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# USE OF THE PHRASE “THAT’S SO GAY” AS A HETERONORMATIVE MICROAGGRESSION

Mary K. Ross  
*Northern Michigan University*

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USE OF THE PHRASE “THAT’S SO GAY” AS A HETERONORMATIVE  
MICROAGGRESSION

By

Mary K. Ross

THESIS

Submitted to  
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

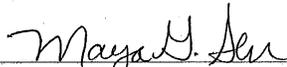
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Graduate Studies Office

2012

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Mary K. Ross is recommended for approval by student's thesis committee in the Department of Psychology and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

 3/26/12  
Committee Chair: Dr. Maya G. Sen Date

 3/26/2012  
First Reader: Dr. Mary M. Pelton Cooper Date

 4/3/2012  
Second Reader: Dr. Chet R. DeFonso Date

 3.14.12  
Department Head: Dr. Paul T. Andronis Date

Assistant Provost of Graduate Education & Research:  
Dr. Brian Cherry Date

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Ross, Mary Katherine

DATE OF BIRTH:

April 19, 1966

## ABSTRACT

### USE OF THE PHRASE “THAT’S SO GAY” AS A HETERONORMATIVE MICROAGGRESSION

By

Mary K. Ross

Prejudice directed toward sexual minorities remains a distressing social issue. Lesbians, gay men and bisexuals often encounter rejection, isolation, harassment and violence. One example of bias toward homosexuals can be seen in language. The phrase “that’s so gay” is one of the most common homophobic pejoratives used today. The goal of the current study was to examine the use of and attitudes towards the term “that’s so gay” in relation to demographic characteristics (i.e., sex, sexual orientation, and contact with sexual minorities) and heteronormativity. Two surveys were given in order to measure participants’ explicit attitudes toward the phrase “that’s so gay” and attitudes towards homosexuals vs. non-homosexuals. As expected, women use the phrase less than men. Many participants reported never using the phrase. Of the participants who do use the phrase, 50% are using the phrase once a week, two or three times per week and daily. The majority of participants reported using the phrase to mean either “lame” or “stupid.” Significant findings emerged showing the participants with higher heteronormativity scores were less likely to view use of the phrase as a form of prejudice, offensive, disrespectful, or a form of verbal abuse. The more heteronormative participants did, however, find use of the phrase to be amusing.

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Mary Katherine Ross

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## **Introduction**

*“Hate is all around us. It takes shape and form in ways that are somehow so small that we don’t even recognize them to begin with, until they somehow become acceptable to us.”-Honorable Dan E. Ponder, Jr.*

### **Prejudice**

Prejudice is one of the most common, dangerous and widespread aspects of human social behavior, often producing unthinkable acts of violence, causing innocent people to suffer and measurable harm to be done to individuals and society (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2004; Taylor, Peplau, & Sears, 2006; Levin, 2002). Simple dislike can escalate to extreme hatred, murder and even genocide (Aronson et al., 2004). Perhaps the most salient example is the more than 6 million European Jews murdered by the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. In the United States, the most relentless prejudice has been against African Americans and has led to civil war, urban decay and crime (Levin, 2002). During the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement improved the lives of African Americans in many ways (Taylor et al., 2006). However, on June 7, 1998, in a crime that is “nothing short of horrific” (as cited in Feldman, 2001, pg. 79), James Byrd a 49 year old black man from Jasper, Texas was first beaten, then chained to the back of a pickup truck by white supremacists and dragged for 2 miles. Mr. Byrd’s torso and head were found approximately one mile apart (racematters.org)

Unfortunately, African Americans are not the only minority group in the United States subjected to prejudice (Taylor et al., 2006). It touches everyone’s life (Aronson et

al., 2004; Valentine & McDonald, 2004). Derogatory labels have been applied to virtually every ethnic and racial group, i.e. Irish: micks, Germans: krauts; Italians: wops; Poles: polacks; Jews: kikes; blacks: niggers; Hispanics: spics; Asians: chinks. However, prejudice has not only been limited to ethnic and racial groups. For example, overweight individuals are also targeted where as the elderly and disabled are assumed to be less physically and mentally competent (Valentine & McDonald, 2004; Taylor et al., 2006; Levin, 2002). Lesbians and gay men are often forced to keep their sexual preferences a secret to protect themselves and their families due to incidents like the murder of Matthew Shepard, an openly gay, 22-year-old college student. Shortly after midnight on October 10, 1998, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson took Matthew to a desolate area outside Laramie, Wyoming. The two men tied him to a split-rail fence where they beat him and left him to die. He hung on the fence for 18 hours until found. He was so badly beat, the woman who found him mistook him for a scarecrow ([www.matthewshepard.org](http://www.matthewshepard.org)).

What exactly constitutes prejudice causes much confusion (Valentine & McDonald, 2004). According to Taylor et al. (2006) and Aronson et al. (2004), prejudice is an attitude comprised of 3 components: emotional (prejudice), cognitive (stereotype) and behavioral (discrimination). Prejudice is the emotional component, based on the negative or hostile evaluations or judgments toward people in a “distinguishable” group. The assessment is simply due to membership in that group and not on the characteristics of the individuals (Aronson et al., 2004; Feldman, 2001; Jussim et al., 1995; Levin, 2002). Many people who are less positive toward a minority group do not consider

themselves to be prejudiced because they consider their views to be justified or fair (Valentine & McDonald, 2004).

