# INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA IN HOMOSEXUAL MEN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

## HOMOFOBIA INTERNALIZADA EN HOMBRES HOMOSEXUALES: UN ESTUDIO CUALITATIVO

**TITULO CORTO: INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA IN HOMOSEXUAL MEN**

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## ABSTRACT

There is little evidence about linguistic expressions used that show internalized homophobia by homosexual individuals. The objective of this research was to explore suggestive internalized homophobic language used by web page users for homosocialization purposes among homosexual men living in Bogotá and Cartagena, Colombia. A qualitative study was designed with the purpose of analyzing content of 40 profiles, 20 from Bogota, and in the same proportion in Cartagena. This was based on account profiles from a website which contained contact inquiries between people who were not heterosexual and described homophobic characteristics when referring to their ideal partner. It was observed that in 19 out of 20 profiles in Bogotá and the same proportion in Cartagena people used suggestive and direct qualifiers that showed internalized explicit homophobia and implicit language, for instance, "I am looking for serious people". The internalized homophobia is expressed by looking for that "macho" man who is professional and lives a heterosexual lifestyle. Authors conclude that homosexual men who requested contact with other men by Internet often expressed internalized homophobia in explicit and implicit ways, which suggests accepting hegemonic model of masculine men. Quantitative studies are needed in Colombian non-heterosexual populations.

**Keywords**: male homosexuality; homophobia; gender identity; masculinity; qualitative analysis

## RESUMEN

Se conoce poco sobre las expresiones lingüísticas usadas que sugieren homofobia internalizada. El objetivo de la presente investigación fue explorar frases sugestivas de homofobia internalizada en usuarios de una página virtual para homosocialización entre hombres homosexuales de Bogotá y Cartagena, Colombia. Se diseñó un

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estudio cualitativo en el que se realizó un análisis de contenido de 40 anuncios, 20 de Bogotá y 20 de Cartagena, en perfiles en una página de solicitud de contactos entre personas no heterosexuales. Se observó que 19 de los 20 anuncios en Bogotá e igual proporción en Cartagena usaron calificativos que denotaron homofobia internalizada, en mayor número de forma explícita ('me gustan los hombres varoniles'), y menos frecuente de manera implícita ('busco gente seria'). La homofobia internalizada se expresa en la búsqueda de un hombre "macho", profesional y con un estilo de vida heterosexual. Se concluye que los hombres homosexuales que solicitan de contactos con otros hombres por internet expresan habitualmente la homofobia internalizada en forma explícita, lo que sugiere la aceptación del modelo hegemónico de hombre masculino. Se necesitan estudios cuantitativos en poblaciones no heterosexuales colombianas.

**Palabras clave**: Homosexualidad masculina; homofobia; identidad de género; masculinidad; análisis cualitativo

## INTRODUCTION

The stigma occurs when an individual or collective attribute, characteristic, condition, trait or situation takes an unfavorable valuation[1]. The stereotype is a preconceived, positive or negative, idea of an attribute. The idea can be favorable or unfavorable and involves a simplification of the valuation of the person or group[2-5].

Prejudice occurs when the stereotype is demeaning, degrading, negative or pejorative connotation; it is a rapid evaluation or attitude toward the person as a whole because he or she displays the negative named trait, without considering other aspects. The idea appears almost automatically and it is resistant to change; however, all information denies repeatedly the belief[6, 7].

Discrimination is present when the collective or community validates hegemonic prejudice and give a low status to the person or persons, a category of second-class citizens, and ignore the rights of people carrying the stigmatized characteristic[8-10].

In simple words, homophobia is defined as a negative attitude toward homosexual individuals[11]. However, this unfavorable disposition is essentially a stereotype, a prejudice based on sexual orientation[12]. On the other hand, homophobia is not considered as a phobia by the American Psychiatric Association and the World Health Organization.

