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FAMILIARITY AND UNDERSTANDING OF LGBTQ+ HATE SPEECH

ABSTRACT

This study measured the relationship between the number of LGBTQ+ persons a participant knew and their perception of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) hate speech. Prior sociological and psycholinguistic research precipitated this study's hypothesis that familiarity with non-heteronormative individuals affects one's perception of LGB hate speech. Moreover, it was hypothesized that familiarity with LGBTQ+ persons would positively correlate with perceived offensiveness of gendered hate speech. If such a correlation were found, it would suggest that one's familiarity with the queer community could influence perceived implicit meaning and eventual word choice.

This study included 36 participants and used a two-part survey. The first section of the survey measured participants' familiarity with the LGBTQ+ community and collected demographic information. The second section used a hierarchical rankings system and asked participants to rank anti-LGB hate speech offensiveness in different victim contexts. From the participants' survey responses, two scores were obtained: a measure of participants' personal distance from the LGBTQ+ community and their ratings of LGB hate speech. After collecting all survey responses, the two scores showed medium positive correlations in some categories, thus supporting the study hypothesis that participants with greater familiarity with the LGBTQ+ community would find gender-specific hate speech more offensive.

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, marriage enfranchisement was extended to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer-Inclusive (LGBTQ+) community in the United States (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015). Federal protection for same-sex marriage changed the social landscape for non-heteronormative couples and relationships. For many, marriage equality in the United States signaled the end of an era categorized by discrimination, ignorance, and bigotry against LGBTQ+ persons. This change, propelled by the backlash of Proposition 8 in California, has even caused some to question if the era of closeted sexuality and open discrimination is over in North America (Weber, 2015).

Studies performed in rural areas of the country, however, have shown that discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community still exists in isolated regions, especially those with a small population of "out" LGBTQ+ individuals (Griffin, 2015). Moreover, in situations involving hiring new employees,

Tilcsik (2011) found that openly gay men were likely to face employment discrimination from places that focused on stereotypically male, heterosexual traits. Both studies found that systemic discrimination leads to an in-group/out-group structure which further ostracizes LGBTQ+ persons. This problem is confounded by stereotype homogeneity within minority demographic groups, defined by Brown-Saracino (2015) as the pressure within minority communities to conform to an identity-presentation which resembles one's presenting minority. For example, Brown-Saracino (2015) studied variations within lesbian communities in four separate cities and determined that within groups, identity presentation is significantly more uniform when compared to identity presentation in other lesbian communities.

As demonstrated, previous studies have shown that geography, demographics, and community boundaries in some part affect the external views and internal self-perception of minority groups. Moreover, established research has suggested that rural communities which focus on stereotypically masculine qualities often have higher rates of sexual-identity discrimination. Springfield, Missouri is an example of a small midwestern city surrounded by rural farmland. In April 2015, Springfield was highlighted in national news for its repeal of anti-discrimination laws protecting some civil rights of LGBTQ+ persons living within the city limits. The anti-discrimination ordinance, which had been passed by the city council in October 2014, was repealed by a narrow popular vote on April 7, 2015. Shortly after the repeal, news providers such as *Time Magazine* (Steinmetz, 2015) and *The New York Times* (Yokley, 2015) covered the repeal. This widespread media coverage led to national controversy as more progressive areas of the country, many of whom had passed similar pro-LGBTQ+ ordinances, questioned the motivation, character, and rationale of the Springfield repeal.

The controversy surrounding the Springfield repeal demonstrated the spectrum of opinions on LGBTQ+ rights in relation to an isolated event and is especially relevant in our understanding of part of this particular sample, as well as its impact on national news. Since group opinions on LGBTQ+ rights can be influenced by social factors such as location and community norms, how individual opinions on queer issues evolve must be addressed not only from a psychological research standpoint but also within the context of the perceiver's social environment.

This study was designed to test how one's familiarity—defined as the number of LGBTQ+ individuals a participant knew—affected perception of similar LGB hate speech. Familiarity was chosen for this study because of prior research suggesting that both social influences and familiarity can change personal opinions on issues related to the LGBTQ+ community. Mere exposure

to gay and lesbian persons increases support for gay rights and positive attitudes (Garretson, 2015). By using hierarchical word ranking, this study tested whether a personal factor like familiarity could affect perception of a term's implicit meaning, which is defined by Sagi and Dehghani (2014) as the moral, social, and emotional loading of and schemas surrounding a word or term.

