

**Friendly Teasing or Traumatic Bullying? Examining the Conditioning Effect of Social
Distance on the Negative Psychological Outcomes of Homophobic Name-Calling**

Kai Lin, Ph.D.*

Lecturer

School of International Studies and Education

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

University of Technology Sydney

Email: kai.lin@uts.edu.au

ORCID: 0000-0003-3966-0009

Lin Liu, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor

University of Florida

Department of Sociology and Criminology and Law

Email: lin.liu@ufl.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-9041-8296

Abstract

This study examined homophobic name-calling among 2,161 middle school students in the US and found that those who had experienced homophobic name-calling fared significantly worse than those who had never experienced it, regardless of whether they were called names by rivals, strangers, or friends. While this study also found evidence that the adverse mental health effect of homophobic name-calling was worse if it had been initiated by rivals than by friends, the overall findings affirm the potent and enduring toxicity of homophobic name-calling on adolescents' mental health documented in previous studies. Despite some limitations, findings from the current study shed light on our currently ambiguous understanding of the conditioning effect of social distance on the negative psychological impacts of homophobic name-calling and pose several implications for bullying prevention and intervention practice and policymaking.

Keywords: Adolescent, Homophobic Name-Calling, LGBTQ, Teens, Bullying

Introduction

Teasing is a complex social interaction underlying a wide range of behaviors from offer-withdrawal games between parents and young children to affectionate nickname-calling, banter, and flirtations between intimate partners or friends. Despite its versatility, most instances of teasing are characterized simultaneously by both (a) controlled and subtle aggression or denial *and* (b) more prosocial elements such as humor and play (Keltner et al., 2001). One controversial instance of “teasing” that has generated much research in recent years is homophobic name-calling among adolescents (Moyano & Sánchez-Fuentes, 2020; Tucker et al., 2016). Existing empirical research suggests that a substantial number of secondary school students in the US experience being called homophobic names (Felix et al. 2009; Kerr et al. 2011; Russell et al. 2012; Sinclair et al. 2012). Current research overwhelmingly suggests that the use of homophobic slurs, regardless of intention and perception of intention, can lead to negative psychological outcomes. Homophobic name-calling has been found to be associated with a wide range of negative psychological and behavioral outcomes including decreased trust in peers (see D’Urso et al., 2018), attenuated school belonging (Hatchel, Espelage, & Huang, 2018; Hatchel, Merrin, & Espelage, 2018), depression and anxiety (Rawlings & Espelage, 2020; Symons et al., 2014), increase in substance use (Tucker et al., 2016), and perpetration of dating violence (Espelage et al., 2018; Humphrey & Vaillancourt, 2020).

In addition to these findings, however, there is also an emerging, albeit mixed, body of evidence (Miller et al., 2020; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021; Pascoe, 2005; Tucker et al., 2016) suggesting that the social distance between the “teaser” and the “teasee” may influence the mental health outcomes of homophobic name-calling. Such a conditioning effect may pose practical implications for anti-bullying prevention and intervention, as different strategies may be

needed for optimal efficacy in these efforts, and the current literature has not sufficiently examined this potential divergence in effect.

To fill this knowledge gap and potentially improve the precision and efficacy of bullying prevention and intervention strategies, this study analyzes longitudinal data of a large sample of students from 36 Midwestern middle schools in the US and compares mental health outcomes among teens who were never called homophobic names and those who were called homophobic names by friends, rivals, and strangers. This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Do the negative psychological effects of homophobic name-calling on adolescents vary by the social distance between the person calling and the person being called?
2. Does homophobic name-calling in a “teasing” context among friends pose significant mental health concerns that warrant structured intervention, and if so, what should these intervention efforts look like compared to traditional bullying intervention and prevention?

