Sex Differences in the Romantic Relationships of Same-Gender Couples: The Role of Visibility Management

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Abstract

Although internalized homonegativity (IH) in lesbian, gay, or bisexual people (LGBs) predicts adverse relationship satisfaction, this association has typically only been examined on an individual level. Moreover, studies often ignore potential mechanisms that underlie sex differences. One of these mechanisms is related to visibility management (i.e., the careful, planned decisions about whether or not to disclose one's sexual orientation). Therefore, in this study we investigate dyadic sex-specific associations between IH, visibility management, and relationship satisfaction. Our sample includes 254 LGB couples (139 female and 115 male same-gender dyads) in Flanders, Belgium. Data were analyzed with the Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model (APIMeM). Results indicated that there were small to medium significant correlations among IH, visibility management, and relationship satisfaction. We also found support for mediated actor effects: individuals low in IH maintain less restrictive visibility management strategies. These in turn lead to higher relationship satisfaction, but only in female same-gender couples. Our findings contribute to the understanding of mechanisms that underlie the harmful effects of sexual minority stressors for same-gender relationship satisfaction.

Keywords

Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model; Internalized Homonegativity; Visibility Management; Same-Gender Relationship Satisfaction.

Introduction

In recent decades, the acceptance and public attitudes toward sexual minority couples (i.e., those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; LGBs) have significantly improved in the Western world (Brewer, 2003; Dewaele, Van Houtte, Cox, & Vincke, 2013). However, these relationships often remain devalued and contested. LGBs do not only suffer from general life stressors that are experienced by all couples; they are also confronted with unique minority stressors because of being members of a stigmatized group. This can be detrimental for their romantic relationships in terms of relationship satisfaction, quality, and functioning (Li, Cao, Zhou, & Mills-Koonce, 2019; Gonçalves, Costa, & Leal, 2019; Totenhagen, Randall, & Lloyd, 2018).

Several limitations in the existing research are worth noting. Firstly, studies are rare that shed light on how internalized homonegativity (IH), a specific and often-studied minority stressor, might influence romantic relationship characteristics (e.g., relationship satisfaction). Secondly, research has almost exclusively focused on individuals in a romantic relationship instead of taking on a dyadic perspective. The vast majority of existing studies on the association between IH and relationship outcomes only focus on the individuals involved in same-gender couples rather than the couple as a whole (Li et al., 2019). Finally, sex differences have rarely been considered, despite existing evidence that these might play a role in same-gender relationship dynamics (Thies, Starks, Denmark, & Rosenthal, et al., 2016).

In this study, we extend prior research by employing an actor-partner mediator model and investigate the association between IH with relationship satisfaction. Specifically, we test whether visibility management strategies mediated this association and whether there are different effects among female and male same-gender couples.

Minority stress and its impact on romantic relationships among LGBs

Research conducted across numerous countries found that when LGBs experience minority stress, this might negatively impact their romantic relationships (Cao, Zhou, Fine, & Liang, et al., 2017; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Pepping, Cronin, Halford, & Lyons, 2019). Among various stressors, IH has often been studied as a potential threat to LGBs' well-being (see e.g. Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2010). It is conceptualized as the internalization by LGBs of negative attitudes and assumptions about sexual minorities in society. Meyer and Dean (1998) referred to it as 'the gay person's direction of negative social attitudes toward the self, leading to a devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self-regard' (p. 161). IH has been reported to have a direct impact on relationship length for gay men (Ross & Rosser, 1996), and affects relationship problems and relationship strain among LGBs (Frost & Meyer, 2009).

In the case of same-gender couples, the impact of IH on LGB couples has received some attention in the literature. For example, large studies have found that high levels of internalized homonegativity are associated with less satisfaction in romantic relationships (Pepping at al., 2019; Sommantico, De Rosa, & Parrello, 2018; Thies et al., 2016). However, the mechanism underlying the association between IH and relationship satisfaction has rarely been explored (Li et al., 2019; Pepping et al., 2019). A qualitative study has shown that in response to internalized homonegativity, couples use certain coping strategies such as the concealment of their intimate relationship, a form of visibility management, to avoid rejection (Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, & Hatton, 2007). These strategies might thus explain why or whether IH directly or indirectly affects relationship satisfaction.