In 2003, Gill Valentine and Ian McDonald carried out research on behalf of Stonewall, a civil rights group working for legal equality and social justice for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals in the U.K., surveying 1700 adults throughout England which shows the extent of prejudice against minority groups. Valentine and McDonald (2004) identified five types of prejudice that are characterized by varying degrees of social acceptance: 1) Aggressive prejudice which is defined as open and explicit animosity toward a minority group often accompanied with a threat of violence; 2) Banal prejudice which is the mundane, unnoticed attitudes of a less positive attitude toward a group which may or may not be intentional; 3) Benevolent prejudice in which someone does not intend to be less positive toward another group, but their views or actions are perceived by the recipient as stereotypical and negative; 4) Cathartic prejudice is characterized by an acceptably less positive view of a group because the prejudice is justified; and 5) Unintentional prejudice which is defined as an attitude or behavior that demonstrates a lack of understanding about “diversity and civil rights issues.”

An example of benevolent prejudice could be a heterosexual woman who talks positively about homosexuals by saying “they value gay men for their feminine qualities.” Because prejudice is no longer socially acceptable without justification, cathartic prejudice helps to justify feeling less positive about a group without labeling it prejudice. Anger and or repulsion are easy to justify while hate is less easy. Instead of thinking that bigotry, unemployment, lack of education causes poverty, cathartic prejudice blames the characteristics of the minority group suffering from poverty (Levin,

2002). Herek (2007) states that “tolerance for a minority group” should not be confused with “respect” for that group. Valentine and McDonald (2004) characterize tolerance as only a “grudging acceptance of a group” if the group keeps a low profile as perceived by conformity and invisibility. Lesbians and gay men are not allowed to show public affection, Asians are discouraged from speaking in public and a black professional will not be met with approval. People who hold these views consider them to be justified, self-evident and not prejudicial. Unintentional prejudice is often used without ill-intent and often is not viewed as unacceptable to the user. An example is the language people use as standards of speech such as the word “colored.” The user does not understand that the words they choose are offensive because the words often seem irrelevant and go unnoticed in contrast to words like “nigger” and “fag.” Those are examples of words which are recognized as derogatory. However, acting on prejudices in non-violent ways such as joking and calling names are considered justified (Valentine & McDonald, 2004). Prejudice does not come from the “ranting and raving of bigoted extremists” but is present in the everyday approval of mainstream society (Levin, 2002, pg. v). Miller (2004) describes a modern conflict between implicit, unconscious biases and the conscious ideal to be politically correct. Now prejudices have become more subtle and aversive and are expressed in indirect, often unintentional ways (Dovidio & Gaetner, 1991; Miller, 2004).

### **Sexual Prejudice**

It is still socially acceptable to express some prejudices such as sexual prejudice, while other prejudices have become socially unacceptable such as racism (Valentine & McDonald, 2004). According to Herek (2000), sexual prejudice is the negative attitude

toward an individual because of his or her sexual orientation whether the target is homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual. Herek (2000) states that like all other prejudices, sexual prejudice has three principal features: it is an attitude; it is directed at a social group and its members; and it is negative.

Prejudice based on sexual orientation has been commonplace throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Until 1973, homosexuality was defined by the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), as a form of psychopathology and it was widely assumed that lesbians, gay men and bisexuals could be helped by psychologists and psychiatrists to become heterosexual (Herek, 2007).

In the late 1960s, psychologist George Weinberg coined the term homophobia which helped change society's views of sexual orientation (Herek, 2000; Ferris & Stein, 2008) and defined anti-homosexual attitudes (Wright, & Cullen, 2001). The term labeled a heterosexual's dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals (Herek, 2000; Ferris & Stein, 2008), an irrational fear of homosexuals and the fear of having homosexual feelings in oneself (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; VanVoorhis & Wagner, 2002).

The term heterosexism also started to be used at the same time as homophobia. It is a variation on the term homophobia as attitudes that "stigmatize and denigrate any behaviors, identities, relationships and communities that are not heterosexual" (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; VanVoorhis & Wagner, 2002). Individuals who deviate from traditional feminine and masculine roles are particularly vulnerable to heterosexism. The term heterosexism makes homosexuality inferior to heterosexuality and parallels the terms sexism, anti-Semitism and racism in describing an entire ideological system (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; VanVoorhis & Wagner, 2002). Homophobia typically

describes an individual's anti-homosexual attitudes and behaviors while heterosexism refers to society's customs, institutions, ideologies and patterns of oppression (Herek, 2000, Ferris & Stein, 2008). Herek (2000) states the term homophobia implies an individual's irrational fear while heterosexism is a social phenomenon.

Heteronormativity takes heterosexism to the next level. It is the result of social pressures to conform to such heterosexual roles as people should only partner with others of the opposite sex. Habarth (2008) defines heteronormativity as the "assumption that people are heterosexual unless they indicate otherwise" and that there are benefits to being heterosexual that are taken for granted and perpetuated everyday by social institutions such as religion, schools, media and parents' expectations. The theory of heteronormativity has been found to be the foundation of heterosexism, homophobia and sexism (Habarth, 2008).