Literature Review

The Fine Line between Teasing and Bullying

Teasing is common among adolescents. Children after the age of 10 can tell the distinction between ironic and literal criticisms and are able to understand ironic criticisms as a form of teasing (Mills, 2018; Pexman et al., 2005). They understand how a message that provokes them can also be funny and, above all, harmless. From sixth grade through high school, the proportion of adolescents teasing and experiencing teasing increased from 10% to 60% (Sherer & Clark, 2009). Teasing is used by youths to serve several purposes (Baxter, 1992; Eder et al., 1995; Voss, 1997; Mills, 2018). First of all, it can be used among friends as a prosocial way to increase intimacy, introduce taboo topics, and resolve conflicts. Nevertheless, teasing is

not always harmless or well-intentioned. When intended, it can induce severe psychological harm and serve as an effective bullying tactic against disliked peers (Kowalski, 2003). Bullying in the form of malicious teasing during childhood has been linked to a subsequent increase in depressive symptoms and social anxiety in adult life (Storch et al., 2004; Strawser, Storch, & Roberti, 2005).

Because teasing can be bullying in disguise, adolescents consider the relationship they have with the teaser when interpreting the intention of a tease they experience (Jones et al., 2005). Most teens feel that teasing among friends is acceptable because those closest to them know their non-hostile intentions, and vice versa (Mills, 2018; Rawlins, 1992). When teasing is used in a deliberately cruel manner against a friend, it is associated with the worsening of interpersonal relationships between the teaser and the teasee (Ledley et al., 2006; Storch et al., 2004). Even if a seemingly well-intentioned tease was masterfully executed, research found that certain topics are so toxic that they are simply “off limits” to teasing. For instance, research on weight-based and appearance-based teasing has shown almost universally negative psychological (e.g., depression and anxiety) and behavioral consequences (e.g., eating disorder) from these types of teasing, even when they were initiated by friends in a joking manner (Lie, Rø, & Bang, 2019; Menzel et al., 2010). Taken together, all of this research suggests that the line between teasing and bullying is fuzzy, and it depends on several contextual factors such as the relationship between the teaser and the teasee, the status of their relationship, and the topic of the tease.

Homophobic Name-Calling among Adolescents

Another controversial topic in “teasing” is homophobic name-calling among adolescent peers. Adolescence is a critical developmental stage where gender socialization takes place and

where interpersonal skills are developed. Using homophobic slurs is not uncommon among adolescents: Miller and colleagues' (2020) survey of teenage boys in the US showed that three-quarters of the boys call their peers homophobic names.

When intended, homophobic slurs can communicate bona fide anti-LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer) sentiments and constitute serious bullying and hate-based violence. However, research has shown that homophobic name-calling is not always meant to directly attack those who identify as LGBTQ. Pascoe's (2005) study on adolescent boys in the US demonstrated that homophobic name-calling is not as often an attack on another boy's sexual orientation as it is on his masculinity. Boys perceived to be unmasculine, regardless of their sexual orientation, are subject to homophobic name-calling and marked as inferior. If a boy fails to defend his masculinity by aggressively rejecting the label, they risk further stigmatization. Nevertheless, it should be noted that sexual orientation still plays a part in the targeting of homophobic name-calling. Pascoe (2005) further explained that boys who were perceived as *both* gay and unmasculine received the worst treatment from their male peers, often subject to verbal, emotional, and physical abuse. Similar to its use among boys, homophobic labeling is also deployed by adolescent girls to police the boundaries of acceptable femininity, in addition to other mechanisms of sexualized "teasing" such as "slut-shaming" (Miller, 2017).

Even though homophobic name-calling may be more commonly used to police gender role conformity rather than to launch hate-based attacks against sexual minorities, research overwhelmingly supports the link between homophobic name-calling and a myriad of negative mental health outcomes including increased depression and anxiety (Rawlings & Espelage, 2020; Symons et al., 2014; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008), suicidal ideation and attempts (Cochran & Mays, 2000; D'Augelli et al., 2002), decreased trust in peers (D'Urso et al., 2018),