Because of the subjective nature of hierarchical ranking, we theorized that participants' scoring of synonymous terms could be used to help parse one aspect of implicit meaning: offensiveness. This assumption was a reaction to Sagi and Dehghani's (2014) work on understanding how moral rhetoric was used in different texts. They used latent semantic analysis, a computational text tool, to understand the moral strength of words often used in context together. For example, they found an increase in morally-associated words to the term *mosque* after the debate of building a mosque close to Ground Zero in New York City (Sagi & Dehghani, 2014). Although Sagi and Dehghani analyzed the moral loading of words and phrases in rhetorical context, the content of this study built on their idea that presenting terms with associated context allowed for clearer analysis of implicit meaning as tied to familiarity with the LGBTQ+ community.

METHOD

This project distributed a two-part survey over social media. The first section asked participants for their basic information (gender, age, etc.) and the number of LGBTQ+ individuals they knew personally; the secondary section had participants rank terms typically associated with the LGBTQ+ community in order from least to most offensive. This survey was designed around the theory that participants with larger networks of gay acquaintances would more negatively rank specific, gender-oriented hate speech over generic hate speech. Also, by using social media, this survey targeted a variety of geographic locations, such as urban centers and rural areas across the United States, which would provide cross-community input, thus avoiding the stereotype homogeneity within one location as presented by Brown-Saracino (2015). By sampling from varied locations, this study was able to avoid place stereotyping and develop a nuanced analysis of LGB hate speech.

Participants

This study made use of an online survey disseminated via Facebook and email links to 36 individual participants. Fifteen participants were from an undergraduate honors seminar at Missouri State University. These participants were chosen using convenience sampling, and they accessed the survey through an

email link disbursed via the college email server. The remaining 21 participants accessed the survey through a link distributed within a group of past participants at the Interlochen Arts Festival, a national arts program which draws participants from across the country. The author was a member of said group; however, he was not personally acquainted with the majority of persons within the group. Twenty-six participants identified as female, and 10 identified as male. The majority of participants were 18 or younger.

Materials and Procedure

Before viewing the survey, participants were informed they would see potentially offensive speech and that they could end the survey at any time with no penalty. The online survey was divided into two distinct sections: demographic information (from which the independent variable was drawn) and linguistic ranking of LGB slang (from which the dependent variable was drawn). The first section asked participants to provide their gender identity, age, and familiarity with members of the LGBTQ+ community. Questions pertaining to participant demographic and possible participant responses can be found in Appendix A, Table A1.

The second section contained five questions, four of which asked the participants to rank the “offensiveness” of 10 modern and historic LGB slurs within the context of differing sexualities (a heteronormative man/woman, lesbian, and gay man). All rankings were hierarchical, asking participants to rank terms against each other cardinally instead of a sliding scale. For example, all participants were asked to rank how offensive they found the terms “sissy”, “queen” and “f-ggot” alongside seven other words. Identical sets of words were used across both sexuality variants. Adjustments were made according to gender when explicit meaning was required (“tomboy” was used in place of “sissy” for the female variant). For a complete list of terms utilized and their corresponding victim identities, see Appendix A, Table A2.

RESULTS

Data Analytic Conceptualization

The purpose of the study was to measure the correlation between the number of LGBTQ+ individuals a person knew (*Q*-factor) and their perception of LGB hate speech (*R*-factor). In order to determine the *R*-factor of each word, participants were asked to rank the same word four times with different target victims in mind: a heteronormative man/woman, lesbian, and gay man. Because the terms presented had similar linguistic function, difference in par-

ticipant rating allowed this study to measure one aspect of implicit meaning—moral loading of the concept of offensiveness—and correlate this meaning to participants' familiarity with LGBTQ+ persons. Not only did this control for contextual bias within subjects' responses, it also provided an insightful look into how perception of sexuality affects the implicit meaning of hate speech.

