

# Many heterosexual college males say 'That's so gay,' but why?

January 30 2013, by Jared Wadley

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(Phys.org)—"That's so gay" is a popular expression on campuses nationwide among heterosexual students, especially young men. But why do they say it? A new University of Michigan study sheds light on this question.

"That's so gay," although not necessarily said to harm lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) students, can create a hostile environment, say U-M

researchers. Inherent in this saying—frequently used to declare something, some behavior or someone as "stupid" or "uncool"—is the assumption that being gay is inferior and that being heterosexual is desirable.

Regardless of the underlying intent, these messages can negatively affect LGB students, says Michael Woodford, assistant professor at the U-M School of Social Work and the study's lead author. The findings suggest that heterosexual [male students](#)' tendency toward saying "that's so gay" is partially explained by certain attitudes and factors.

"Studies find that perpetuating LGB hate crimes and gay bullying is strongly correlated with homophobia. Therefore, it is commonly assumed that [homophobia](#) is linked to saying 'that's so gay,'" Woodford said. "However, our results suggest otherwise."

Among the heterosexual male undergraduates surveyed, attitudes about the [acceptability](#) of same-sexuality were unrelated to using the phrase, but levels of discomfort with feminine men were related. The more respondents were uncomfortable around feminine men, the more likely they were to report saying the phrase.

The study also found that when respondents heard the phrase frequently, they tended to say it more often.

"We're all affected by the social context we're in," Woodford said. "Our results suggest that students may replicate what they hear others say. Some students who use the phrase simply may be following the dominant language norms or are unconsciously replicating others' behaviors."

Most [respondents](#) (65 percent) reported saying "that's so gay" at least once on campus in the past 12 months, and 31 percent reported using the

phrase 10-plus times. Nearly 90 percent of the students reported hearing "that's so gay" at least once on campus; 63 percent indicated hearing the phrase 10 or more times.

"The high rate of usage suggests that using the phrase is part of the campus's implicit culture," Woodford said. "It's a cultural norm, one that the campus culture has allowed to develop and continue. As a result, students perceive it is okay to use the phrase."

In contrast to previous research, the current study found that being exposed to lesbians, gays and bisexuals, specifically acquaintances, may reduce the number of times a person uses the phrase.

Earlier research conducted by Woodford and colleagues found that LGB students are at increased risk for feeling unaccepted on campus as well as experiencing physical health problems, such as headaches, the more they hear "that's so gay."

"Since these problems can interfere with students' academic performance, eliminating the use of the expression from college campuses is important in fostering lesbian, gay and bisexual students' well-being and potential," Woodford said.

Data were collected using an anonymous online survey that asked about experiencing and witnessing harassment and other forms of interpersonal mistreatment on campus, as well as students' attitudes.

The study used data from 378 male undergraduates between 18 and 25 years of age who identified as "completely heterosexual." Participants were asked how many times in the past 12 months they had "said the phrase 'that's so gay' to suggest something was stupid or undesirable." They were asked about the frequency of hearing the phrase used in the same way.

The study suggests that to eliminate the phrase from college campuses, education focusing on increasing male students' comfort with, and ultimately acceptance of, atypical male gender expression will make a difference. Also, it is critical for staff, faculty and [students](#) to intervene when they hear the phrase, thereby conveying that such language is inappropriate and ultimately beginning to change the [social context](#) and interrupt a potentially harmful social norm.

The study's other authors were Michael Howell, assistant professor of social work at Appalachian State University; Alex Kulick, a U-M undergraduate student in Women's Studies and research assistant in the School of Social Work; and Perry Silverschanz, a U-M lecturer in the School of [Social Work](#) and the Department of Psychology.

The findings appear in the January issue of *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.

**More information:** Journal of Interpersonal Violence:  
[jiv.sagepub.com/content/28/2.toc](http://jiv.sagepub.com/content/28/2.toc)

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