Visibility management strategies as a mediating role

According to Mohr and Daly (2008), concealment of one's sexual orientation might negatively influence relationship quality through its effects on social support (i.e., intimate relationships that stay hidden cannot receive support from their social environment) and on psychological functioning. Of course, hiding one's intimate relationship is only one of the many behavioral options to cope with minority-specific stressors. Early literature (see Goffman, 1963) identified managing one's identity (i.e., impression management) as a coping strategy, to deal with potential discrimination on the one hand and to avoid self-denial (i.e., to be 'true' to oneself) on the other. In this study, we will therefore specifically focus on visibility management strategies as a way for LGBs to manage experienced or anticipated minority stressors.

Visibility management strategies refer to an ongoing process by which LGBs make careful, planned decisions about whether they will disclose their sexual orientation or romantic relationship and by which they continue to monitor the presentation of their sexual orientation in different environments (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003). Its goal is to regulate disclosure to maintain privacy as

well as minimize stigma, harm, or marginalization (Dewaele et al., 2013; Lasser, Ryser, & Price, 2010). In a qualitative study, support was found for a theoretical model that describes the association between distal minority stress processes (experiencing the social environment as LGB-friendly or homonegative), maintaining less or more restrictive visibility management strategies, and proximal minority stress processes (Dewaele et al., 2013). A study making use of a relatively large sample (n=2378) of LGBs also found that visibility management mediated the link between experiences of internalized homonegativity and mental distress. These studies thus support the notion that visibility management acts as a coping strategy for LGBs to manage stigma and to regulate experienced levels of stress.

The role of visibility management strategies with regard to intimate relationships is illustrated by research from Mohr and Daly (2008). They argue that not being open about one's sexual orientation (i.e., more restrictive visibility management strategies) might negatively influence intimate relationship quality through its effects on social support. Furthermore, research on same-gender couples has offered evidence for a negative association between concealment on the one hand and relationship satisfaction on the other hand (Jordan & Deluty, 2000; Pepping et al., 2019; Uysal, Lin, Knee, & Bush, 2012). However, although these studies used some measure of concealment, they did not measure visibility management as a dynamic, ongoing process that includes verbal disclosure or concealment of a person's sexual orientation as well as a variety of strategies and modes of communication (D'haese, Dewaele, & Houtte, 2016). Therefore, it remains unknown if and how visibility management strategies relate to characteristics of intimate relationships.

Sex differences in same-gender romantic relationships from a dyadic perspective

Sex also warrants consideration when examining minority stress and relationship outcomes (Guschlbauer, Smith, DeStefano, & Soltis, 2019). There is a lack of research examining sex differences in romantic relationships specifically. A systematic review of heterosexual couples (Jackson et al., 2014) showed that women report slightly lower relationship satisfaction than men. There is limited literature on sex differences in romantic relationships among LGBs. One study focuses mainly on individual-level minority stress and relationship satisfaction (Rostosky & Riggle, 2017) but does not compare men with women. There is some evidence that women and men experience different levels of minority stressors, with GB men reporting higher levels of IH than LB women (Van Beusekom, Bos, Kuyper, Overbeek, et al., 2018), and lesbian women reporting higher levels of relationship satisfaction than gay men (Guzmán-González, Barrientos, Gómez, Meyer, et al., 2019). Additionally, identity concealment was linked with poorer individual outcomes among lesbians only (Bariola, Lyons, & Leonard, 2016). Furthermore, jealousy alerts individuals to threats to valued relationships but has also been shown to represent a potential risk to relationship satisfaction that differs for gay and bisexual men when compared to lesbian and bisexual woman. (Edlund & Sagarin 2017; Kuhle et al., 2009; Scherer et al., 2013). These results also raise questions about the potential effect of IH on relationship satisfaction for female and male same-gender couples separately.