The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs compiled a report in 2009 "in order to document, analyze and challenge the pervasive and consistent pattern of hate-related violence" against lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender and questioning people. NCAVP defines anti-LGBTQ hate violence as "any act that an offender commits against a person or a person's hatred for that person's actual or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression."

NCAVP reports the following information from their 2009 report:

- 22 hate-motivated murders were reported in 2009. That is the second highest murder rate in the last 10 years.
- 79% of the murders were people of color.
- 50% of the murders were transgender women.
- The remaining murders were gender non-conforming men.
- There were more serious injuries reported in 2009 than prior years.

NCAVP also collected information on 2,181 victims and survivors of hate violence:

- 49% of the victims identified as gay
- 28% of the victims identified as lesbian
- 10% of the victims were heterosexual
- 7% of the victims were bisexual
- 2% of the victims were questioning or unsure

It seems from the NCAVP 2009 report that transgender women and gender non-conforming people are particularly vulnerable to hate violence: 52% of reported cases were non-transgender males; 32% of victims were non-transgender females; and 11% were transgender women. As far as race is concerned, NCAVP reported 47% of victims were white; 23% of victims were latino; and 17% were black. The majority of people reporting hate violence were between the ages of 19 years old to 29 years old.

### **Stereotypes**

The cognitive component of prejudice is a stereotype. In 1922, Walter Lippman introduced the term stereotype to mean “the little pictures we carry around inside our heads” (as cited in Aronson et al., 2004). Stereotype is the first step in prejudice and helps us organize and interpret information, providing the cognitive framework to classify people according to particular social characteristics (Jussim, 1995; Leichtman & Ceci, 1995; Feldman, 2001; Aronson et al., 2004). They simplify how we look at the world yet distort people’s perceptions according to what culture regards as normative (Aronson et al., 2004; Jussim, 1995; Leichtman & Ceci, 1995; Taylor et al, 2006).

People use stereotypes as a generalization about a group of people, assigning the same characteristics to all members of the group (Aronson et al., 2004; Taylor et al, 2006).

These generalized characteristics provide expectations about how the group supposedly

behaves, thinks, feels and what their preferences and competencies are (Aronson et al., 2004; Feldman, 2001).

### **Discrimination**

Stereotypes often lead to unfair treatment. Discrimination is the action component of prejudice and is expressed in many subtle, even unconscious, and blatant ways (Harper, G. & Schneider, M, 2003). Aronson et al. (2004) define discrimination as the “unjustified negative or harmful actions toward a member of a group, simply because of his or her membership in that group.” Traditional forms of discrimination are easily identifiable. Examples of discrimination in the United States include the previous ban on lesbians and gay men in the military; the lack of legal protection for reasons of employment, housing and other services; and the passage of many state and federal laws against same-sex marriage. However, discrimination has changed over the decades to a more subtle and covert form of discrimination called microaggressions (Shelton & Delgado-Romeo, 2011; Sue, 2010). Microaggressions are “communications of prejudice and discrimination” expressed through “seemingly meaningless and unharmed tactics” (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Sue, 2010). They could be snubs, dismissive looks, gestures, tones, social exclusion or other unconscious and unintentional expressions of bias toward socially marginal groups (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue, 2010, Swearer, et al., 2008). The perpetrator may not even be conscious of the demeaning message they are delivering, but their choice of words betrays how they actually think and feel about their target (Pearson, Dovidio & Gaertner, 2009; Schnake & Ruscher, 1998).

In clear contrast to traditional messages of hate, anger and intolerance, microaggressions are hidden in the content, syntax and context of communication (Sue

2010). Sue (2010) states microaggressions are the accumulation of regular small injustices that promote hostility and animosity toward the target. Through verbal and nonverbal means, microaggressions reflect that minority groups, such as sexual minorities, are not welcome, intellectually inferior and deviate from the norm (Sue, 2010).

Ridiculing someone because of their ethnicity, class, religion, gender or race is unacceptable behavior today. However, it is still permissible to pick on and torment people because of their sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation due to such attributes as being shy, smart, artistic, musical, theatrical, or nonathletic (Phoenix, 2006; Swearer, Turner, & Givens, 2008; Unks, 1995). Sexual orientation discrimination takes two forms: 1) personal experiences: when someone is directly targeted because of their sexual orientation (i.e. taunts such as being called a “fag” or “queer”); and 2) ambient experiences: when someone is indirectly targeted (i.e. someone telling an offensive joke or using the phrase “that’s so gay”) (Sue, 2010, Swearer, et al., 2008). Both personal experiences and ambient experiences send a generalized message that people who are different, weird or non-normative are “gay” (Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000; Herek, Cogan & Gillis, 1999; Thurlow, 2001).