attenuated school belonging (Hatchel, Espelage, & Huang, 2018; Hatchel, Merrin, & Espelage, 2018), increase in substance use (Tucker et al., 2016), perpetration of dating violence (Espelage et al., 2018; Humphrey & Vaillancourt, 2020), and feeling unsafe (Swearer et al., 2008) and not belonging (Poteat et al., 2011) at school (Swearer et al., 2008) among *both* heterosexual and sexual minority youths. For example, based on a sample of 251 boys (9th-11th grades) in a private, all-male college preparatory school, Swearer and her colleagues (2008) reported that 26% of the boys were victims of homophobic name-calling and the victims perceived school to be unsafe and experienced more severe anxiety and depression than non-victims. Using a sample consisting of 350 lesbian, gay, or bisexual youths in high schools, D'Augelli and colleagues (2002) found that participants' current mental health symptoms, especially traumatic stress reactions, were associated with verbal abuse directed at their perceived sexual orientation. Based on a large sample of 15,923 adolescents in grades 7 through 12, Poteat and colleagues (2011) found that homophobic name-calling is significantly associated with lower levels of school belonging and more frequent suicidal ideation, and this damaging effect could not have been offset by more parental support. Another more recent study (Espelage et al., 2018) tested the *Bully–Sexual Violence Pathway* theory (which posits that adolescent bullies who also participate in homophobic name-calling toward peers are more likely to perpetrate sexual violence over time) and found support for it: middle school homophobic name-calling perpetration increased the odds of perpetrating sexual violence in high school among early middle school bullying male and female perpetrators.

As the evidence suggests, even homophobic name-calling done in a friendly and joking manner may negatively contribute to psychological wellbeing among adolescents. However, the context of homophobic name-calling still matters, as it may influence the *degree* of

psychological harm, and warrant context-specific prevention and intervention strategies. One of such contexts is the social distance of the relationship between the “teaser” and “teasee.” Some research, such as Tucker and colleagues’ study (2016), found that only homophobic name-calling from non-friends negatively influenced the mental health of US high school students. While this study was limited by not having controlled for previous states of mental health and not having compared across multiple roles on the scale of social distance (e.g., from friends to strangers to rivals), it provided empirical support for the potentially heterogeneous effect of homophobic name-calling by social distance. Several qualitative studies have also provided insights into how social distance may affect how adolescents perceive homophobic name-calling. For example, Miller and colleagues (2020) found that the boys in their study normalized calling each other “gay” and trivialized it as “just random talk.” Odenbring & Johansson (2021) discovered that homophobic name-calling was a part of boys’ “lad culture” and was framed as an everyday joke *believed* by the teasers to enhance peer bonding. In contrast to Tucker and colleagues’ (2016) research, findings from these qualitative studies do not suggest that homophobic name-calling by friends is any less harmful psychologically. In fact, in close relationships, individuals develop higher expectations for the behavior of their friends and partners (Campos, Keltner, Beck, Gonzaga, & John, 2007; Keltner et al., 2001). Hurtful teases from intimate others may be even more painful and difficult for the recipient to escape or forgive (Kowalski, 2003). Given the mixed and nuanced findings from these studies, more sophisticatedly designed research is warranted to further unpack the influence of social distance on the psychological impacts of homophobic name-calling.

The Current Study

Although the studies reviewed above added a great deal to our understanding of homophobic name-calling on adolescent mental health, very few utilized a longitudinal design to supplement single time-point estimation. Furthermore, few studies systematically tested the potentially varying effect of homophobic name-calling across different roles on the scale of social distance. Finally, most existing quantitative studies did not control for respondents' previous states of mental health. A recent study by Davis and colleagues (2018) reported that after controlling for the pre-existing level of depression, bullying victimization did not predict deterioration in depressive symptoms. Given that pre-existing levels of mental health is a salient confounder in the analysis of bullying victimization and mental health, it is imperative to adjust for the impact of prior mental health status when assessing the effect of homophobic name-calling. Therefore, the current study aims to examine the potentially divergent impact of homophobic name-calling by social distance on adolescents' mental health and school belonging, controlling for respondents' previous mental health status.

Methods

Setting

We utilized data from a longitudinal randomized clinical trial of a socio-emotional learning program, publicly available via the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). 2,698 students from 36 middle schools in Illinois and Kansas participated in the four-wave study, of which data collection occurred during each spring between 2010 and 2013. Participating schools were recruited through the school district offices, and each school had consented to be assigned to either an intervention (i.e., implementing a socio-emotional learning program aimed at bullying prevention) or control condition. To be eligible, the schools could not have been implementing any large-scale bullying prevention curriculum or initiative,

and control schools agreed not to implement a bullying prevention program until after the three-year trial.

