

Physical health and aging well in older LGB+ adults: The role of discrimination, coming out and personal resiliency

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INTRODUCTION

Elderly members of sexual minority communities face a unique form of discrimination due to both their sexual orientation and advancing age. Recent research has delved into the distinctive challenges faced by older LGB+ individuals within the realm of sports and physical activity. It is widely acknowledged that engaging in physical activities and sports is essential for enhancing happiness, bolstering mental resilience in later years, and fostering overall psychological well-being as one ages. However, accessing these opportunities can prove difficult for marginalized groups like older LGB+ adults, given the prevalence of heteronormative and ageist attitudes in our society.

Several studies have pointed out that experiences of discrimination, social exclusion, and prejudice—often stemming from both societal norms and personal struggles such as concealing one's sexual orientation—can discourage regular exercise among older LGB+ adults. Consequently, this diminished engagement in physical activity can have adverse effects on their physical health.

Aim:

The present study explores:

- Differences regarding experiences of prejudice and discrimination, coming out, and personal resiliency between sexual minority men and sexual minority women;
- Differences regarding experiences of prejudice and discrimination, coming out, and personal resiliency between young old adults and old old adults
- How experiences of discrimination and prejudice, coming out, and personal resiliency could have an impact on the physical health of older lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adults.



METHODOLOGY

Participants	
N	82 Italian cisgender LGB+ adults
Age	young older adults (65-70 years; 78%) old-old adults (over 71 years; 22%)
Sexual minority groups	sexual minority women (37%) sexual minority men (63%)
Method	Questionnaire
Data Analysis	ANOVAs and hierarchical multiple regression analysis

Measures	
Coming out (CO)	Percentage of people who know participants' sexual orientation. From 1 (“0%”) to 5 (“100%”) (Rosati et al., 2020)
Physical Health	Physical Health Scale (D’Augelli et al., 2001)
Experience of prejudice and discrimination	The Daily Heterosexist Experiences Questionnaire (DHEQ; Balsam et al., 2013)
Resilience	Resilience Scale - Personal Competence (RSCS; Wagnild & Young, 1983)

RESULTS

Table 1. Differences by sexual minority groups

Measures	Women		Men		F(1,81)	p
	M	DS	M	DS		
CO	3.53	0.94	3.90	1.36	1.74	0.19
DHEQ	0.91	1.08	0.63	0.72	1.98	0.16
RSCS	5.57	1.44	5.50	1.14	0.06	0.81
Physical Health	2.86	0.89	3.21	0.62	4.53	0.04
SES	3.95	0.71	4.13	0.81	0.97	0.33

Table 2. Differences by age groups

Measures	65-70 years		Over 71 years		F(1,81)	p
	M	DS	M	DS		
CO	3.81	1.27	3.61	1.09	0.37	0.54
DHEQ	0.53	0.56	1.44	1.33	18.75	0.00
RSCS	5.71	0.96	4.85	1.84	7.20	0.01
Physical Health	3.14	0.69	2.87	0.92	1.93	0.17
SES	4.11	0.75	3.89	0.85	1.14	0.29

Table 3. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis

	B	SE B	β	R ²
Step 1				0.08
LGB+	0.44	0.23	0.12	
Age	-0.09	0.11	-0.09	
SES	0.12	0.11	0.12	
Step 2				0.48***
LGB+	0.30	0.18	0.15	
Age	0.08	0.09	0.08	
SES	0.05	0.09	0.05	
DHEQ	-0.29	0.12	-0.29*	
RSCS	0.25	0.11	0.25*	
CO	0.33	0.09	0.33** *	

DISCUSSION

Literature indicates that sexual minority women tend to exhibit lower levels of physical well-being compared to their male counterparts within the sexual minority community. This difference is likely attributed to the tendency of sexual minority men, particularly gay men, to prioritize their physical appearance and overall health as a means of maintaining a youthful and age-defying image.

Additionally, research findings suggest that older adults in the younger age reported higher levels of resilience and experience less discrimination compared to those in the older age group. Historical societal attitudes have been less accepting of sexual minority groups, compelling them to conceal their sexual orientation and internalize the stigma associated with it. Furthermore, the study results highlight that openly expressing one's sexual orientation, coupled with greater resilience and reduced experiences of discrimination, could determine better physical health among older LGB+ people.. Thus, creating an environment where individuals can openly embrace their identity without fear of discrimination proves pivotal for the well-being of aging sexual minority adults.

POLICY IMPLICATION

According to the literature, the ways to create a safer and more affirming society for older LGB+ adults could be different: Starting from promoting inclusive policies through the visibility of older LGB+ adults in society and physical activity-related contexts to reducing prejudice and discrimination against older LGB+ adults within the implementation of the cultural competencies of both professionals and institutions (Baiocco et al., 2021; Pezzella et al., 2023).