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# **“That’s so Gay”: Heterosexual Male Undergraduates and the Perpetuation of Sexual Orientation Microaggressions on Campus**

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## **ABSTRACT**

“That’s so gay,” a popular expression on campuses, is a sexual orientation microaggression that can contribute to a hostile environment for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students. Using data from a campus climate survey conducted at a large urban university, we investigated use of the phrase among heterosexual male undergraduates who are emerging adults (18–25 years). Multiple regression analysis suggested that saying the phrase is positively associated with hearing peers say it and with holding negative perceptions of feminine men, whereas having LGB acquaintances was negatively associated with use of this expression. We offer practice and policy recommendations for curbing its use, thereby enhancing campus climate.

Language is a “pernicious and powerful tool” (Parker, 2001, p. 78) that can be wielded quite effectively to purposefully harm, belittle, and marginalize others (Chonody, Rutledge, & Smith, in press; Sue, 2010; Winans, 2006). Language is also powerful when not intentionally used in such ways (Pelligrini, 1992). Anti-gay language, one of many mechanisms through which heterosexism is enacted, communicates hostility toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people and contributes to creating an unwelcoming and unsafe environment for them (Burn, 2000).

The expression “that’s so gay” is commonly used by young people to convey something is stupid, weird, or undesirable (Burn, Kadlec, & Rexer, 2005; *Talk of the Nation [TON]*, 2009; Winans, 2006). It can also be used as an intentional slight against an LGB person, someone perceived to be LGB, or even a heterosexual peer (Burn, 2000; Winans, 2006). The phrase is an example of heterosexist language (Ramlow, 2003), a mechanism by which sexual orientation microaggressions—everyday derogatory slights directed toward marginalized populations—are perpetuated (Nadal, Rivera, & Corpus, 2010; Sue, 2010). Inherent in this saying is the assumption that being gay is inferior and that being heterosexual “is desirable, advantageous, and normal” (Nadal et al., 2010, p. 221). “That’s so gay” has become so ubiquitous it has been described as “low-level, tolerated background noise” across educational settings, including college (*TON*, 2009, para. 69).

Researchers have examined LGB college students’ experiences with heterosexism (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010); however, little attention has been given to subtle heterosexism, such as gay jokes and homophobic slurs (Burn, 2000; Burn et al., 2005; Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2008; Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012). These types of heterosexist behaviors communicate animosity toward LGB people and can negatively affect LGB students (Burn et al., 2005; Silverschanz et al., 2008; Woodford et al., 2012); therefore, it is critical to prevent and address subtle heterosexism to foster an inclusive environment for LGB students’ learning and development.

Although incidence rates of various heterosexist behaviors, including subtle ones, have been documented (Brown et al., 2004; Franklin, 2000; Jewell & Morrison, 2010; Rankin et al., 2010; Silverschanz et al., 2008; Woodford et al., 2012), the factors that contribute to these behaviors have been understudied. We located only one study that specifically investigated heterosexual college students’ use of the word “gay” as an adjective equated to “stupid” (Chonody et al., in press). This study and those examining other heterosexist behaviors, such as using anti-gay epithets and using verbal or physical threats (Burn, 2000; Franklin, 2000; Jewell & Morrison, 2010; Schope & Eliason, 2000), among heterosexual college students, suggest that male undergraduates tend to engage in heterosexist behaviors more than other groups. Additional study is needed to understand the nature of these behaviors, including saying “that’s so gay” among this particular cohort of students. To advance understanding of contemporary heterosexism and to inform campus climate interventions promoting a positive and affirming space for LGB students, we examine the incidence of saying “that’s so gay”

and identify the factors associated with its use among heterosexual male undergraduate students who are emerging adults (18–25 years). We focus on these students because individuals in this stage of development are establishing their worldviews (Arnett, 2000), including on controversial topics, such as attitudes about LGB people.