In comparing participants' hierarchical ranking of words across both heteronormative and non-heteronormative circumstances, one is able to deduce the contextual offensiveness of individual terms more accurately and observe how familiarity affects perception of offensiveness. This study measured this relationship by having participants hierarchically rate a strongly-gendered term ("fai-y"/"dy-e") and a historically gender-neutral term ("f-ggot") alongside eight placebo hate-speech terms. For statistical analysis, linear correlations were calculated between these word rankings and familiarity for each participant by the term presented in the study. Correlations indicate the degree of relatedness between two variables, such that positive correlations indicate a simultaneous increase in variables, and negative correlations indicate that as one variable increases, the other decreases. However, the main focus in this paper was the comparison of gendered terms to a baseline, using Fisher's r-to-z transformation (Fisher, 1915). This procedure determines if correlations are significantly different, thus indicating a difference in strength of relationship between variables. We use Cohen's (1988) terms to define small ($r = \pm .10$), medium ($r = \pm .30$), and large ($r = \pm .50$) effects.

For each of the four ranking questions, the correlation between individuals' ranking of "f-ggot" (R -factor_{f-ggot}) and familiarity (Q -factor) was the baseline of the study [$r_{\text{baseline}} = \text{correlation}(Q\text{-factor}, R\text{-factor}_{f\text{-}ggot})$]. This term was chosen because it has a history of being directed toward the LGBTQ+ community as a whole, and while one may believe it to only apply to homosexual men, the concept originated as a derogatory term for women (Russo, 1981; faggot, n.d.). The dependent variable of this study was the correlation of familiarity to ranking of the gendered terms [$r_{\text{dependent}} = \text{correlation}(Q\text{-factor}, R\text{-factor}_{\text{orgendered-term}})$]. This method of difference scoring postulated four dependent variable correlations: Heteronormative male ($r_{\text{fai-y/het.}}$), Heteronormative female ($r_{\text{dy-e/het.}}$), Non-heteronormative male ($r_{\text{fai-y/non-het.}}$), and Non-heteronormative female ($r_{\text{dy-e/non-het.}}$). All dependent variable correlations were based on the average participant ranking of presented gendered terms. By subtracting each baseline correlation from its corresponding dependent variable correlation, the final correlation (r_{final}) was determined ($r_{\text{final}} = r_{\text{dependent}} - r_{\text{baseline}}$). See Table 1 for correlation and difference scores as well as their Z -score and p -value. Results are discussed using a $p < .05$ criterion for statistical significance.

Table 1: Averaged Correlations Between Familiarity and Survey Ranking

Target population	Baseline	Gendered	Difference	Z-scores	p-values
HN Man	-0.29	0.40	-0.69	-2.96	<0.01
HN Woman	-0.05	-0.10	0.05	0.22	0.82
NHN man	-0.24	0.20	-0.44	-2.05	0.04
NHN Woman	0.09	-0.19	0.28	1.29	0.20

Note. These are the averaged values of correlations between familiarity (*Q*-factor) and survey ranking (*R*-factor) with their respective *Z*-scores and *p*-values.

Correlation Results

Within participant responses to heteronormative ranking, there were several moderate correlations between *R/Q*-factor. For example, participants with a higher *Q*-factor tended to view the baseline term “f-ggot” as less offensive when directed at a heteronormative man than other words offered. However, participants with higher familiarity scores were likely to rank the gendered term “fai-y” as more offensive than the baseline r_{f-ggot} when used in reference to a heteronormative man. When the r_{f-ggot} score was subtracted from the r_{fai-y} score, a large negative correlation remained ($r_{final/het. male.} = -0.69$). This implies participants with higher familiarity scores could be expected to rank presented gendered terms as significantly more offensive when compared to the study’s baseline rating (*R*-Factor_{f-ggot}).

Similar correlations did not appear in the context of female victimization, which implies there was no significant relationship between participants’ familiarity with LGBTQ+ and their ranking of presented terms in the context of victims perceived as female. There was little correlation of familiarity and ranking between both “f-ggot” and the more gendered term “dy-e.” For individual participant responses, see Figure 1.

Correlations within participant responses to non-heteronormative individuals were less pronounced than those within the heteronormative groups. When ranking words addressed at gay males, the gendered term “fai-y” had the strongest correlation when compared to its baseline. When the $r_{f-ggot/non-het. male}$ score was subtracted from the $r_{fai-y/non-het. male}$ score, a moderate correlation remained. Like the heteronormative group, female victimization was again characterized by low *R*-factors. For graphical representation of individual participant responses, see Figure 2.