Furthermore, given extensive evidence for stress crossover from one partner to another, studies that investigate relationship satisfaction should include both partners (for review, see Randall, & Bodenmann, 2017). Dyadic research on heterosexual couples has modelled stress and relationship satisfaction via Actor-Partner Interdependence Models (APIM, e.g. Breitenstein, Milek, Nussbeck, Davila et al., 2018; Randall, & Bodenmann, 2017; Williamson, Karney, & Bradbury, 2013). Nevertheless, the vast majority of existing studies on the associations between minority-related stress and same-gender romantic relationship outcomes have collected data from only one partner in a couple and analysed data from an individual rather than a dyadic perspective (Li et al., 2019). And even when both partners' data are available, researchers still face the challenge of distinguishing one partner from the other simply based on their sex (i.e., the interchangeable nature of same-gender dyads; Li et al., 2019; Sadler, Ethier, & Woody, 2011). Efforts appropriately addressing this issue with more rigorous approaches are pressing (Ledermann, Macho, & Kenny, 2011). To conclude, the purpose of the present study is to test the following hypotheses:

H1: IH will be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction in individuals.

H2: Visibility management will mediate the negative association between IH and relationship satisfaction.

For both hypotheses we expect to find actor as well as partner effects. Finally, we will investigate whether the associations between IH, visibility management, and relationship satisfaction differ between male and female in same-gender romantic relationships.

2 Methods

2.1 Data collection, Participants

Data for this study were derived from a larger project and were collected through an online survey between 2017 and 2018, in order to examine the impact of minority stress on the intimate relationships of LGBs (see Symons, Dewaele, Van Houtte, & Buysse, 2019). The survey was administered in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking community in Belgium) following a protocol that was approved by the ethical board of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (Ghent University). Diverse recruitment strategies were used, including advertisements in the written press, through LGB-specific and non-LGB-specific events and associations, and through social media (mainly Facebook).

Participants were asked how they would label themselves in terms of sexual identity: 'more heterosexual than homosexual', 'bisexual', 'more homosexual than heterosexual', 'homosexual', or 'something else'. Participants who indicated that they identify as 'more heterosexual than homosexual' or who indicated 'something else' were asked whether they are able to complete questions that concern LGBs. Individuals in a romantic relationship with a duration of more than three months were selected for this study. Via a unique couple identifier code, respondents could be matched with their partner. We included all couples that have two biological males or two biological females in a relationship that has lasted for at least three months. Within this group, we explored the gender identity of the individuals involved: 70.2 % of all participants identified as cisgender (i.e.,

someone whose gender identity matches their biological sex at birth, *n*=348), 2.8 % as transgender (i.e., someone whose gender identity differs from their sex as registered at birth, *n*=14), 1.4% as gender neutral (i.e., someone who identifies as not distinguishing according to gender, *n*=7), 0.8% as bigender (i.e., someone who identifies as both male and female, *n*=4), and 24.8% as agender (i.e., someone who identifies as not belonging to any gender, *n*=123). 46.4 % of the couples involved at least one partner who did not identify as cisgender.

The final sample included 254 same-gender couples (508 individual LGBs) with 139 female and 115 male same-gender dyads. The age of the female participants ranged from 19 to 66 years with an average of 34.53 years (*SD*=11.04). The age of the male participants ranged from 20 to 69 years with an average of 31.66 years (*SD*=10.71). The median of relationship duration was 48 months (interquartile range=24–120 months).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1 Internalized Homonegativity Inventory