## **LGB DISCRIMINATION ON CAMPUS**

Microaggressions refer to “everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Sue, 2010, p. 3). Recently, the concept of microaggressions has been used in regard to sexual orientation, including heterosexist language (Nadal et al., 2010; Sue, 2010). Heterosexist language may have negative consequences for LGB students. Silverschanz et al. (2008) found experiencing and witnessing heterosexist harassment, such as being called homophobic names or overhearing gay jokes, to be negatively associated with social acceptance and student engagement in educational activities, and positively associated with anxiety among sexual minority students. “That’s so gay” can also negatively affect the well-being of LGB students (Nadal et al., 2010). A recent study conducted with LGB students found positive associations between hearing “that’s so gay” and feeling left out on campus, the frequency of headaches, and the frequency of stomach problems (Woodford et al., 2012). These authors posited that feeling excluded on campus is an outcome of the tension between having a sexual minority identity and being in an unwelcoming social environment in which “that’s so gay” is common. They also speculated that the physiological nature of stress related to hearing this microaggression can help to explain the findings concerning physical health. Given that feeling unaccepted on campus and having physical health problems can interfere with students’ academic performance, eliminating the use of “that’s so gay” from college campuses is important in fostering LGB students’ well-being and potential.

Little is known about the factors that promote use of “that’s so gay.” Chonody et al.’s (in press) research into the use of the phrase suggests that heterosexual students’ use of “gay” to criticize something is related to background characteristics and their friends’ attitudes toward gay and lesbian people. Specifically, in both bivariate and multivariate analyses (including controlling for anti-gay attitudes and friends’ anti-gay attitudes), younger students and male students were found to use the phrase more than older and female students. Also, anti-gay bias and using the phrase were positively associated, both at the bivariate level and when controlling for demographics; however, anti-gay bias did not have an enduring effect when friends’ attitudes were controlled. In addition, conservative political ideology was found to be positively associated with using the phrase in bivariate analysis and when controlling only for demographic factors, yet when anti-gay bias was added political ideology lost statistical significance. Neither race nor the number of LGB friends was significantly associated with using the phrase.

In regard to a broader range of heterosexist behaviors, studies have found a positive relationship between sexual prejudice toward lesbian and gay people and perpetuating anti-LGB behaviors (Burn, 2000; Franklin, 2000; Jewell & Morrison, 2010; Schope & Eliason, 2000). The same pattern has been found concerning conservative political ideology (Jewell & Morrison, 2010). However, these studies have produced mixed results about the role of LGB social contacts (Franklin, 2000; Schope & Eliason, 2000).

For male students, homophobia is often underpinned by notions of masculinity (Burn, 2000; Harris, 2008; Kimmel, 2010). Homophobic jokes and slurs are frequently used between heterosexual males to regulate masculinity and reinforce traditional gender norms (Burn, 2000). However, because the boundaries of femininity are less strictly regulated, a parallel dynamic is not known among female students. Heterosexual male students' use of derisive anti-gay language in this way is *not* necessarily because of strong anti-gay sentiment; approximately half of the male students in Burn's (2000) study who regularly called peers "fag" and other anti-gay slurs did not endorse overly homophobic attitudes. Similarly, Harris (2008) found that even those with more liberal feelings toward homosexuality and those with gay friends engage in heterosexist behavior in response to pressure to adhere to traditional male gender norms. Some of Harris' participants also reflected that they perpetuate heterosexist behaviors to avoid speculation about their own sexuality. In a related study, among males who reported engaging in anti-gay behaviors, Franklin (2000) found a positive correlation between endorsing traditional male roles and these behaviors. Interestingly, in this study, views about traditional male roles among anti-gay *physical assailants* and anti-gay *name-callers* were statistically indistinguishable, thereby reinforcing the importance of masculine ideology across these behaviors. Collectively, these results highlight the need to consider perceptions of male gender expression in attempting to understand the antecedents of male heterosexual students' use of "that's so gay."