Procedures

All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the respective Institutional Review Board of the Principal Investigators' (PI) affiliated universities. School districts were contacted by the PI in each state to introduce the project and to identify schools interested in participating. For all participating schools, parents of all sixth-grade students were sent letters informing them of the purpose and procedures of the study. Several meetings were also held to inform parents of the study in each community. An 86% participation rate was achieved in schools using a waiver of passive consent and a 63% participation rate was achieved for schools using an active consent procedure. In addition, students were asked to consent to participate in the study through a consent procedure included on the cover sheet of the survey. Trained research assistants administered surveys to classes ranging in size from 10 to 25 students. The research assistants first informed the students of the general purpose of the investigation. Students were then given survey packets and the survey was also read out loud to them. It took the students approximately 40 minutes to complete the survey.

Participants

At the beginning of this longitudinal research project, a total of 3,651 sixth-grade students were recruited to participate in the four-wave survey study. Like many other longitudinal studies, participants in this study experienced attrition over the four waves of data collection. The current study utilized the two waves of data collected when respondents were in 7th and 8th grade (i.e., in 2012 and 2013), respectively (hereafter T1 and T2 data) in order to reliably include homophobic name-calling (which was highly censored in 5th and 6th grade).

The onset of puberty typically occurs during 7th and 8th grade, and youths begin to use joking banter and teasing in socialization and understand the concepts of sexuality and gender identity (Ingram et al., 2019). Thus, this developmental stage provides an ideal time to observe teasing and homophobic name-calling. After excluding cases with missing values on the variables of interest to the current study, we finalized a sample of 2,161 youths. Missing data analysis suggests that excluded cases were comparable in means and standard deviations on experiencing homophobic name-calling, age, school belonging, depression, and other relevant variables.

Measures

Dependent Variables. *T2 Depression.* This scale included nine items derived from the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977). Participants were asked how often in the past 30 days they: (1) were very sad; (2) were grouchy or irritable, or in a bad mood; (3) felt hopeless about the future; (4) felt like not eating or eating more than usual; (5) slept a lot more or a lot less than usual; and (6) had difficulty concentrating on their school work; (7) worried a lot; (8) felt happy; (9) felt nervous or afraid that things would not work out the way they would like them to. Response categories included 0 = never, 1= seldom, 2= sometimes, 3= often, and 4 = always. This scale showed desirable inter-item reliability in the current sample ($\alpha = .84-.85$).

T2 School Belonging. This was measured by the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (Goodenow, 1993). Students were asked how much they agreed with the following statements: “I feel proud of belonging to my school,” “I am treated with as much respect as other students are,” “The teachers here respect me,” and “There is at least one teacher or another adult in this school I can talk to if I have a problem.” Response categories were cast

on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (4) strongly agree. The items exhibited good internal reliability ($\alpha = .81-.82$).

Independent Variables. *Homophobic Name-Calling.* This was measured by the following survey question: “Some kids call each other names like homo or gay. How many times in the past 30 days did the following person say these words to you?” Then they were asked how often these words were said by a friend, someone they did not know well, or someone they did not like. Original responses included 0=Never, 1=1 or 2 times, 2=3 or 4 times, 3=5 or 6 times, and 4=7 or more times. Due to very small counts of students who reported being teased more than 3 times, we recoded them into binary responses indicating whether respondents were teased over the past 30 days. Based on the three-item agent responses, respondents were categorized into four groups: never experienced homophobic name-calling, called homophobic names by friends, by strangers, and by rivals.

School Environment. Multiple proxies of school environment were assessed. *School Racial Diversity* was indicated as the percentage of White students in each school. *School Size* was a numeric variable representing the number of students enrolled in each school. *Student Disadvantage* was represented by the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. *Bullying Prevention* was a binary variable with 1 indicating the school implements bullying intervention programs.