Ambient experiences seem for more prevalent than physical manifestations of bullying in schools (Haskell, 2005; Kimmel, 1993; Phoenix, Hall, Weiss, Kemp, Wells, & Chan, 2006, Thurlow, 2001). Kimmel (in Buchwald, Fletcher & Roth, 1993) state “the prevalence of homophobic bullying, teasing and violence is staggering (Swearer, et al., 2008). Approximately 1.6 million public school students are bullied because of their actual sexual orientation or a perceived sexual orientation (Haskell, 2005; Swearer, et al.,

2008). Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak (2008) state the phrase “that’s so gay” seems to have “permanently entered the straight teen vernacular” and is probably the most common put-down in America’s high schools and middle school today. Kimmel (1993) and Thurlow (2001) believe the phrase has nothing to do with sexual orientation but refers to anything seen as unmasculine or “uncool.” Even if a homophobic pejorative is not used with serious intent, after all it is not a racist word, the repercussions of microaggressions last long past the actual event (Swearer, et al., 2009). Used so carelessly, microaggressions cause the environment in which lesbian, gay men and bisexual individuals live in to be hostile, angry and damaging to their self-esteem (Phoenix, et al., 2006; Sue, et al, 2007; Sue, 2010; Swearer, et al., 2008; Thurlow, 2001). They are often so subtle microaggressions can be a challenge to decipher (Sue, 2010). The recipients of the insult or snub are left feeling powerless, shamed, invisible and marginalized (Phoenix, et al., 2006; Sue, 2010, Thurlow, 2001). Gender atypical boys specifically who are victimized report feeling lonely, having fewer male friends and experiencing greater psychological distress than gender typical boys (Swearer, et al., 2008).

### **Linguistic Category Model**

Geschke, Sassenberg, Ruhrmann, & Sommer (2010) state what is said about people affects other individuals’ attitudes and behavior toward them. The Linguistic Category Model (LCM, Semin & Fiedler, 1991) reveals the differences in the linguistic abstractness of information with its effects on the recipients. Events or behavior are scaled on different levels ranging from descriptive action verbs such as “kick” to interpretive action verbs such as “attack” to state action verbs such as “anger” to state verbs “hate” to adjectives such as “aggressive.” The events or behaviors characterized on

different levels of abstractness (description active verbs) to the most abstract category (adjectives). Geschke, et al. (2010) and Schnake & Ruscher (1998) believe the more abstract fashion in which a behavior is described the more likely the audience will attribute the behavior to the target. Abstract wording allows for an “enduringness” of the event than concrete wording (Geschke, et al., 2010). The effects of linguistic abstractness do not seem severe on the surface, as it is subtle not blatant prejudice. However, blatant prejudice can be strongly affected by political correctness and therefore the covert, subtle prejudice can measure a more valid assessment of the individuals’ actual prejudices (Geschke, et al., 2010; Schnake & Ruscher, 1998). It is this researcher’s belief that the phrase “that’s so gay” is an extremely abstract phrase and therefore perpetuates the prejudice that being homosexual or being perceived as homosexual means that the individual is defective or dysfunctional.

## Rationale

This thesis takes as its starting point that the phrase “that’s so gay” is a homophobic pejorative. The current study consists of two surveys. Participants will be asked to complete a short-form scale survey designed to measure participants’ explicit attitudes toward the phrase “that’s so gay.” Participants will also respond to a short-form scale searching for attitudes towards homosexuals vs. non-homosexuals using the Heteronormative Attitudes and Beliefs Scale (Habarth, 2008). The current study is concerned with three main research questions. First, who uses the phrase “that’s so gay” and how frequently do they use it. Second, how do people use the phrase “that’s so gay?” Lastly, is heteronormativity related to the use of the phrase “that’s so gay?” The following relevant hypotheses will be examined:

**Hypothesis 1.** Women will report lower use of the phrase “that’s so gay.”

**Hypothesis 2.** Sexual minorities will report lower use of the phrase “that’s so gay.”

**Hypothesis 3.** Heterosexuals who have higher levels of contact with sexual minorities will report lower use of the phrase “that’s so gay.”

**Hypothesis 4.** Heteronormativity will correlate positively with how upset a participant would be if someone said “that’s so gay” about something they were doing.

**Hypothesis 5.** Heteronormativity will correlate negatively with use of the phrase as name-calling, a form of prejudice, a form of verbal abuse,

offensive, and disrespectful, and correlate positively with use of the phrase as amusing.

Support for these hypotheses will indicate a clear scientific understanding of the relationship between sexual prejudice and antigay behavior. Such understanding may help to prevent future behavioral expression of sexual prejudice through language, discrimination and harassment.

## Method

### Participants

Data for this study were provided by undergraduate students recruited from the entire student population of Northern Michigan University. A random list of 500 students was requested from the Department of Institutional Research. A total of 96 people accessed the survey website. 81 people responded to all items and were included in the final sample. Of the participants who indicated their gender, 70% were female and 30% were male. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 years old to 51 years old ( $M = 21.27$ ,  $SD = 4.65$ ). The sample was largely heterosexual (85%). Of the remaining participants, 4% described themselves as homosexuals, 7% as bisexuals, 1% as transgender, and 1% preferred not to answer. A total of 70% of participants indicated “yes” they did know someone who was homosexual, 26% of participants indicated “no” they did not and 4% indicated they were “unsure” if any of their family or friends were homosexuals.

### Measures

**The “That’s So Gay” Survey.** Participants were administered a survey assessing their attitudes, behavior, and perceptions of others’ attitudes and behaviors toward the phrase “that’s so gay.” The full survey is presented in Appendix A. Demographic information was collected regarding age, gender, sexual orientation and whether participants had any family or friends who are homosexual. The remainder of the survey combined multiple choice questions with “yes”/”no” questions, 5 and 7-point Likert-type items and open-ended questions.