To develop knowledge concerning heterosexual male undergraduates' use of "that's so gay" we ask: *What are the factors associated with use of the phrase?* We consider the role of socio-demographics (age and race), attitudinal frames (political ideology and LGB attitudes), exposure to LGB educational content, and social context (LGB friends, LGB acquaintances, and hearing "that's so gay"). Educational exposure is a common predictor of students' attitudes toward sexual minorities (Hopwood & Connors, 2002; Lambert, Ventura, Hall, & Cluse-Tolar, 2006) but its role in anti-LGB language has not been investigated. Unlike other studies, we consider various dimensions of LGB attitudes, such as opinions about the acceptability of same-sex sexuality and comfort around persons with atypical gender expression, to examine their differential effects. Given the often-subtle nature of contemporary prejudice (Nadal et al., 2010; Walls, 2008), we avoid measures conveying overt biases, such as gay men are sick. We include the frequency of hearing "that's so gay" because we posit that students are influenced by their social environment, therefore, a positive relationship likely exists between hearing the expression and saying it. Previous research found anti-gay social norms among friends (Chonody

et al., in press; Franklin, 2000) and family members (Franklin, 2000) to be a risk factor for perpetuating anti-gay behaviors.

## **METHOD**

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger cross-sectional campus climate study conducted at a large Midwestern public research university. The university offers courses and extracurricular programs to foster respect for diversity, including sexual orientation diversity. The university's antidiscrimination policy includes protections based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.

Data were collected using an anonymous online survey. The survey inquired about various aspects of campus climate, including student wellbeing, experiencing and witnessing heterosexist harassment and other forms of interpersonal mistreatment on campus, and social attitudes. The survey was developed in collaboration with an advisory board of students, staff, faculty, and alumni as well as student affairs staff. A group of recent graduates reviewed the survey and offered helpful feedback about item wording and the survey's content and online presentation.

The survey was administered by the firm that conducts the host university's campus-wide student satisfaction and learning outcome surveys. The survey's online interface and layout mirrored these campus-wide surveys. The study was approved by the university's Research Ethics Board. None of the recruitment or informed consent materials referenced sexual orientation or issues related to sexual orientation.

### ***Participants***

Participants were taken from a larger survey sample of undergraduate and graduate students. Sampling involved a census of junior and sophomore undergraduate students ( $N = 11,342$ ; 51% male) and a random sample of 8,000 graduate students ( $N = 14,226$ ; 55% male). The survey link was activated by 5,007 students. After reading the informed consent form, 3,762 agreed to participate; however, because of missing data the sample was reduced to 2,568. Nearly 13% of the eligible undergraduate students (age in years  $M = 19.21$ ,  $SD = 2.51$ ; 38% male) and 14% of the eligible graduate students (age in years  $M = 27.73$ ,  $SD = 5.91$ ; 40% male) completed the survey. We limit the analytic sample to male undergraduates between 18 and 25 years of age who identified as completely heterosexual ( $n = 378$ ). Sexual orientation was assessed through the question, "What is your sexual orientation?" and students selected from seven options ("completely lesbian or gay," "mostly lesbian or gay," "bisexual," "mostly heterosexual," "completely heterosexual," "asexual," and "not listed, please specify"). For theoretical and empirical reasons, we consider the mostly heterosexual respondents to be different from the completely heterosexual respondents. We believe that in choosing "mostly heterosexual," a respondent selected an identity that is not part of the sexual majority, and likely considers himself

to be a sexual minority. In addition, comparative analyses found the mostly heterosexual group to be significantly different than the completely heterosexual group in terms of the outcome measure and attitudinal variables.

### ***Procedures***

Recruitment procedures were similar to those used by the university for its campus-wide student surveys. Specifically, students were contacted using official university email addresses and invited to participate in the study. Reminder messages were sent 7 and 14 days later. The invitation and reminder messages included the survey link, and all correspondence was signed by the Vice President of Student Affairs. To encourage students to participate in the study, flyers advertising the study were posted throughout campus, the student newspaper published a story about the study the day before survey implementation, and interested participants had the opportunity to enter a raffle for one of fifty \$50 cash cards.