Instead, internalized homophobia is defined as a discomfort or dysphoria to face their own non-heterosexual sexual orientation. Likewise, internalized homophobia is known as internalized homonegativity, internalized heterosexism or autohomophobia[13]. Internalized homophobia implies self-stigma, the implicit and explicit acceptance of values, beliefs, regulations and social hegemonic prescriptions, predominant stereotype about their own non-exclusive heterosexual orientation[13]. People take as own stereotypes they heard in first years of socializations at home, school and in other contexts, which are reproduced by hegemonic stereotypes[14].

Internalized homophobia is found one third of persons who are not heterosexual[15]. In the United States, Herek, took a sample of 2,259 homosexual men, lesbians and bisexuals, assessed self-homophobia using the revised version of internalized homophobia scale and he observed some level of self-stigma. From the sample, people admitted at least one of the five items of the scale. This recurrent pattern was found in 11% of lesbian women, 22% bisexual women, 22.5% of homosexual men and 45.5% of bisexual men[16]. On the other hand, in South Africa, Vu *et al.* (2012) took a sample of 324 men who had sex with men (this denomination is preferred since the sexual behavior in these men could be discordant with their sexual orientation). Presence of internalized homophobia was assessed through a 9-item, Likert-type scale. Around 72.6% of the participants were homosexuals and 27.4% were bisexuals or heterosexual. A high level of internalized homophobia (OR = 5.5, 95%CI 2.5-12.0) was presented among recognized themselves as bisexuals or heterosexuals[17].

The notion of culture has been understood in a simple way as how groups of persons feel, think and behave. The individual way of interpreting reality relies on personality features. Within a culture persons build a prototype of sexual roles and behaviors, there are female and male

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sexual roles. For example, in the occidental hegemonic world, features as weak, pacific, and passive are taken as "feminine", whereas, strong, aggressive, and active are seen as "masculine". In Latin American culture is expected that men must be "macho", which is the ideal of masculinity[18].

Owing to the existent sexual prejudice, non-heterosexual people have searched for particular socialization spaces to avoid abuse and discrimination[19]. During more than two decades, the Internet has enabled homo socialization (without sexual or erotic objective) and this has helped the consolidation of non-heterosexual people's sexual attraction[20]. It is expected to observe no judgmental language in socialization spaces and in virtual sexual encounters of men who recognized themselves as homosexuals. Thus, according to heuristic observations, many homosexual men incorporated the concept of hegemonic masculinity and their current homophobia in the building of their masculine role. As a result, they display a disciplining and educating character about sexual roles. In addition, they expect their friends and sexual non-heterosexual couples to follow their version of the traditional masculinity as an indication of their own masculinity[21]. As always, the most explicit and implicit ways of stigmatization and discrimination are displayed through language. The power of exploitation control and exclusion of other of stigma is more effective when it is done with a subtle source and acknowledgment[22].

Nowadays, a number of instruments had been designed to assess internalized homophobia[23]. Available studies inform about the frequency of internalized homophobia building on their conclusion upon the measurements obtained through those instruments[16, 17]. In the present study, a content analysis of adjectives, nouns, and phrases, is done to explore internalized homophobia, because Internet reduces inhibition presented when using other methods of contact and facilitates conversations and sexual expressions. It is an important topic not only because internalized homophobia is inversely related to emotional well-being[15-17]; it is also associated with mental and physical health of men who have sex with men by using the Internet for meeting people for friendship or sexual contacts[20]. Internalized homophobia is related to mental health problems, such as anxiety and depressive disorders, including suicide behaviors[24-26].

The objective of this current research was to explore phrases, nouns, adjectives and other qualifiers suggesting internalized homophobia among virtual page homosexual users located in Bogotá and Cartagena, Colombia.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

A qualitative study was designed that did not require written informed consent given that everyone had access to public information which did not compromise the integrity of the participants and kept information provided confidential. These types of studies are classified as non-risky studies, according to Resolution 8490 de 1993 from Health Ministry of Colombia.