**The Heteronormative Attitudes and Beliefs Scale (HABS).** Participants also completed the Heteronormative Attitudes and Beliefs Scale (Habarth, 2008), which measures “assumptions about heterosexuality as natural or normal” (Appendix A). The scale consists of 16 category-partition (Likert-type) items, comprised of two scales with 8 items each, with balanced negative/positive wording. Each item is scored with a 7-point Likert-type scale with response options ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Questions 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15 and 16 are reverse coded.

### **Procedures**

Students received an e-mail (Appendix B) describing the study. A reminder e-mail was sent two weeks later (Appendix C). The survey was administered online through Qualtrics, an Internet survey company, wherever participants had a computer and an internet connection.

Participation in this research project was voluntary. Participants could choose to skip any question they did not wish to answer and could exit the survey at any time. Informed consent was explained on the first screen of the survey. Participants were instructed to click “next” to continue taking the survey after verification of age and consent. If the subject decided not to be in this study or stopped participating at any time, they were not penalized.

## Results

The frequency with which the participants reported using the phrase “that’s so gay” are shown in Figure 1. A plurality of participants (44%) reported never using the phrase “that’s so gay.”

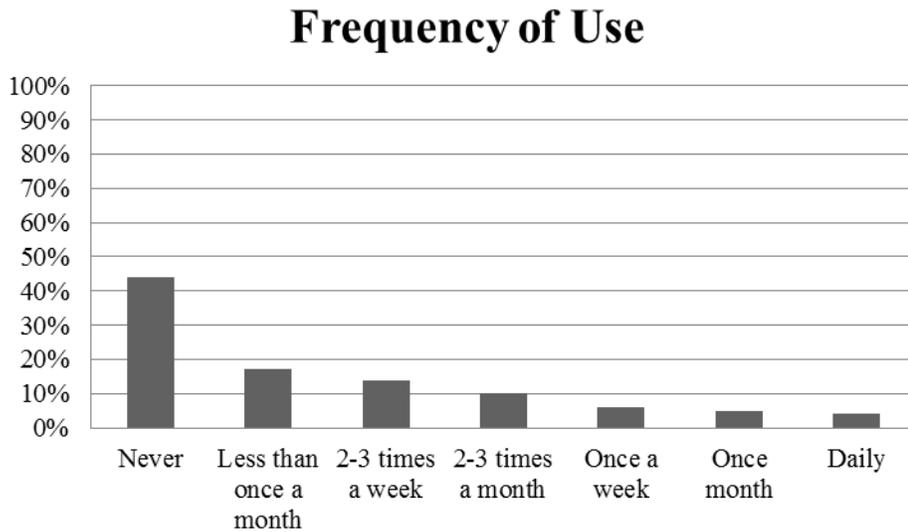


Figure 1. The frequency with which participants used the phrase “that’s so gay.”

Participants reported using the phrase “that’s so gay” in several different contexts, as shown in Figure 2. Of the choices offered in the survey, participants used the phrase to mean “lame,” “stupid,” “homosexual,” “uncool,” “unmasculine” and “other.”

## Context

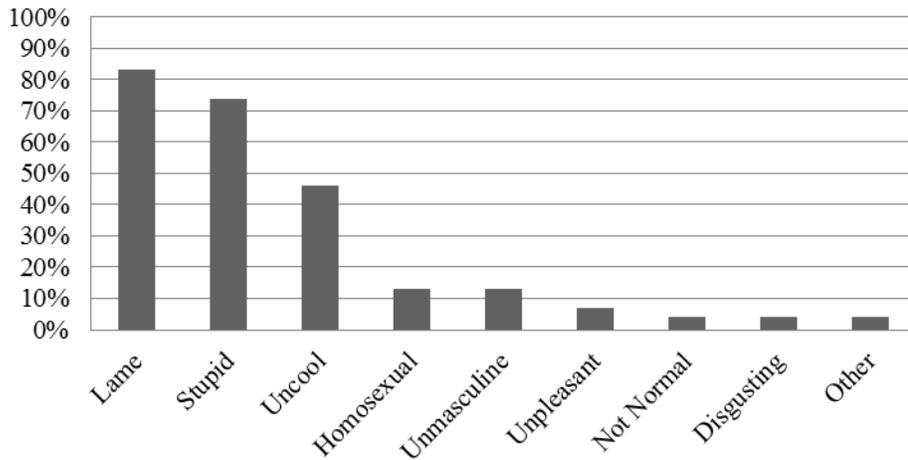


Figure 2. The context in which participants used the phrase “that’s so gay.”

The most frequently-used context was the term “lame” (50%). “Stupid” was the second most frequently used context used by 32% of the participants as shown in Figure 3. The participant who answered “other” reported using the phrase to mean “cute.”

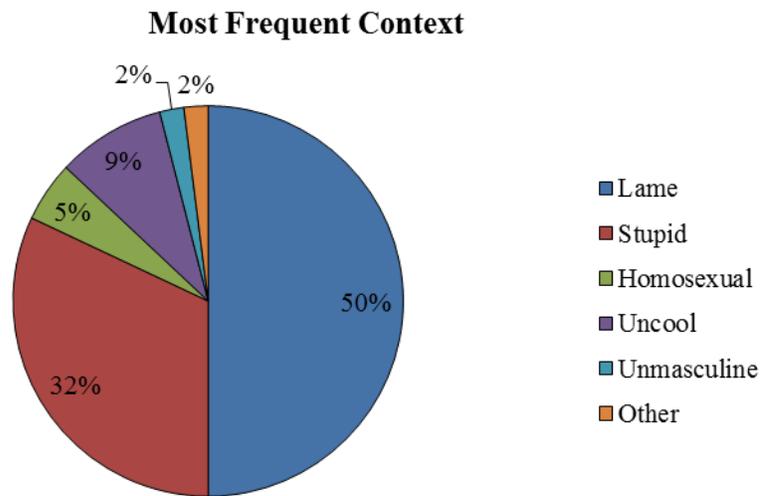


Figure 3. The context in which participants used the phrase “that’s so gay” most frequently.