### ***Measures***

The survey instrument contained a total of 322 questions, with approximately 75 questions being posed only to specific groups (e.g., sexual minority students). Questions about heterosexist harassment were posed about mid-way in the survey and the attitudinal questions were toward the end.

*That's so Gay.* Survey participants were asked how many times in the past 12 months (at the University) they had "said the phrase 'that's so gay' to suggest something was stupid or undesirable" ("never" [coded 0], "once," "2–3 times," "4–9 times," and "10 or more times" [coded 4]). Using the same response categories, they were asked about the frequency of hearing the phrase used in the same way. A higher score on these variables indicates saying or hearing the phrase more often.

*Attitudinal frames.* We inquired about political ideology using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = extremely conservative, 7 = extremely liberal). Five questions were posed to assess attitudes toward sexual minorities, each using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). The statement, "It is perfectly okay for people to have intimate relationships with people of the same sex," was included as an indicator of perceptions about the acceptability of same-sex sexuality. To assess opinions about support for legal protections for sexual minorities, we included the item, "I would sign my name to a petition asking the government to protect the employment rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons." Two items assessed views about persons with atypical gender expression: "I feel comfortable around masculine looking women" and "Feminine men make me feel uncomfortable." We reverse scored the second item, so that a higher mean reflects more comfort with atypical masculine gender expression. The statement, "Lesbians and gay men could be heterosexual if they really wanted to be," evaluated attitudes about the etiology of homosexuality being a choice.

*LGBT educational content and LGB social contacts.* A question queried exposure to educational content on LGBT people in for-credit courses (none [coded 0], 1, 2–4, 5 plus [coded 3]). We inquired about respondents' contact with LGB people in terms of both friends and acquaintances (none [coded 0], 1, 2–4, 5 plus [coded 3]). For each of these variables, a higher score represents more content and more social contacts with LGB people, respectively.

*Race and age.* Respondents were asked to identify their race/ethnicity by selecting from eight categories, including “not listed (please specify).” For the purposes of this analysis, we recoded these into White/people of color. Age was measured as a continuous variable.

### **Data Analysis**

We conducted exploratory analyses between saying “that’s so gay” and all other variables. Next, after ensuring no concerns regarding multicollinearity existed, to identify the predictors of how often students say “that’s so gay” and to determine the explanatory power of the predictors, we conducted a multiple OLS regression. All independent variables were included in the estimated model because we were interested in the controlled effect of all variables.

## **RESULTS**

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables. Table 2 presents the inter-item correlations for the continuous variables, and Table 3 displays the multiple OLS regression results.

The participants' average age was 19.42 years ( $SD = 1.05$ ). Almost threequarters (74%) were White. Most respondents (65%) reported saying “that’s so gay” at least once on campus in the past 12 months (35% never, 9% once, 15% 2–3 times, 9% 4–9 times, and 31% 10 or more times). Although participants overall were not overly politically liberal, they were also not extremely biased in their LGB attitudes. Nearly 90% of the respondents reported hearing “that’s so gay” at least once on campus; 63% indicated hearing the phrase 10 or more times.

At the bivariate level, we found that participants who reported lower levels of comfort around feminine men indicated saying the phrase more often ( $r = -.18, p = .001$ ) as did those who reported hearing it more frequently ( $r = .52, p < .001$ ). Bivariate results were insignificant for all other variables.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Dependent and Independent Variables