IH was measured by a subscale of the Internalized Homonegativity Inventory as developed by Mayfield (2001). This subscale consists of nine items that measure the extent to which LGB respondents have developed negative attitudes towards homosexuality (e.g. 'I feel ashamed of my homosexuality' and 'When people around me talk about homosexuality, I get nervous'). Respondents rated each item on a five-point scale (score 1 = *completely agree*, score 5 = *completely disagree*). The scores of negatively phrased items were reversed so that a higher score refers to more internalized homonegativity. Previous studies have demonstrated that scores on this scale among Dutch participants have adequate internal consistency with Cronbach's Alpha of 0.76 and 0.77 respectively (Cox et al., 2010; Dewaele et al., 2014). In the current sample, internal consistency was 0.75. Additionally, results obtained from the CFA demonstrated that the model fit is acceptable (χ^2/df= 3.17, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.90, and RMSEA = 0.07).

2.2.2 Visibility Management Scale

The Visibility Management Scale developed by Lasser et al. (2010) was adapted to measure how participants manage the visibility of their romantic relationship. Participants who were in a relationship were presented items that measure openness about being in a same-gender relationship such as 'I want my acquaintances to know that I have a relationship' and 'I am afraid others will reject me if they discover that I have a relationship'. Fifteen items were rated on a six-point scale (score 1 = *completely disagree*, score 6 = *completely agree*). The scores on negatively phrased items were reversed so that a higher score refers to more openness. Internal consistency was judged to be good in previous studies, with Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.75 to 0.92 (Dewaele et al., 2014; D' haese et al., 2016; Lasser et al., 2005). In the current study Cronbach's Alpha was 0.85. The results of the CFA indicated that the model fit was acceptable (χ^2/df= 1.79, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.96, and RMSEA = 0.04).

2.2.3 Brief Dyadic Adjustment Scale

The Brief Dyadic Adjustment Scale developed by Sabourin, Valois and Lussier (2005) was

applied to measure relationship satisfaction. This scale consists of four items, and the first three items in the questionnaire employ a six-point Likert-type response format with responses ranging from 1 (*always*) to 6 (*never*) to evaluate individuals' perceptions regarding the quality of life shared with their partners (e.g., 'How often do you discuss, or have you considered separating, or ending your relationship?'). The fourth item measures the individuals' subjective experience of happiness in his or her romantic relationship. It employs a seven-point Likert-type response format with responses ranging from 1 (*extremely unhappy*) to 7 (*perfectly happy*). Previous studies have demonstrated that scores on this scale have an internal consistency reliability of 0.70–0.96 (i.e., the values of Cronbach's Alpha) in the general population (Sabourin et al., 2005) and 0.65–0.84 among LGBs (Caska-Wallace et al., 2016; Péloquin & Lafontaine, 2010; Gonçalves et al., 2019). Cronbach's Alpha was 0.71 in the present sample. The results of the CFA indicated that the model was an acceptable fit (χ^2/df= 3.43, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.91, and RMSEA = 0.09).

2.3 Statistical Analysis

We used IBM SPSS Statistics version 22.0 (SPSS 22.0; see e.g., IBM, 2012) to perform preliminary data analysis. Missing data patterns were examined among all key study variables. In order to evaluate patterns of missingness, we computed the Little and Rubin (2002) missing completely at random (MCAR) test; results suggest the data are missing completely at random, $\chi^2 = 30.70$; $df = 28$, $p = 0.33$. Therefore, multiple imputation was used to handle missing data (Baraldi & Enders, 2010). Outliers were investigated using the z test in which all raw scores were transferred into z scores, where scores falling outside the convention of −3.29 and +3.29 were regarded as outliers (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Hence, eight outliers were discovered in the data, which were replaced with the nearest non-extreme values in these variables (Barnett & Lewis, 1994). Residual and scatter plots and analysis of skewness and kurtosis values for all variables indicated assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were satisfied.

