular, having a larger erect penis, etc.—may be agents that generate differences in

narcissism in MSM. This may be due, in part, to attractiveness. Evidence suggests that the MSM community places considerable value on youthful appearance (i.e., less body hair; Filiault & Drummond, 2007) and male physical attributes such as height, muscularity, and erect penis size (Drummond & Filiault, 2008; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). MSM report wanting partners that measure above average on these attributes (particularly regarding muscularity; Bailey et al., 1997), and men exhibiting these traits are consistently found to be more attractive by MSM (Duncan, 2007). Men with above-average bodies may ultimately be given more attention, be more likely the center of attention, and therefore develop a greater sense of narcissism.

Narcissism in MSM also may be associated with partner selection and rejection. One of the fundamental indicators of narcissism is an inflated sense of entitlement (Campbell & Baumeister, 2006). More narcissistic MSM may believe they *deserve* the most physically attractive partners. Research using heterosexual populations has shown that narcissistic individuals tend to be more attracted to partners of higher status and to those who have the ability to enhance the narcissistic individual (Tanchotsrinon, Maneesri, & Campbell, 2007). Thus, if the most attractive partners in the MSM community are also the most muscular and tallest, then MSM who report being narcissistic will report wanting partners who imbue what the community values as attractive. If men within the community consider larger penises (for example) more attractive (Drummond & Filiault, 2008), those with increased narcissism

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will likely place the greatest emphasis on penis size. As a result of this tendency towards physically superlative partners, narcissistic MSM may also report rejecting more partners on appearance-based criteria.

We explored the following hypotheses:

- Increased narcissism will be associated with increased self-reported positive body attributes (e.g., increased height, muscularity, and erect penis size) and decreased self-reported negative body attributes (e.g., lower weight and less body hairiness).
- Increased narcissism will be associated with wanting partners with increased positive body attributes (e.g., increased height, muscularity, and erect penis size), and decreased negative body attributes (e.g., lower weight and less body hairiness).
- MSM who report actually rejecting sexual partners for not having positive attributes or for having negative attributes will be more narcissistic than those who do not actually reject on these traits or have never rejected sexual partners.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

MSM placing sexual advertisements online were asked to take a brief on-line survey. Specifically, we responded to each man's sexual advertisement with a block message informing him of a research study on the attitudes and behaviors of MSM. A link embedded in the email took them directly to the survey. Participants were not compensated for their time. A sample of 649 MSM completed the survey.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Narcissism

The 16-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16) was used to assess the degree to which individuals were narcissistic ( $\alpha = .76$ ; Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006). This inventory was comprised of forced choices between a non-narcissistic response and a narcissistic response. For example, individuals had to choose between the non-narcissistic statement (0), "I prefer to blend in with the crowd," or the narcissistic statement (1), "I like to be the center of attention." Participants' scores were averaged (0 = not at all narcissistic, 1 = extremely narcissistic).

#### 2.2.2. Self and partner body attributes

We asked the men to rate themselves, compared to most men, on a seven-point scale on the following body attributes: height, weight, body hairiness, muscularity, and erect penis size (1 = lowest, 7 = highest). For example, individuals who rated themselves as "1" on body hairiness were hairless, while individuals who rated themselves as "7" were extremely hairy.

Similarly, we asked the participants to rate the body attributes of their partners using the same seven-point scale on the same attributes: height, weight, body hairiness, muscularity, and erect penis.

#### 2.2.3. Partner rejection

We used a checklist to assess "the possible reasons for rejecting men." Participants could indicate with "yes" or "no" if each of the following criteria applied to why they had rejected same-sex partners: appeared too old, appeared too young, weighed more, weighed less, were taller, were shorter, were less muscular, were more attractive, and were less attractive. Participants could also select, "I have never rejected individuals no matter what they looked like or seemed."

**Table 1**  
Description of the sample.

	<i>n</i>	% of <i>N</i>	
<i>Location (in people)</i>			
<10K	58	8.9	
10K–50K	117	18.0	
51K–100K	108	16.6	
101–500K	133	20.5	
501–1000K	93	14.3	
1000K +	140	21.6	
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>			
White	553	85.2	
Black	26	4.0	
Latino	40	6.2	
Asian/pacific islander	13	2.0	
Middle eastern	2	0.3	
Other	15	2.3	
<i>Education</i>			
Some high school	12	1.8	
Finished high school	69	10.6	
Some undergraduate	217	33.4	
Finished undergraduate	184	28.4	
Some graduate	51	7.9	
Finished graduate	116	17.2	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Age	40.51	12.27	18–79
Narcissism inventory (NPI-16)	.35	.21	0–1
<i>Body attributes</i>			
Height	4.51	1.05	1–7
Weight	4.26	1.02	1–7
Hairiness	3.85	1.42	1–7
Muscularity	3.78	1.09	1–7
Erect penis size	4.51	.99	1–7
<i>Partner attributes</i>			
Height	4.44	.93	1–7
Weight	3.80	.67	1–6
Hairiness	3.67	1.48	1–7
Muscularity	4.35	.96	1–7
Erect penis size	4.87	.97	2–7

Note: *N* = 649. For the body and ideal partner attributes, lower scores meant less of the body attribute and higher scores meant more of the body attribute. Age was negatively related to narcissism ( $r = .18, p < .01$ ).

### 2.3. Statistical analyses

Unless stated otherwise, the data were analyzed using *t*-tests, multiple linear regression, or binary logistic regression analyses. The effect size ( $\beta$ ) reported in the proceeding results section represents the standardized regression coefficient and can be interpreted similarly to a correlation coefficient. We statistically controlled for age across all of the tests due to its negative relationship with narcissism (see Section 4, Table 1). Furthermore, when testing for associations between narcissism and each of the partner attributes, we controlled for each corresponding body attribute of the actual participant. For example, when testing narcissism predicting muscularity of partners, we controlled for the participant's self-reported muscularity. This ensured that any significant effects were not merely artifacts of participants' desiring partners similar to themselves. Similarity has been shown to affect partner preferences in same-sex relationships (e.g., Mackey, Diemer, & O'Brien, 2004); but the scope of this paper was to show how narcissism, not similarity, contributes to preferences.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Sample

As shown by Table 1, the sample was largely White and showed fairly normal distributions on both age and education. Many of the

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