Variables	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
Dependent variable		
Saying “that’s so gay” (past 12 months)		1.92 (1.69)
Never	133 (35.2)	
Once	34 (9.0)	
2–3 times	58 (15.3)	
4–9 times	35 (9.3)	
10 or more times	118 (31.2)	
Independent variables		
Demographics		
Age		19.42 (1.05)
Race		
White	277 (74.1)	
People of color	97 (25.9)	
Attitudes		
Political ideology <sup>a</sup>		3.65 (1.34)
Acceptability of intimate same-sex relationships <sup>b</sup>		4.98 (2.12)
Support for LGBT employment protections <sup>b</sup>		5.28 (1.91)
Comfort with atypical male gender expression <sup>b</sup>		4.60 (1.57)
Comfort with atypical female gender expression <sup>b</sup>		4.66 (1.60)
Etiology of homosexuality (choice) <sup>b</sup>		3.06 (1.61)
Educational content		
LGBT course content		0.31 (0.59)
None	287 (75.9)	
One	66 (17.5)	
2–4	25 (6.6)	
5 plus	—	
Social context		
LGB friends		1.20 (0.99)
None	124 (32.9)	
One	85 (22.5)	
2–4	138 (36.6)	
5 plus	30 (8.0)	
LGB acquaintances		1.18 (1.08)
None	144 (38.1)	
One	70 (18.5)	
2–4	115 (30.4)	
5 plus	49 (13.0)	

*(continued)*

**Table 1. (continued)**

Variables	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
Hearing “that’s so gay” (past 12 months)		3.13 (1.37)
Never	44 (11.6)	
Once	11 (2.9)	
2–3 times	34 (9.0)	
4–9 times	51 (13.5)	
10 or more times	238 (63.0)	

Notes. LGBT = lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender; LGB = lesbian, gay, and bisexual.

<sup>a</sup>1 = extremely conservative, 7 = extremely liberal.

<sup>b</sup>1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree.

The overall regression model accounted for 33% of the explained variance,  $F(12, 357) = 14.66, p < .001$ . As presented in Table 3, 3 of 12 independent variables were significant in controlled analysis. With a small effect size, a negative association was found for comfort with atypical male gender expression. That is, respondents with higher reported levels of discomfort with feminine men reported saying “that’s so gay” more frequently. Also with a small effect size, a negative association was found for having LGB acquaintances. Students with more LGB acquaintances indicated saying the phrase less often. Finally, a positive association was found between the outcome and hearing “that’s so gay” and the effect size was large. Those who reported hearing the phrase more often also reported saying it more often. No other variables were significant in the model.

## DISCUSSION

Our results help to advance understanding of the nature of this popular contemporary form of sexual orientation microaggression. Consistent with previous reports, we found high incidence rates of “that’s so gay” being said (TON, 2009; Winans, 2006). The findings suggest that heterosexual male students’ proclivity toward saying “that’s so gay” is at least partially explained by select attitudes and contextual factors.

**Table 2. Intercorrelations Among Dependent and Independent Variables**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Saying "that's so gay"	—												
2. Age	-.02	—											
3. Race (ref. White)	-.01	-.05	—										
4. Political ideology	-.10	-.01	.15**	—									
5. Acceptability of intimate same-sex relationships	-.06	.09	-.08	.52***	—								
6. Support for LGBT employment protections	-.06	.06	-.02	.51***	.59***	—							
7. Comfort with a typical female gender expression	-.10	.13*	-.08	.24***	.32***	.30***	—						
8. Comfort with atypical male gender expression	-.18***	.04	-.00	.27***	.35***	.36***	.29***	—					
9. Etiology of homosexuality (choice)	.07	-.03	.14**	-.39***	-.60***	-.46***	-.29***	-.36***	—				
10. LGBT course content	.02	.08	-.05	.01	.01	.07	.16**	.09	-.12*	—			
11. LGBT friends	-.08	.03	-.03	.20***	.25***	.23***	.17***	.30***	-.19***	.07	—		
12. LGBT acquaintances	-.07	-.08	-.06	.16**	.18***	.20***	.06	.16**	-.12*	.12*	.23***	—	
13. Hearing "that's so gay"	.52***	-.10	-.00	.04	.05	.12*	.03	.01	-.08	.08	.06	.13**	—