Furthermore, common method variance may influence some hypothesized relationships between constructs in the research model. Using Harman's single-factor test, we tested our data for common method bias (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). The first factor, which was extracted using principal axis factoring without rotation, accounts for only 25.42% (less than 40%) of the overall variance. Therefore, common method bias did not affect this analysis. In addition, variance inflation factors (VIF) were calculated to check for multicollinearity. VIF value was 1.405, lower than the upper limit of 10.0 (Neter et al., 1989). Therefore, multicollinearity issues did not affect this analysis.

Mplus version 7.4 (Mplus 7.4; Muthén and Muthén, 2015) was used to perform the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). We evaluated the model using model fit indices including the relative/normed chi-square ($\chi 2/df$), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker Lewis index (TLI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and good model fit is indicated with a $\chi 2/df$ of less than 0.10, RMSEA of less than 0.10, and both CFI and TLI above 0.90 (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Steiger, 1990). Finally, a dyadic mediation model (i.e., APIMeM) was analyzed. Two partners in a same-gender couple should be regarded as "interchangeable" with one another, as their sex does not

vary within a couple. The APIMeM for interchangeable dyads is specifically designed with partner A and partner B designations as totally arbitrary and thus suitable for an interchangeable twin dyads model by forcing equality constraints on all parameters—means, variance, intercepts, and paths (the same actor effect and the same partner effect)—that are indistinguishable (Kenny et al., 2006; Olsen & Kenny, 2006; Sadler et al., 2011). Indirect effects were additionally estimated by bootstrap analyses as recommended by Hayes (2013). If the 95% confidence interval includes 0 then the indirect effect is not significant at the .05 level; if 0 is not in the interval then the indirect effect is statistically significant at the .05 level (Hayes, 2013). In addition, multigroup analyses were used to test whether the pathways (i.e., path coefficients) in our models were equal for the two samples (Kline, 2005). Before testing the differences of the multigroup model, the goodness of fit of the models was tested for the samples separately.

3 Results

3.1 Preliminary analyses

Consistent with previous study, we first explored the dyadic data for nonindependence using intraclass correlations (ICC) to investigate whether there are associations between both partners' reports of the same variable (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). In our case, we checked a specific measure that can be applied to data from indistinguishable dyads (Alferes & Kenny, 2009). In dyadic data analysis, the ICC may assume any value between –1.0 and 1.0. An ICC of 1.0 suggests that members of the dyad had identical responses: any variability is completely attributed to dyad membership (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006).

The ICC indicated that same-gender couple members were similar to one another. Thus we moved forward with our dyadic data analyses. Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the main study variables are reported in Table 1. The scores of participants for IH ranged from 9 to 45 (M = 18.20, SD = 5.08)，visibility management ranged from 15 to 90 (M = 68.90, SD = 10.49), relationship satisfaction ranged from 4 to 25 (M = 21.26, SD = 2.28). There were small to medium significant correlations among all variables.

Table 1 Descriptive and correlations (N=508)

	M	SD	1	2	3	ICC
Females (n=278)						
1 Internalized Homonegativity	18.858	5.114	1			.396
2 Visibility Management	68.078	10.837	-.539**	1		.543
3 Relationship Satisfaction	21.373	2.539	-.167**	.192**	1	.825
Males (n=230)						
1 Internalized Homonegativity	17.342	4.970	1			.295

2 Visibility Management	69.825	10.115	-.567**	1		.514
3 Relationship Satisfaction	21.154	1.941	-.215**	.211**	1	.594

Note. * p <0.05，** p <0.01

3.2 APIMeM Analyses

Direct Paths

The APIMeM was separately tested in the female subsample and male subsample. The baseline model provided acceptable joint model-data fit indices for both groups, indicating that one common model is plausible across genders (female subsample: $\chi 2/df$ = 1.11, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, and RMSEA = 0.03; male subsample: $\chi 2/df$ = 1.63, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.94, and RMSEA = 0.07). Standardized coefficients for path analyses are displayed in Figure 1 and 2.