A content analysis was done based on a sample of homosexual men who are living in Bogotá and Cartagena. A Colombian website that offers socialization including erotica and non-erotic orientation. Authors decided to do the study with cities that are culturally diverse. As a result, there were eventually differences in internalized homophobia and heterosexism expressions. It is an alternative for an objective study, which allows doing a description and systematic quantification of target interest phenomena. This information was collected to give a general perspective in the hypothesis formulation and understanding of the situation[27].

An intentional sample of 20 profiles in each city was taken for convenience[28]. Each website profile was revised online in April 2014 until we had a pre-established sample. It included profiles from men who presented themselves as homosexuals and who provided a minimum description of the person who they would like to have an encounter or communication with. Information related to age, role in the sexual intercourse, city and advertisements was collected. Each advertisement was assigned with a number from 1 to 20 for Bogota; and 21 to 40, for people in Cartagena. Men who described themselves as bisexual, heterosexual and open minded were systematically excluded, because according to other studies internalized homophobia is common in these groups[16, 17].

Profiles were analyzed based on technical principles offered by ground theory. The codification implied conceptualization, data reduction, definition of categories according to properties and dimensions, and finally,

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categories were associated with emergent domains[29]. This analysis was completed using Atlas.ti program, 2006[30].

## RESULTS

It was observed that 19 of 20 advertisements in Bogotá and Cartagena used quantifiers in equal proportion which denoted a great number of internalized homophobia in an explicit way (I like masculine men) in a majority of times; It was said in pejorative ways (faggot or sissy) and less frequently in an implicit way (I am looking for serious people).

Three categories were identified, not mutually exclusionary which could denote internalized homophobia at the moment of describing their ideal partner.

*Macho man*

"I don't want effeminate guys… I prefer a serious guy".
"No guys who are effeminate and faggot… we are men and we don't have to loose our essence and that is the way we have to behave".
"No, if they have their hair done, brush their eyebrows and use face powder, wear color contact lenses".
"Only real men, I don't like faggot or sissy guys and not weird accents".
"I want virile men who you can walk on the street and doesn't show he is gay".
"I want to meet a serious man, no, effeminate guys I like 100 % active and masculine guys".
"I don't want guys with a feminine voice".
"I don't like people who are feminine, faggot or sissy... serious people... I am a man in search of another man".
"I am looking for a man with a masculine attitude... who doesn't display his gayness".
"I am looking for active guys".

Only in Cartagena it was found an additional qualifier that showed that physical traits are also important in the search of the ideal partner. For instance, one of the participants included in the description of his ideal man "no anorexic guys"; and one second, "I look for athletic men".

The description and characteristics of the ideal man corresponds to the traditional virility model, which lacks any trait usually attributed to women's condition, and all types of womanliness, effeminate manners, and finally, assumes a penetrating role during the sexual intercourse. There is a notable difference from the cultural context in the Colombian Caribbean area where machismo is more prominent and it is associated with obese and muscular body composition. These advertisements suggested that many homosexual men shared the idea of having an erotic identity (sexual orientation) homosexual; but rejected the discordant behavior according to biological birth sex (sex identity).

*Heterosexual life style*

"Whose life is not only the fact that he is gay or not".
"Zero people immersed in that gay world".
"I don't want guys who go to gay bars and who have 20 thousand gay friends".
"I am looking for serious people and discretion".

Additionally, in Cartagena one of the advertisements was expressed "no drugs". This expression can denote a stereotype of drug use or other substances that cause addiction in non-heterosexual people as an essential gay life style.

In this category, it was observed that participants who placed advertisements in the website knew the heterosexual perspective (straight) which considers the gay life style as it is known in Sociology, or the gay culture as it will be defined by an urban ethnographer which will see this culture as an incorrect way of living, dangerous and low status. In addition, it also talks about the gay culture as conditioning people's life aspects by bringing a pattern or life style completely undesirable. It is accepted to have an erotica homosexual identity but not a gay socio sexual identity.

*College professional*

"Professional friends".
"I would like to meet someone professional".