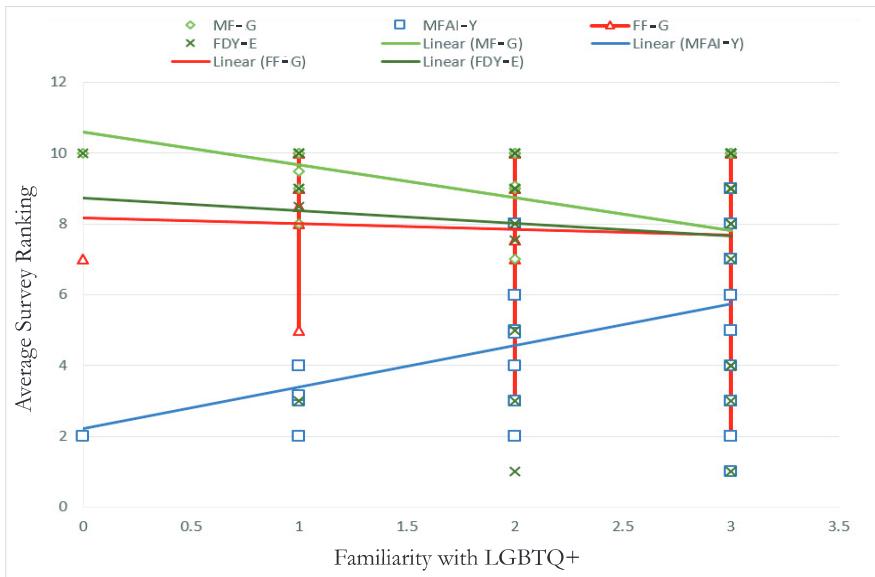


Figure 1. Participant rankings with regression lines for heteronormative sub-group responses. This scatterplot represents each person in the study; however, given the limited range of the scale, individual dots overlap. Regression lines are provided for visual reference.

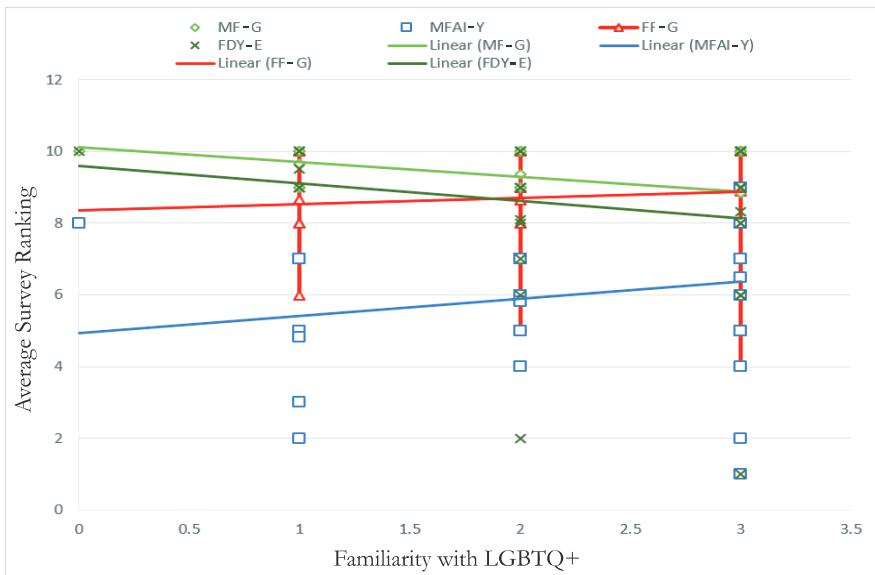


Figure 2. Participant rankings with regression lines for non-heteronormative sub-group responses. Again, the dots in this graph overlap due to the limited range of scores in this study. Regression lines are provided for visual reference.

DISCUSSION

This study suggested a correlation between the number of LGBTQ+ persons an individual knew and their perception of LGB hate speech. The results suggested perceived gender and sexual orientation of hate-speech victims change this correlation. Within both the study's heteronormative and non-heteronormative sub-groups, the correlation was significantly stronger (larger, given Cohen's standards) when referencing male victims as opposed to female victims of hate speech. This result implies that when victims are perceived as male, strongly-gendered hate speech is viewed as more offensive than when the victim is perceived as female. Moreover, when rating hate speech directed at heteronormative victims, the correlation between the independent variable (familiarity to LGBTQ+ community) and dependent variable (individual speech ranking) was larger when contrasted with the non-heteronormative context's rankings. This finding implies participants with higher familiarity scores tended to rank gendered terms as more offensive than non-gendered terms.