Participants were widely split in regards to whether they had ever asked someone not to use the phrase “that’s so gay.” Most participants (70%) reported never having asked someone to refrain from use the phrase and 30% reported yes, they had asked someone to not use the phrase. Participants were also widely split in regards to using the phrase within hearing distance of someone they knew to be homosexual. Most participants (76%) reported not using the phrase “that’s so gay” within hearing distance, while 24% reported they had.

**Women will report lower use of the phrase “that’s so gay.”**

An independent-samples *t*-test was calculated comparing the means of females vs. males,  $t(77) = -2.629, p < .05$ . The mean of the females ( $M = 1.96, SD = 4.62$ ) was significantly different from the mean of the males ( $M = 5.83, SD = 8.61$ ). As expected, women use the phrase “that’s so gay” less than men do.

**Sexual minorities will report lower use of the phrase “that’s so gay.”**

This hypothesis was not addressed as not enough sexual minorities completed the survey.

**Heterosexuals who have higher levels of contact with sexual minorities will report lower use of the phrase “that’s so gay.”**

An independent-samples *t*-test was calculated comparing the mean score of heterosexuals who have known contact with sexual minorities to the mean score of heterosexuals who do not,  $t(64) = 0.584, p > .05$ . The mean of the heterosexuals with known contact to sexual minorities ( $M = 3.067, SD = 6.57$ ) was not significantly different from the mean of the heterosexuals without contact to sexual minorities ( $M = 4.12, SD = 7.25$ ).

**Heteronormativity will correlate positively with how upset a participant would be if someone said “that’s so gay” about something they were doing.**

A Pearson correlation was calculated examining the relationship between the scores on the Heteronormativity Attitudes and Beliefs Scale (HABS) and the participants’ level of upset if someone said “that’s so gay” about something they were doing. No significant correlation,  $r(79) = .048, p > .05$ , was found between the HABS score and the participants’ level of upset.

**Heteronormativity will correlate negatively with use of the phrase as name-calling, a form of prejudice, a form of verbal abuse, offensive, and disrespectful, and correlate positively with use of the phrase as amusing.**

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated for the relationships between participants’ Heteronormativity score and use of the phrase as name-calling, a form of prejudice, a form of verbal abuse, offensive, disrespectful, and amusing. A negative correlation was found with use of the phrase as a form of prejudice,  $r(79) = -.282, p < .05$ ; in regards to the phrase being offensive,  $r(79) = -.270, p < .05$ ; and in regards to the phrase being disrespectful,  $r(79) = -.233, p < .05$ . A strong negative correlation was found,  $r(79) = -.353, p < .01$ , in regards to the phrase being a form of verbal abuse. A weak correlation that was not significant was found,  $r(79) = -.184, p > .05$ , indicating no relationship between the participant's Heteronormativity score and use of the phrase as name-calling. A positive correlation was found,  $r(79) = .226, p < .05$ , in regards to the phrase as amusing.

## Discussion

The goal of the current study was to examine the use of and attitudes towards the term “that’s so gay” in relation to demographic characteristics (i.e., sex, sexual orientation, and contact with sexual minorities) and heteronormativity, the unconscious assumption that homosexuality is inferior and heterosexuality is superior that is ingrained in all aspects of society.

The first hypothesis, that women would use the phrase less as compared to men, was well supported by the data. Unfortunately, the second hypothesis regarding use of the phrase “that’s so gay” by sexual minorities was unable to be addressed due to a small sample size resulting in too few sexual minorities completing the survey. According to previous research in the area (Herek, 2007; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009), Hypothesis 3 should have found that heterosexuals who have higher levels of contact with sexual minorities would report lower use of the phrase “that’s so gay.” This study, however, found no significant difference between heterosexuals who had contact with sexual minorities and heterosexuals who did not have contact and their use of the phrase “that’s so gay.”

Many participants reported never using the phrase. Of the participants who do use the phrase, 50% are using the phrase once a week, two or three times per week and daily. Because this sample was largely heterosexual, this finding supports Kosciw’s, Diaz’s, & Greytak’s (2008) statement that the phrase “that’s so gay” seems to have “permanently entered the straight teen vernacular” (p. 10).

The current study also examined the context in which the phrase “that’s so gay” was used by participants. Data from the present study show that, of the participants who did use the phrase, the majority mostly used it to mean either “lame” or “stupid.” Very few used the phrase to mean “homosexual.” One participant stated she used the phrase to mean “cute.” This would seem to support Kimmel’s (1993) and Thurlow’s (2001) belief that the phrase has nothing to do with sexual orientation but refers to anything that is seen as unmasculine or “uncool.” However, “gay” is an abstract term that is often used loosely to describe anything undesirable such as a lack of interest in sports, academic success or a lack of aggression. The current study shows that even if the phrase “that’s so gay” is not used to mean homosexuality per se, the abstractness of the phrase basically equates being gay with being lame or stupid. On the surface, the phrase may seem innocuous, but it contributes to the cumulative, powerful and dramatic impact on the lives of homosexuals.