In more recent decades important changes were introduced in the labor market. Heavy work and working outside are not essential masculinity characteristics. However, past advertisements suggested that training, which included post-secondary education and occupational

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professionalization, are typical virility traits. This also implied that higher education camouflages sexual orientation and it is widely accepted the hegemonic norm in the workplace that has gender stereotypes for men and women depending on the type of work they do.

## DISCUSSION

The internalized homophobia in men takes implicit and explicit ways. The present study allows understanding several of these ways; being one the rejection of discordant gender characteristics according to the cultural context. The second way is related to resistance to what we know as gay life style. Lastly, it is the implication of choosing a professional career that is not directly associated as "typical" non-heterosexual occupation.

It could be seen that general masculinity inquires seen in advertisements are not only the acceptation of the hegemonic model. This also showed that people's who placed these advertisements could negate their own feminine traits if they are present[31]. "Feminine features" are always possible in whomever men without taking into account their sexual orientation. It is evident that many men with discordant gender behavior do not have fully acceptance of their own sexual traits, which are present from childhood to adolescence and persist as some level of gender dysphoria in adults[32].

Even when the sexual dimension of people is frequently taken as a monolithic construct; it is understood that there are four extensively correlative factors: sex identity, gender identity, erotic identity (sexual orientation) and sociosexual identity. It is frequent that global sexual dimension is maintained despite of the dissonances among its factors and observed behaviors[18]. Many men can sustain a pattern of satisfactory sexual relations with other men without considering themselves as homosexual and bisexuals[33]. In public health, the concept of men who have relations with men is used to separate sexual practices from their sexual orientation, gender identity and sociosexual identity[18, 33]. The descriptions in the advertisements suggested that homosexual men, as well as heterosexuals, could accept homosexual behaviors, but not the hegemonic traditional gender discordancy. It seems that it is uncomfortable for people to show "feminine traits" in a man[18].

This study findings showed that labor activities are not only classified by gender, stereotype occupations for men and women, as well as classification taking into account sexual orientation such as occupational activities for "straight" and "gay" people. It is expected that the industrialization breakthroughs, systematization and wealth accumulation, in the workforce gender and sexual orientation should lack of importance because this does not affect the essence of production and services provided[34]. Nevertheless, based on recent Colombian studies, which propose that the society reserves jobs in a context or framework that these occupations are acceptable or belongs to people, who are not heterosexuals[35, 36].

Likewise, these findings suggested that internalized homophobia expressions could take different forms and subtle ways such as micro-aggressions, similar to other prejudice ways observed[37]. The way to face these micro-aggressions is doing simultaneously with the hegemonic heterosexism, which can be the exaggeration of masculine stereotype characteristics like muscle men[38, 39]. In addition, other hegemonic characteristics are being active in the sexual relation role[40], for instance, having children without a sexual stable heterosexual couple or showing a traditional family so they can assume their heterosexuality[41]. Lastly, authors give a hypothesis that suggests that consolidation, or the most important expression of internalized homophobia. Similarly, there is a total rejection for gay sociosexual identity taking into account for the heterosexist opinion because their beliefs that all non-heterosexual aspects are banal, low value, depreciable, non-desirable and low status[42, 43]. As a result, this means that they have to maintain their non-heterosexual orientation hidden with negative implications for their life style and public health of the countries[39, 44].

It is well-known that non heterosexual people report worst mental health than heterosexuals[24, 25, 45]. Internalized homophobia is part of stress derived from sexual minority status related to chronic stigmatization, prejudice and discrimination[46-48]. So, researches are needed in this topic; non-heterosexual persons who report high internalized homophobia are in increased risk for emotional distress and mental disorders[49, 50].

In conclusion, homosexual men who solicited friendship or sexual intercourse with other men via Internet expressed openly their internalized homophobia in implicit and explicit ways, which suggested the acceptance of the hegemonic model of a "masculine man". There is a need to do quantitative studies that could determine the

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frequency of internalized homophobia and its relationship to mental health in non-heterosexuals Colombian populations.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflicts to declare related to the research.

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