These results support this study's hypothesis: namely, that the familiarity with LGBTQ+ persons influences perception of LGB hate speech. However, this study's results demonstrate the complexity of hate speech's implicit meaning. Judging from participant responses, it seems that LGB hate speech is subject to varied social forces, such as perceived gender, sexual orientation, and personal familiarity. Together, these social identifiers form elements of hate speech's implicit meaning, such as offensiveness. Though formally, terms such as "f-ggot," "dy-e," and "fai-y" are consistently classified as hate speech, the variability of participants' hierarchical rankings shows a diverse and nuanced view of participants' understanding of implicit meaning. As a sub-unit of English vocabulary, this study suggests LGB hate speech terms tend to have surprisingly flexible implicit meaning in spite of the individual terms' strict formal definitions.

From a societal viewpoint, this information could be used to help understand how LGBTQ+ visibility within society influences individual understanding, tolerance, and education with regards to sexual orientation and gender identity. Since this study seems to suggest that familiarity with the LGBTQ+ community does indeed alter linguistic perception, it would be reasonable to assume that the presence of out gay, lesbian, and non-binary individuals within a given community could change perception. In the future, further psycholinguistic investigations could explore how demographic and geographical communities respond to the presence of out LGBTQ+ persons in an attempt to understand how visibility of the LGBTQ+ community impacts

LGBTQ+ rights and issues. This research is especially crucial in the context of historical views of homosexuality and could potentially be integrated with new ways to educate others about sexual prejudice (Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016).

Within this study, certain limitations exist. Namely, the sample size was less diverse than anticipated, and the survey was limited to only 10 questions. In further studies, this research should be expanded to include both wider sample studies (statewide/national level) and more focused sample studies (within individual high schools, socio-economic brackets, etc.) to allow this research to be extrapolated to more diverse populations. If the study were to be replicated, it would be worth including a third section on gender identity (male, female, transgender male, transgender female, and non-binary) to better understand the discrepancies found in this preliminary study within its pre-fabricated contexts.

Studying the language surrounding minority communities provides workable data on the societal, personal, and cognitive processes which characterize these groups and persons. Quantitative, psycholinguistic research is essential when engaging complex social groups. Research similar to this study's analysis of LGBTQ+ language should aim not only to analyze the data which presents itself, but also to use a mathematical structure to provide targeted analysis to their research findings (Sagi & Dehghani, 2014). As future studies deal with more complex, fluid aspects of queer culture, quantitative analysis can provide not only an accurate look at specific functions of LGBTQ+ language, but also the means by which to deconstruct queer theory from an empirical, non-binary-based viewpoint.

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APPENDIX A

Participants within this study's survey were asked to answer four questions regarding their demographics. The questions were about age, gender identity, religious affiliation, and familiarity with LGBTQ+ persons. Possible responses to these questions can be found in Table A1.

Within this study's survey, participants were presented four different contextual cues with corresponding word lists for ranking. These questions included the following text: "Rate the following words (least to most offensive) with the assumption that they are directed towards a [sexual identity marker]." To identify gender and sexual identity, four phrases were substituted for "sexual identity marker" in the previous statement: straight man, straight woman, gay man, and lesbian woman. In Table A2, lists of hate speech terms presented in the study can be found.

Table A1: Demographic Survey Questions

Question presented to participants.	Age	What is your Gender Identity?	Do you identify with any of the following religions? Please select all that apply.	How many LGBTQ+ people do you personally know?
Possible Response 1	>18	I identify as male.	Christianity	
		I identify as female.	Judaism	
	18–29	I identify as neither male nor female.	Islam	0
			Buddhism	1–3
	30–44		Hinduism	3–7
			Not Religious	8+
	45–59		Agnosticism	
		I prefer not to answer.	Atheism	
	60+		Other	

Note. These are the demographic questions presented in this study's survey organized by question type and possible responses.

Table A2: LGB Hate-speech Survey Terms

Functional use of the word in study's analysis	Heteronormative and Non-heteronormative Man	Heteronormative and Non-heteronormative Woman
Baseline	F-ggot	F-ggot
Gendered Term	Fai-y	Dy-e
Placebo	Pansy	Butch
Placebo	Sodomite	Tomboy
Placebo	Sissy	Lesbo
Placebo	Gay	Femme
Placebo	Twink	Lesbian

Note. These are the LGB hate-speech terms that were presented in the survey. They were organized by context and function within the study.