Last, this study looked at the relationship between heteronormativity and the use of the phrase “that’s so gay.” The fourth hypothesis predicted the higher a participant’s heteronormativity score, the more upset they would be if someone said “that’s so gay” about something they were doing. However, the findings did not support this hypothesis. The fifth hypothesis focused on the correlations among heteronormativity and use of the phrase as name-calling, a form of prejudice, a form of verbal abuse, offensive, disrespectful, and amusing. Significant findings emerged showing the participants with higher heteronormativity scores were less likely to view use of the phrase as a form of prejudice, offensive, disrespectful, or a form of verbal abuse. The more heteronormative participants did, however, find use of the phrase to be amusing supporting the assertion

that the phrase “that’s so gay” is an ambiguous microaggression that stems from the effects of heteronormativity.

As with any study, a discussion of the limitations is necessary. One limitation of this study is the small sample size of sexual minorities. It was difficult to find enough people to have a randomly selected representation of Northern Michigan University’s sexual minority population. Because a true picture of the experiences of sexual minorities in regards to the phrase “that’s so gay” is still needed, another researcher may consider seeking out participants with LGBT specific backgrounds and perspectives by soliciting participants from a combination of different sources. Another limitation of this study is the use of explicit attitudes obtained from participants’ own after-the-fact reports of their experiences. Explicit attitudes are inherently inaccurate as people’s actual behavior can be very different from what they report. A third limitation could be the subject’s interest in the survey. Topics such as homosexuality are often thought of as taboo and controversial and may have caused discomfort to the participant therefore influencing their willingness to carefully consider their answers.

The young men who killed Matthew Shepard probably did not wake up the morning of October 9, 1998 and decide that they hated gay men enough to physically attack one. Instead, the attack was most likely the culmination of years of exposure to heteronormativity that went unaddressed, sending the message that gay people are acceptable targets. Subtle forms of prejudice such as the phrase “that’s so gay” lead to more visible and physical forms of violence because they foster the belief that gay people deserve to be punished, especially those who are brave enough to flaunt their sexuality and gender differences in public.

The results of this study draw attention to the fact that further research in the area of antigay microaggressions is necessary. Research exploring the impact of subtle antigay behaviors is needed to increase society's understanding of the consequences of these behaviors for sexual minorities.

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## **Appendix A: "That's So Gay" Survey**

### **Informed Consent Form and Notice of Voluntary Participation**

Thank you for your interest in my research! This study is being conducted by Mary Ross from the Psychology Department at Northern Michigan University for my Master's Degree thesis project.

The purpose of this study is to collect information about the phrase "That's so gay."

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary and anonymous. If at any time there is a question that makes you feel uncomfortable and you do not wish to answer, you have the right to skip that question and go to the next. You are also free to discontinue the survey at any time. If you do not wish to participate, please stop the survey.

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Mary Ross, at (906) 399-8231, marross@nmu.edu, or Dr. Maya Sen at msen@nmu.edu. If you have further questions regarding your rights as a participant in a research project, you may contact Dean Terry Seethoff at (906) 227-2300 or tseethof@nmu.edu.

If you agree to participate, we would like you to complete a short survey on your computer. The survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete, and contains a range of questions regarding your attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality and the phrase "That's so gay."

Your part in this study is anonymous. That means that your answers to all questions are private. No one else can know if you participated in this study and no one else can find out what your answers were. Scientific reports will be based on group data and will not identify you or any individual as being in this project.

We realize that this is a very sensitive topic and appreciate your honesty. We are not looking for the "politically correct" response; we want to know what you really think and do. If at any time there are questions that make you feel uncomfortable and that you do not wish to answer, you do have the right to skip over that questions and go onto the next. You are also free to discontinue the survey at any time.

As a fellow student, I know how busy you are and want to thank you for taking the time to complete my survey and helping with my research. This is a chance to express your true beliefs about homosexuality while remaining totally anonymous.

I am at least 18 years old

- Yes
- No

I understand that my participation in this survey is voluntary, meaning that I may choose whether or not to participate, and that I may stop the survey at any time. I also understand that this survey is anonymous and I do not need to provide any information, such as my name, that would reveal my identity.

- Yes, I agree to participate in the study.
- No, I do not agree and will not participate in the study.

What is your age? [Options presented were 18-99 years}

What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Intersex/Other

What is your sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Transgender
- Queer
- Other
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

Do you have any family/friends who are homosexual?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

How often do you say "that's so gay"?

- Never
- Less than Once a Month
- Once a Month
- 2-3 Times a Month
- Once a Week
- 2-3 Times a Week
- Daily

In which context(s) do you use the phrase "that's so gay"? Something or someone is (choose all that apply):

- Lame
- Stupid
- Homosexual
- Uncool
- Unmasculine
- Not normal
- Unpleasant
- Disgusting
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Which context do you use most frequently?

Do you use the phrase "that's so gay" when someone you know to be homosexual is within hearing distance?