Student Demographic Characteristics. *Age* was a numeric variable representing students’ self-reported age. *Sex* was a dummy variable with 0 representing male and 1 representing female. *Race* contained seven categories in the survey: White, Black/African American, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, and Multi-Racial. We recoded this variable into a variable with four categories: White, Black, Latinx, and Other, as the number of

Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, and Multi-Racial respondents was very small in the sample.

T1 Depression and School Belonging. These two variables were measured in the same way as *T2 Depression* and *School Belonging*.

Analytic Strategy

This study follows a four-step analytic approach. First, we provided descriptive statistics of all the variables used in the study. Second, we examined correlations between T2 homophobic name-calling and T2 depression and school belonging. Third, multilevel models (i.e., random coefficient models) were constructed to attain a more unbiased estimation of model coefficients by controlling for the clustering of individual students (i.e., Level-1 units) in different schools (i.e., Level-2 units). Meanwhile, we also controlled for a range of confounders including school environment, student demographic characteristics, as well as T1 depression and school belonging. After model estimates were returned, we conducted post hoc pairwise comparisons of depression and school belonging outcomes across different subgroups by social distance (i.e., from friends to strangers to rivals). Performing multiple comparisons on the same outcome measure risks inflating the probability of Type I errors (i.e., false positives). To address this concern, we employed the Bonferroni correction procedure to safeguard against family-wise error rates (Proschan & Waclawiw, 2000; Sinclair, Taylor, & Hobbs, 2013).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of all variables included in this study. 48 % of the students were female, 25% White, 35% Latinx, 26% Black/African American, and 14% were grouped into the “Other Race” category. Their average age was 13.2 years. 54% of the

students enrolled in schools that received a bullying intervention program. 55.4% of the students did not experience homophobic name-calling over the past month, and among the rest 44.6% of students who did experience it, 23.5% were called primarily by rivals in school, 17.3% by friends, and 3.8% by strangers.

[insert Table 1 here]

Differences in Depression and School Belonging across Subgroups of Students

Figure 1 presents the average levels of depression and school belonging across subgroups of students who were called homophobic names by people of different social distance to them. The group called names by rival students in school reported the highest level of depression ($\mu = 16.88$), followed by the group called names by strangers ($\mu = 16.56$) and friends ($\mu = 14.62$). The group who never experienced being called homophobic names reported the lowest level of depression ($\mu = 12.24$). The pattern of school belonging across these six groups is largely the reverse of the pattern of depression (Figure 2). The highest level of school belonging was found among those who never experienced homophobic name-calling ($\mu = 12.19$). Those who were called names by rivals ($\mu = 11.60$) and friends ($\mu = 11.59$) reported lower levels of school belonging than those who were called names by strangers in school ($\mu = 11.65$).

[insert Figures 1 and 2 here]

The Impact of Homophobic Name-Calling on Depression and School Belonging

Model 1 in Table 2 summarizes the results of the multilevel models on depression and school belonging, with school and student level confounders being controlled for. We found that the groups teased by friends ($b=2.35, p<0.001$), rivals ($b=3.48, p<0.001$), and strangers ($b=2.78, p<0.001$) all experienced significantly higher levels of depression than their peers who never experienced homophobic name-calling (reference group). The coefficient of the group

called names by rivals was the highest in value, indicating the gap in depression between them and the reference group was the largest. For the coefficients of control variables, school-level demographics did not reach statistical significance in the model. However, some of the student-level variables were significant. Male students exhibited significantly lower levels of depression than females ($b=-3.26, p<0.001$). Not surprisingly, one's prior level of depression was a significant predictor of current depression ($b=0.46, p<0.001$). Post hoc comparisons of the Bonferroni-adjusted means of depression across the three subgroups were performed (Table 3). Four of the six pairwise comparisons of depression reached statistical significance. Those called names by friends, rivals, and strangers reported significantly higher levels of depression than the reference group. Meanwhile, homophobic name-calling by rivals more severely impacted mental health than that by friends. Students who were called names by rivals reported significantly higher levels of depression than those called names by friends.