Notes. Ref. reference category; LGBT = lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender; LGB = lesbian, gay, and bisexual.  
\*p < .05. \*\*p ≤ .01. \*\*\*p ≤ .001

**Table 3.** Multiple OLS Regression Predicting Saying “that’s so gay” (*n* = 370)

Variable	B (SE B)	B
<b>Demographics</b>		
Age	0.05 (0.07)	0.03
Race (ref. White)	-0.05 (0.17)	-0.01
<b>Attitudes</b>		
Political ideology	-0.07 (0.07)	-0.06
Acceptability of same-sex intimate relationships	0.06 (0.05)	0.07
Support for LGBT employment protections	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.04
Comfort with atypical female gender expression	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.05
Comfort with atypical male gender expression	-0.13 (0.05)	-0.12*
Etiology of homosexuality (choice)	0.04 (0.06)	0.04
<b>Educational content</b>		
Courses with LGBT content	0.03 (0.13)	0.01
<b>Social context</b>		
LGB friends	-0.06 (0.08)	-0.04
LGB acquaintances/co-workers	-0.15 (0.07)	-0.09*
Hearing “that’s so gay”	0.68 (0.06)	0.55***

Notes. Ref., reference category; LGBT = lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender; LGB = lesbian, gay, and bisexual.

\**p* < .05. \*\*\**p* < .001.

We found that attitudes toward male gender norms were associated with use of the phrase in both levels of analyses. Participants who felt uncomfortable around feminine men tended to report using the expression more often than others. Because no other LGB attitudes attained statistical significance in either level of analysis, the influence of attitudes about feminine men suggests that belief in traditional or adherence to traditional gender norms may play an influential role in the perpetuation of “that’s so gay” on campus. This finding is corroborated by previous studies that have documented a strong relationship between support for traditional gender roles and norms and anti-gay behaviors and attitudes (Franklin, 2000; Harris, 2008; Harris & Edwards, 2010; Schope & Eliason, 2000).

Research has suggested that undergraduate male students sometimes define masculinity in terms of what they have been conditioned to believe men are *not* supposed to be: gay or effeminate, and in this context anti-gay behavior may serve as a “primary means to enforce rigid and limited gender norms for men” (Harris & Edwards, 2010, p. 45). From an early age, children are socialized to develop and demonstrate traits and behaviors typically associated with male or female gender (Kimmel, 2010). Boys appear to be particularly sensitive to social and cultural messages related to gender-normative male behavior and receive harsher reactions from other boys, and even girls, for

demonstrating gender atypical behavior than do girls with atypical gender behavior (Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). These gender lessons can remain intact for college-age males who may express hostility toward LGB people (or those perceived to be LGB) as a part of the gender policing that occurs among men to establish and maintain rigid gender boundaries and to punish deviant gender expression (Franklin, 2000; Harris, 2008; Harris & Edwards, 2010; Kimmel, 2010; Schope & Eliason, 2000). Saying “that’s so gay,” then, may be understood as a contemporary tactic of male gender policing.

Unlike earlier studies investigating the role of anti-gay attitudes and antigay behaviors (Burn, 2000; Chonody et al., in press; Franklin, 2000; Schope & Eliason, 2000), we assessed subtle anti-gay prejudice and examined various dimensions of such prejudice. Given its similarity to conceptualizations of traditional anti-gay prejudice examined in extant studies, we were surprised that the item concerning the acceptability of same-sex relationships was not significant. However, perhaps fundamental differences exist between students who endorse explicitly overt biases toward LGB individuals (such as disgust and hatred [Franklin, 2000]) and those who support subtle forms of prejudice. Future research should investigate this issue.

We found a very powerful positive association between saying and hearing “that’s so gay” in both levels of analyses. It is possible that hearing the phrase more frequently increases the probability of saying it more often, as students replicate the behaviors they witness. Our results corroborate Burn’s (2000) conclusion that some perpetrators of anti-gay slurs may be conforming to external social norms and are not necessarily internally biased toward sexual minorities. In the case of “that’s so gay,” our results suggest, in contrast to students who may say the phrase because they are strongly prejudiced, some students who use it simply may be following the dominant language norms or are (unconsciously) replicating others’ behaviors.