For female same-gender couples, higher scores on IH were associated with more restrictive visibility management strategies (β = -0.53, p < 0.01). Less restrictive visibility management strategies were associated with higher relationship satisfaction (β = 0.14, p < 0.05). Other actor effects are not significant. Additionally, none of the direct partner effects were significant (Figure 1). For male same-gender couples, higher scores on IH were associated with more restrictive visibility management strategies (β = -0.55, p < 0.01). Other actor effects were not significant. None of the direct partner effects were significant (Figure 2).

We also used multigroup models to test whether the path coefficients differ between women and men. We compared the first model (allowing the paths to vary across sex) with the second model (constraining the structural paths across gender to be equal) to examine the sex differences. The results showed non-significant chi-square differences between two models, $\Delta\chi 2$ (6) = 2.84, p > 0.05. Inspection of each path coefficient further confirmed that there were no differences in direct effects.

Mediating Paths

By testing the indirect effects of the model, we found a significant actor effect between IH and relationship satisfaction via visibility management among female same-gender couples (β = -.076, *95%CI* =[-.154, -.003], see Table 2 for details), yet no other partner effects. Additionally, for male same-gender couples, none of the indirect actor or partner effects of IH on relationship satisfaction via visibility management were significant.

Table 2 APIMeM results among female same-gender couples for the indirect results

Indirect effect	Female same-gender couples		Male same-gender couples	
	β	95% CI	β	95% CI
IHa → VMa → RSa	**-.076****	**[-.154, -.003]**	-.065	[-.150, .024]

IHa → VMp → RSa	-.001	[-.014, .008]	-.005	[-.030, .010]
IHa → VMa → RSp	-.004	[-.081, .070]	-.027	[-.109, .070]
IHa → VMp → RSp	-.048	[-.032, .009]	-.012	[-.040, .002]

Note: IH=Internalized Homonegativity. VM=visibility management. RS=Relationship Satisfaction. a=actor. p=partner. $^{*}p$ <0.05，$^{**}p$ <0.01.

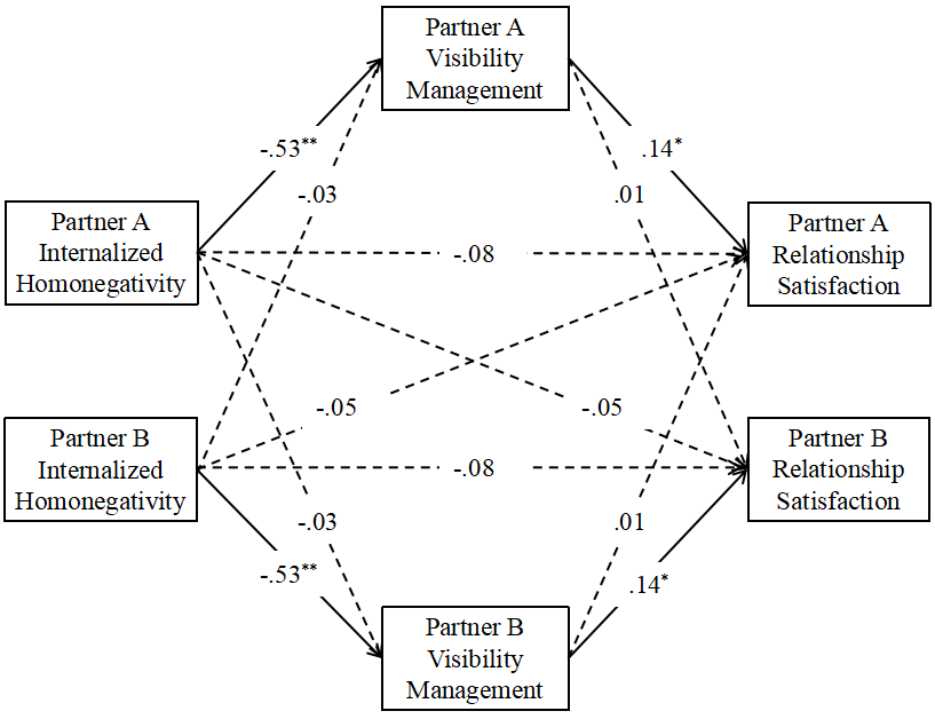

Fig.1. Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model for female same-gender couples. Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$.

