

Distinctive Psychosocial Experiences of Gay Arab-Australian Men: A Qualitative Exploration

Bernard Saliba^{1,2}, Melissa Kang³, Mohamed Hammoud¹, Limin Mao⁴, Garrett. Prestage¹

¹UNSW, Kirby Institute, Sydney, Australia

²University of Technology Sydney, School of Public Health, Sydney, Australia

³University of Sydney, Faculty of Medicine and Health, Sydney, Australia

⁴UNSW, Centre for Social Research in Health, Sydney, Australia

Background

- Despite extensive public health research on improving the lives of gay, bisexual, and other populations of men who have sex with men (GBMSM) in Australia, ethnic minority sub-groups, including Arab-Australian GBMSM, have been largely neglected.
- Arabic is the second most commonly spoken non-English language in the country.
- Need to address potential health disparities, promote inclusive sexual health services, enhance mental health support, and inform policy and advocacy efforts.
- Study aim: To explore key distinctive psychosocial experiences for gay Arab-Australian men.

Methods

- Purposive and snowball sampling took place between January and March 2022. See picture below from the 2022 Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras Fair Day event.
- Following recruitment, one-on-one qualitative interviews were conducted virtually in Sydney, Australia between April and October 2022.
- Interviews were transcribed and coded in NVivo. Reflexive thematic analysis was adopted.
- The interview questions were categorised as:
 - Demographic Information;
 - Intersectional identities;
 - Arab/gay community connectedness; and
 - Access to health and support services.

Recruitment at 2022 Fair Day



Alt Text: Image shows person (lead study researcher) standing behind a stall set up in a park with colours, words, and images designed to attract gay Arab-Australian men to participate in his study.

Results

- Eleven (11) cis-gendered, self-identified gay men, aged 25–59 took part in this study.
- Majority resided in Western Sydney, an area with a high concentration of Arab communities.
- Majority had Christian upbringing (n=8) and were of Lebanese background (n=9).
- More than half (n=6) had completed a postgraduate education and were full-time employed at the time of the interview (n=6).

Following analysis, three distinctive psychosocial themes were identified:

Navigating Intersectionality

For participants in this study, family obligations, cultural expectations, and religious upbringings were the main sources of tension surrounding the reconciliation of their ethnic backgrounds with their sexual identities:

It's just always the disconnect between what you think you should be and who you are. And it's just in your face all the time. Like, oh, this is what a typical Arab is, what a typical Lebanese boy is, and I was definitely not that. (Anthony, 34)

I don't know care so much about how people react [to my sexuality], the main thing is just protecting my parents from it all (the shame and stigma). That's my main concern. (Charbel, 37)

I think I see myself a part the [Arab-Australian] community purely because of my upbringing. Otherwise, if I look at the other part of life... my sexuality, I find that hard to integrate with the Arab community. (Mansoor, 33)

Coming out: A Crisis of Identity

Family and community attitudes towards homosexuality, as influenced by a system of social surveillance and tight-knit nature of Arab-Australian communities, were the main determinant of the decision to *come out* for the majority of participants in this study. This led many to adopt alternate strategies to self acceptance, and paths to community connectedness, as a means for survival within homophobic and stigmatising contexts:

Sometimes I'm reluctant to [be seen out at queer events] and things like that just [because] of the stigma that the Arab community will impose on my family... I think that's the biggest obstacle... In case people find out (Charbel, 37)

[I was scared to tell my parents] because they [had been] very vocal about [their negative views of] homosexuality in general. (Francis, 29)

I was like "I'm gay" and then mum started crying, and dad, blank-faced, was like: "well, I should take you down to the park with me and my mates, and...we'll bash the pooof out of you". He said "you're going against God, you're going against the family... If your grandmother finds out she will die". (Nadeem, 25)

Difficulty Finding Safe Networks

Despite experiences of marginalisation, exoticisation, and discrimination from within the wider Australian and gay communities, participants in this study expressed feelings of hope for their future as gay Arab-Australian men, specifically in finding each other.

Even though there's a long way to go, I love the shift that's happening. It's almost like an accepting community, in a way, and I find there's a lot more gay Arabs and so I find myself feeling more comfortable in the gay community now. (Mansoor, 33)

Arabs are fetishised among gay men, and I really get angry by that one. Because you kind of see me as an object, and not as a person (Anthony, 34)

The hard thing is finding like-minded people or role models in the gay community who have been able to reconcile their ethnic background. I feel a bit lonely out here when I see the Mardi Gras parade and I think: oh where are all the Habibs? you know and where's all the culture and with the Kaffeya and where's the scarves and where's the food and where are all the signifiers? I want to see it (Mina, 31)

*Participant names have been pseudonymised for confidentiality and anonymity purposes, ensuring the privacy and protection of their identities throughout the study.

Conclusions

Findings suggest an urgent need for intersectional understandings of populations with diverse cultural, religious, and gender and sexuality profiles in Australia. Recognition of this intertwined diversity in the context of gay Arab-Australian men's self-identification, disclosure, and community connectedness is important in enabling more culturally appropriate, equitable, and inclusive health promotion initiatives and support interventions. Providing equitable access to health for all GBMSM populations is key to improving the overall risk of health disparities, including HIV and other STIs, and mental health support for all members of this group.