Although other studies have not investigated the role of peers *engaging* in anti-gay behaviors as a predictor of one’s perpetuation of such behaviors, we found support for our results regarding hearing “that’s so gay” in Chonody et al.’s (in press) finding that one’s friends’ attitudes toward gay and lesbian people significantly predicted saying “that’s so gay,” even when controlling for other factors, including one’s anti-gay attitudes, which lost significance when friends’ attitudes were controlled. Moreover, Franklin’s (2000) findings that both peer dynamics (i.e., wanting to feel closer to friends and meet their expectations) and anti-gay social norms among close peers were linked with being a perpetrator of anti-gay behaviors also corroborate our findings. In short, our results imply that one’s social environment is strongly associated with perpetuating sexual orientation microaggressions via “that’s so gay.” In fact, not only was the effect size of hearing “that’s so gay” the largest predictor of saying it among all significant variables, all others were minuscule in comparison. This emphasizes the importance of decreasing the use of the expression on campus.

When controlling for other variables, we found that students who had more LGB acquaintances reported using the expression less often than those with

fewer LGB acquaintances. Thus, in contrast to previous research (Chonody et al., in press), being exposed to LGB people, specifically acquaintances, may reduce usage of the phrase; however, Chonody et al. only examined the role of LGB friends. Finding social contact with LGB acquaintances to be significant and contact with LGB friends not significant is intriguing given that the closeness and quality of the relationship is often a factor concerning attitudes toward gay and lesbian people (see Schope & Eliason, 2000). Social acceptance may provide an explanation for this finding (Kiesler, Collins, & Miller, 1969; Schope & Eliason, 2000). It is conceivable that some respondents might be concerned that if they say “that’s so gay,” they would be perceived as heterosexist and experience negative repercussions, thus they may tailor their language use according to the social context. Before engaging in homophobic behaviors, individuals tend to assess the associated risks (Jewel & Morrison, 2010; Schope & Eliason, 2000), including how the behavior will be judged by bystanders. In interviews with self-identified heterosexual college students who admitted to engaging in anti-gay behaviors, participants indicated they would only express their opinions of gay men and lesbians around others who were known to feel similarly, otherwise they were concerned they might “be criticized for their opinions, lose the respect of their friends, or offend others” (Jewel & Morrison, 2010, p. 2102). These students were, in fact, motivated to control their prejudice in order not to diminish their social perception among their peers. This dynamic may also apply when saying “that’s so gay.” College students may be aware of how their LGB (or heterosexual) *friends* would respond to hearing them say “that’s so gay.” They likely know which friends the phrase would offend and the friends it would not disturb. However, it is less likely that LGB (or heterosexual) *acquaintances’* reactions can be predicted as successfully, thus leading some students to avoid using the phrase around people they do not know well.

Educators are likely disappointed to learn that educational content on LGBT people is not associated with saying “that’s so gay.” The nature of our measure may help to explain this finding. We inquired about exposure to educational content but did not ask about what was discussed nor to what depth. Briefly discussing heterosexism in class may have different effects in students’ consciousness and behaviors than participating in a course that considers the topic in detail. Additional research is needed to explore these factors.

## **LIMITATIONS**

This study advances knowledge about the nature of the microaggression, using the phrase “that’s so gay,” and the study has many noteworthy strengths (e.g., use of an anonymous internet-based survey to study a sensitive topic; no reference to LGB issues in recruitment materials); nevertheless, the results should be considered in light of the study’s limitations, some of which suggest directions for future research. First, causation cannot be determined given the study’s cross-sectional design. Second, over-demanding recall, item interpretation, measurement error, and other common problems associated with survey research may also apply. Third, social desirability is another concern; although the anonymous nature of the survey helps to reduce this issue, the

study would have benefitted by including a social desirability scale.