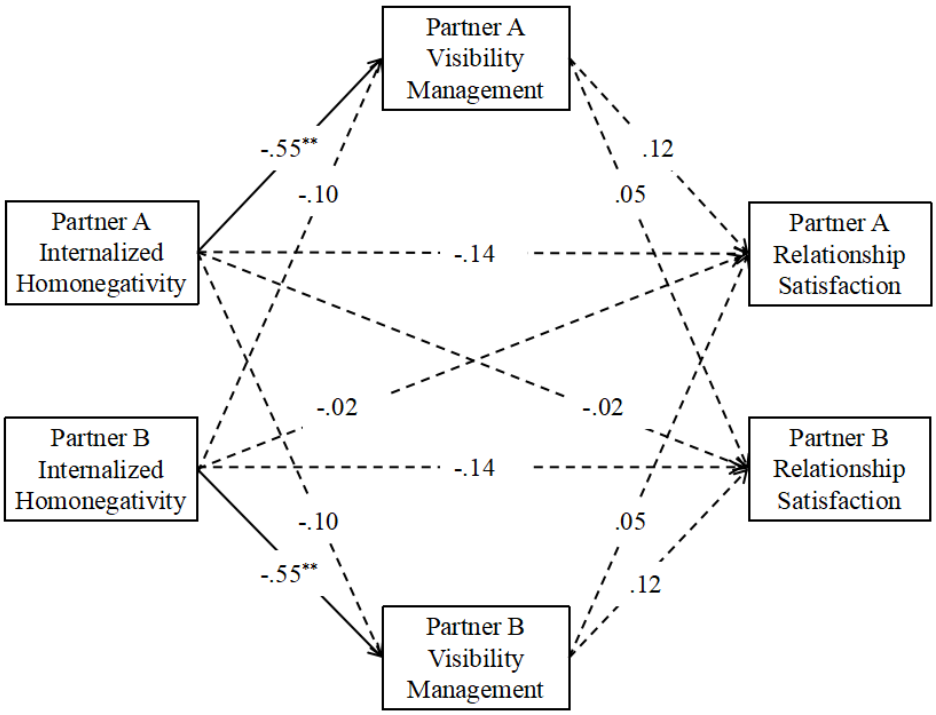

Fig.2. Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model for male same-gender couples. Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the association between IH and relationship satisfaction within same-gender couples, to explore the role of visibility management as a mediator, and to explore potential sex differences in these associations. The present study complemented and extended prior research in important ways. Firstly, it is guided by a process perspective and utilizes a more rigorous statistical strategy (i.e., the APIMeM with interchangeable dyads) to understand the mechanisms that underlie relationship satisfaction in same-gender couples. Secondly, we tested sex differences among these associations, since previous studies showed differences between GB men and LB women in their experience of IH and relationship satisfaction (Guzmán-González et al., 2019; Van et al., 2018). Our findings contribute to the understanding of the mechanisms related to the impact of IH as a proximal sexual minority stressor. It also offers unique insights that might help to develop interventions targeted at assisting same-gender couples with visibility management strategies as a coping strategy.