The multilevel model estimating the effects of homophobic name-calling on school belonging is summarized in Model 2 of Table 2. With control variables adjusted for, we found that three comparison groups reported significantly lower levels of school belonging than the reference group: those called names by friends ($b=-0.37, p<0.001$), rivals ($b=-0.22, p<0.001$), and strangers ($b=-0.44, p<0.001$). In particular, the gap between those called names by strangers and the reference group was the largest. For control variables, we found that race was a significant predictor of school belonging. Compared to White students, Black ($b=-0.59, p<0.001$) as well as Other Race students ($b=-0.65, p<0.001$) reported significantly lower levels of school belonging. Prior levels of school belonging also significantly predicted current level school belonging ($b=0.46, p<0.001$). Post hoc pairwise comparisons of school belonging showed that the reference group reported significantly higher levels of school belonging than the groups

called names by friends, rivals, and strangers (Table 4). However, there were no significant differences in school belonging between these three groups who had experienced homophobic name-calling.

[insert Table 2, 3, and 4 here]

Discussion

This study examined homophobic name-calling among middle school students in the US and found that those who had experienced homophobic name-calling fared significantly worse than those who had never experienced it, regardless of whether they were called names by rivals, strangers, or friends. While this study also found evidence that the adverse mental health effect of homophobic name-calling was worse if it had been initiated by rivals than by friends, the overall findings affirm the potent and enduring toxicity of homophobic name-calling on adolescents' mental health documented in previous studies (D'Urso et al., 2018; Espelage et al., 2018; Hatchel, Espelage, & Huang, 2018; Hatchel, Merrin, & Espelage, 2018; Humphrey & Vaillancourt, 2020; Rawlings & Espelage, 2020; Symons et al., 2014; Tucker et al., 2016).

These findings shed light on our currently ambiguous understanding of the conditioning effect of social distance on the negative psychological impacts of homophobic name-calling. Executing a prosocial tease is a delicate social maneuver. Even without the homophobic motif, this is a risky move that could end up jeopardizing a friendship if not done carefully. By using homophobic slurs, the prosocial foundation of a "tease" is at grave risk of crumbling. This is why homophobic "teasing" causes distress regardless of social distance, as is documented in the current study. By using homophobic slurs, the fear of peer ostracization outweighs any benefit of peer bonding. Even if the teasee did not self-identify as LGBTQ and the process did not result in them being permanently categorized as such, this fear-ridden interaction takes a toll on the

friendship, which is supposed to be a safe haven where you are appreciated by your peers. Assuming that the friendship is strong and resilient, it may withstand the blow of occasional homophobic “teasing” (which is why we are seeing lower levels of adverse mental health outcomes when teasing is initiated by friends). However, this does not mean the friendship is not damaged, however slightly, every time it happens.

This study also found that the adverse effect of homophobic name-calling on adolescent mental health was more pronounced among Black youths and other racial and ethnic minorities. Studies have documented generally less tolerant attitudes toward same-sex intimacy in the Black community (Lewis, 2003; Worthen, 2018), and homophobic name-calling may therefore be especially detrimental to the self-esteem of Black adolescents. In addition, the impact of homophobic name-calling was also stronger for girls than for boys. This suggests that while homophobic name-calling may be more common among boys (Miller et al., 2020; Pascoe, 2005), girls may be more vulnerable to this type of victimization. More research efforts should be dedicated to studying homophobic name-calling among members of these previously understudied groups.

Besides these intellectual contributions, the findings from the current study pose several implications for bullying prevention and intervention practice and policymaking. A recent meta-analysis of 100 independent evaluations of anti-bullying programs across different countries in Europe and North America (Gaffney, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2021) found that the presence of a number of intervention components, including whole-school approach, anti-bullying policies, classroom rules, information for parents, informal peer involvement, and working with victims, were significantly associated with larger effect sizes for school-bullying perpetration outcomes.

The presence of informal peer involvement and information for parents were associated with larger effect sizes for school-bullying victimization outcomes.