Fourth, the findings likely only generalize to other universities with similar demographics; therefore, it would be important to replicate the study at other institutions, especially those in rural centers and those that do not prioritize sexual orientation diversity. Fifth, concerning the sample, the original sample was large and produced an analytical sample suitable for the current analysis; however, the survey response rate was low and male students were underrepresented. Because the host university does not collect information about students' sexual orientation, we cannot assess sample representativeness along this factor.

Sixth, similar to large-scale national studies assessing attitudes toward sexual minorities (e.g., Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2005; Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006), we used single-item measures to evaluate LGB attitudes. Although this helped to minimize respondent burden in the context of an extensive survey, such measures are potentially problematic because they may capture only particular aspects of the attitude of interest. Finally, we did not investigate how students who use the phrase understand it nor who in their social networks uses it and in what social settings. Information regarding social context might help us better understand the nature and consequence of the use of "that's so gay" on campus. In addition to exploring these areas, future research should engage other student populations, such as fraternity members. It will also be important to examine the nature of other sexual orientation microaggressions perpetuated on campus (e.g., "no homo," "homosexuality is a sin" [Nadal et al., 2010]).

## **CONCLUSION**

As a microaggression, "that's so gay" is an offensive expression and can negatively affect LGB students' wellbeing (Nadal et al., 2010; Woodford et al., 2012). Such consequences may interfere with LGB students' learning and personal growth. To improve campus climate for LGB students, colleges need to make elimination of the use of "that's so gay" a priority. This study's findings offer insights that might help student affairs professionals and other allies address heterosexual male undergraduates' heterosexist language.

Conventional campus-based approaches to promoting acceptance of LGB people typically involve campaigns about heterosexist attitudes and behaviors and exposure to LGB people through panels and presentations (Jayakumar, 2009). Adapting these programs to include discussions of the heterosexist nature of "that's so gay" and how it can negatively affect LGB students may be helpful in reducing the frequency of the phrase on campuses. However, our findings suggest that education focusing on increasing male students' comfort with and ultimately acceptance of atypical male gender expression will make the greatest difference. It is important that student affairs professionals and faculty recognize that heterosexist behavior among males is largely the product of masculine gendered norms engrained through years of socialization. Research shows a gender norm-focused violence intervention program for college males has helped participants to reject previously held stereotypical conceptions about masculinity (Hong, 2000). Such a program could also

positively impact the social climate for LGB students, including decreasing the use of “that’s so gay.” Gender norms and gender-related behaviors might be addressed by merging critical interrogation of masculinity with activities such as service learning, community service, or recreational activities like camping trips that bring college males together in inviting contexts (Harris & Edwards, 2010).

Many universities’ anti-discrimination statements include sexual orientation and gender expression and identity (Sanlo, 2004). Supplementing antidiscrimination policies with policies about not using “that’s so gay” or other heterosexist language will be important. The phrase needs to be defined as an offensive slur, like racial and gender remarks that would not be tolerated. Further, student leaders must model respectful behavior and not say “that’s so gay.” We recommend these individuals be engaged in educational campaigns addressing heterosexist language. In addition, university community members, especially staff and faculty, must be prepared to intervene when they hear “that’s so gay.” We suggest intervention training be mandatory for staff and others who work closely with undergraduate students. Existing programs, such as LGBT ally and safe space programs (Woodford, Kolb, Radeka, & Javier, in press), can be expanded to address intervention competencies related to “that’s so gay.”

Some individuals believe words cannot cause harm, and others minimize the effect of subtle, yet hostile, language such as “that’s so gay.” Unlike racial slurs, this phrase is frequently tolerated on college campuses (TON, 2010). It is necessary to understand that “that’s so gay” is a microaggression, not just an insensitive expression. If we are to make college campuses welcoming and inclusive spaces for LGB students, then universities need to make efforts to address and eliminate “that’s so gay” and other forms of heterosexism.

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