The association between IH and relationship satisfaction

The lack of direct associations between IH and relationship satisfaction among female and male LGBs in the mediation model is inconsistent with some earlier findings (Pepping et al., 2019; Thies et al., 2016). This may, in part, reflect increased societal acceptance of LGB relationships. In Belgium, civil marriage has been legal for same-gender couples since 2003, and in 2006 it became possible for same-gender couples to adopt children (D'haese et al., 2016). This reflects a trend in decreasing societal sexual stigma in recent years. This shift in public opinion and the changing social landscape of sexual prejudice also highlights the need for ongoing research within this area to better

understand how current and ever-changing dynamics affect both individual and relationship satisfaction among LGB individuals. The lack of direct associations between IH and relationship satisfaction may also reflect the partnered status of individuals in this sample. Some research with same-gender couples has found that, in comparison to single individuals, individuals who are married or in committed relationships report lower levels of mental health problems, as well as increased well-being and relationship satisfaction and decreased internalized homonegativity (Parsons, Starks, DuBois, Grov et al., 2013; Riggle et al., 2010). Being in a committed relationship potentially serves as a protective factor for LGB individuals with regard to the experience of stigma. Therefore, findings based on the current sample may not be reflective of the larger LGB population, particularly for those who are not in committed relationships. It should also be noted that there was a significant association between IH and relationship satisfaction but that it disappeared when controlled for visibility management. Previous research showed that visibility management mediates the association between minority stressors and mental distress (Dewaele et al., 2014). This study highlights that visibility management might also play a significant role in the association between minority stressors and relationship satisfaction.

The role of visibility management strategies and sex

The present study confirms that individuals' visibility management strategies mediated the associations between self-reported IH and relationship satisfaction among female same-gender couples. In male same-gender couples, only IH and visibility management were associated. Previous studies found that LGBs who experienced more minority stress maintained more restrictive visibility management strategies (Dewaele, Van Houtte, & Vincke, 2014). Our study shows that this also applies to managing visibility of the romantic relationship. Also, since lower IH scores were associated with more less restrictive visibility management strategies, this might be explained by the fact that these individuals have more access to gay-affirmative values and thus feel psychologically more comfortable with same-gender sexual intimacy (Riggle, Rostosky, Black, & Rosenkrantz, 2017).

We only found a relatively small significant association between visibility management and relationship satisfaction among female participants. This could be due to women's self-representations being more dependent on social relationships with significant others, and their self-esteem, self-enhancement, and well-being depending more than those of men on thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that express a connectedness to others (Cross & Madson, 1997). In other words, less restrictive visibility management strategies among lesbian women could contribute to the creation of a helpful and supportive network and therefore lead to more satisfaction in romantic relationships. However, given the fact that the association is rather small and that there are no significant sex differences in all direct paths, we should refrain from overinterpreting this result. Given the relatively small same-gender male and females couples sample in our study, we cannot rule out the possibility that sampling error may have affected the pattern of results observed in this study.

Conclusion, limitations and future outlook

Unlike previous studies aimed at demonstrating a partner effect of stress on relationship

satisfaction (Randall, & Bodenmann, 2017), this was not the case in our study. A plausible reason is that the levels of experienced IH by LGBs in our sample was rather moderate and therefore does not lead to psychological shock and behavioral change. Since Belgium is ranked in the top five of most LGB friendly countries in Europe (Roelandt, Dewaele, Buysse, & Van Houtte, 2016), minority stress might not explain relationship outcomes in same-gender couples well. Also, visibility management is not the only mechanism to explain the association between IH and relationship satisfaction. Other mediator variables, such as family support and confidant support, could also explain the aforementioned association. Furthermore, since relationship satisfaction changes over a longer period of time (Berscheid & Lopes, 1997), a longitudinal study is required.

In conclusion, the results of this study show that lower levels of IH are associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction through less restrictive visibility management strategies for female same-gender couples. Results of the present study call for interventions to increase acceptance of sexual diversity on a social level or reduce the level of IH among LGBs. Psychologists can use their professional resources to negotiate visibility management strategies with LGB clients that are in a romantic relationship to improve relationship satisfaction. In addition, although gender might play an important role in relationship dynamics (Jackson et al., 2014; Van et al., 2018), our study showed the evidence that the variation between male and female couples in terms of associations between IH, visibility management, and relationship satisfaction, is rather limited.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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