- Yes
- No

Have you ever asked someone to not use the phrase "that's so gay"?

- Yes
- No

How upset would you feel if someone said "that's so gay" about something you were doing?

- Extremely Upset
- Upset
- Slightly Upset
- Neutral
- Not at All Upset

Please answer the following. I believe that using the phrase "that's so gay" is:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Exactly Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
the same as name-calling	<input type="radio"/>						
a form of prejudice	<input type="radio"/>						
a form of verbal abuse	<input type="radio"/>						
offensive	<input type="radio"/>						
disrespectful	<input type="radio"/>						
amusing	<input type="radio"/>						

“Heteronormative Attitudes and Beliefs” Scale

Please rate the following.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Exactly Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Femininity and masculinity are determined by biological factors, such as genes and hormones, before birth.	<input type="radio"/>						
There are only two sexes: male and female.	<input type="radio"/>						
All people are either male or female.	<input type="radio"/>						
In intimate relationships, women and men take on roles according to gender for a reason; it's really the best way to have a successful relationship.	<input type="radio"/>						

Please rate the following.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Exactly Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Things go better in intimate relationships if people act according to what is traditionally expected of their gender.	<input type="radio"/>						
Gender is the same thing as sex.	<input type="radio"/>						
It's perfectly okay for people to have intimate relationships with people of the same sex.	<input type="radio"/>						
The best way to raise a child is to have a mother and a father raise the child together.	<input type="radio"/>						

Please rate the following.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Exactly Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
In healthy intimate relationships, women may sometimes take on stereotypical "male" roles, and men may sometimes take on stereotypical "female" roles.	<input type="radio"/>						
Sex is complex; in fact, there might even be more than 2 sexes.	<input type="radio"/>						
Gender is a complicated issue, and it doesn't always match up with biological sex.	<input type="radio"/>						
Women and men need not fall into stereotypical gender roles when in an	<input type="radio"/>						

intimate relationship.							
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Please rate the following.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Exactly Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
People should partner with whomever they choose, regardless of sex or gender.	<input type="radio"/>						
There are particular ways that men should act and particular ways that women should act in relationships.	<input type="radio"/>						
People who say that there are only two legitimate genders are mistaken.	<input type="radio"/>						
Gender is something we learn from society.	<input type="radio"/>						

## Appendix B: Introductory Email

Subject: Research Survey Invitation from Fellow NMU Student

Here is a chance to express your true beliefs about homosexuality while remaining totally anonymous.

My name is Mary Ross and I am a fellow student at NMU working on my graduate thesis. I am asking you to complete a short survey on your computer. Homosexuality is a very sensitive topic and I appreciate your complete honesty. I am not looking for "politically correct" answers; I want to know what you really think and do. Your name will not be attached to your answers in any way.

As a fellow student, I know how busy you are and want to thank you for taking the time to complete my anonymous survey and helping me with my research. If you agree to participate, please [click here](#). If this does not work, please copy and paste the following link into your browser.

[http://nmu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_4OUMlocpZxw3456](http://nmu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_4OUMlocpZxw3456)

Mary Ross  
Northern Michigan University  
336 Gries Hall  
(906) 399-8231  
[marross@nmu.edu](mailto:marross@nmu.edu)

## Appendix C: Reminder Email

Subject: Reminder of Research Study Invitation

Dear Student,

This is a reminder about the survey I emailed you a little over a week ago. Thank you to all who took the survey! I appreciate your time and attention to my research.

If you have not completed the survey, you still have time!

Please [click here](#) or cut and paste this address into your browser:

[http://nmu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_4OUMlocpZxw3456](http://nmu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_4OUMlocpZxw3456)

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Here is my previous email, in case you did not receive it.

Dear Student,

Here is a chance to express your true beliefs about homosexuality while remaining totally anonymous.

My name is Mary Ross and I am a fellow student here at NMU working on my graduate thesis. I am asking you to complete a short survey on your computer. Homosexuality is a very sensitive topic and I appreciate your complete honesty. I am not looking for

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As a fellow student, I know how busy you are and want to thank you for taking the time to complete my survey and helping me with my research. If you agree to participate, please click here. If this does not work, please copy and paste the following link into your browser.

[http://nmu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_4OUMlocpZxw3456](http://nmu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_4OUMlocpZxw3456)

Mary Ross  
Northern Michigan University  
336 Gries Hall  
(906) 399-8231  
[marross@nmu.edu](mailto:marross@nmu.edu)

## Appendix D: IRB Approval



College of Graduate Studies  
1401 Presque Isle Avenue  
Marquette, MI 49855-5301  
906-227-2300  
FAX: 906-227-2315  
Web site: [www.nmu.edu](http://www.nmu.edu)

Memorandum

November 3, 2011

TO: Mary K. Ross  
Psychology Department

FROM: Terrance Seethoff, Ph.D. *TS*  
Dean of Graduate Studies & Research

SUBJECT: IRB Proposal HS11-428  
"Use of the phrase "That's so gay" as an indicator of homophobic or nonhomophobic attitudes toward homosexuals"

Your proposal "Use of the phrase "That's so gay" as an indicator of homophobic or nonhomophobic attitudes toward homosexuals" has been approved under the administrative review process. Please include your proposal number on all research materials and on any correspondence regarding this project.

Any changes or revisions to your approved research plan must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

kjm