Considering these “best practices”, three policy and practice recommendations are offered here. First, at the school and school-district level, anti-bullying policies that provide clear definitions and examples of homophobic bullying and specify that these behaviors are not accepted, are strongly recommended, along with clear procedures for dealing with such behaviors. School-wide bullying prevention and emotional learning programs should also openly address the issue of homophobic name-calling, not only from the perspective of tolerance and inclusion of sexual minorities but also from the perspective of cultivating healthy, prosocial interpersonal skills among friends. Developing informal peer support groups and providing education for by-stander intervention is also recommended at the school level. Parents should also be enlisted in the endeavor of education and prevention through school-parent communications and information dissemination. Second, at the classroom level, teachers should be educated on the detriments of homophobic name-calling and be trained to carry out timely interventions (including referrals to counseling and communicating with parents) per school policies. Teachers should also be advised to provide students with clear classroom rules for homophobic name-calling.

Finally, regarding rehabilitation, supportive interventions involving communication are preferred over sheerly punitive measures such as suspension and expulsion (Day et al., 2016). Tolerance and inclusion education (especially that of sexual minorities), along with mental health counseling, should be the main focus of the rehabilitation program for this type of cases. In addition, strategies for cultivating cognitive understanding and empathy towards their friends in the process of interpersonal communication are also recommended.

Concededly, several limitations to this study exist. First, this study relied on self-reported survey data, which inevitably introduces the issue of shared-measurement variance (i.e., the same respondent filling out measures of both the dependent variable and its predictors). Furthermore, gender was measured in a binary manner and the sexual orientation of the participants was not measured in this secondary data set. This has limited our capacity to analyze the potentially diverging experiences with homophobic name-calling between cisgender and trans students, and across students of different sexual orientations. Third, due to data limitations, we were unable to examine the dyadic and group dynamics of homophobic name-calling. Future studies should aspire to explore how these factors affect the initiation of homophobic name-calling. Future studies should also attempt to assess how the presence of bystanders may impact the psychological harm of homophobic name-calling.

Conclusion

While homophobic name-calling has been a commonplace occurrence among secondary school students in the US, and some would argue that it is an integral and largely harmless aspect of gender socialization, findings from the current study have demonstrated otherwise. Homophobic name-calling takes a heavy toll on adolescents' mental health and school attachment, and although its negative impact may diminish, it does not disappear even if it was initiated by a friend, in comparison to that initiated by a stranger or rival. Despite several limitations, findings from the current study shed light on our currently ambiguous understanding of conditioning effect of social distance on the negative psychological impacts of homophobic name-calling among friends and pose a number of implications for bullying prevention and intervention practice and policymaking.

References

- Alberts, J. K. (1992). Teasing and Sexual Harassment: Double-Bind Communication. *Constructing and reconstructing gender: The links among communication, language, and gender*, 10, 185.
- Baxter, L. A. (1992). Forms and functions of intimate play in personal relationships. *Human Communication Research*, 18(3), 336-363.
- Campos, B., Keltner, D., Beck, J. M., Gonzaga, G. C., & John, O. P. (2007). Culture and teasing: The relational benefits of reduced desire for positive self-differentiation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 33(1), 3-16.
- Cochran, S. D., & Mays, V. M. (2000). Lifetime prevalence of suicide symptoms and affective disorders among men reporting same-sex sexual partners: results from NHANES III. *American journal of public health*, 90(4), 573.
- D'Urso, G., Petruccelli, I., & Pace, U. (2018). The interplay between trust among peers and interpersonal characteristics in homophobic bullying among Italian adolescents. *Sexuality & Culture*, 22(4), 1310-1320.
- D'Augelli, A. R., Pilkington, N. W., & Hershberger, S. L. (2002). Incidence and mental health impact of sexual orientation victimization of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths in high school. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 17(2), 148.
- Davis, E. M., Campbell, M. A., & Whiteford, C. (2018). Bullying victimization in non-heterosexual university students. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 30(3), 299-313.
- Davis, J. P., Dumas, T. M., Merrin, G. J., Espelage, D. L., Tan, K., Madden, D., & Hong, J. S. (2018). Examining the pathways between bully victimization, depression, academic achievement, and problematic drinking in adolescence. *Psychology of addictive behaviors*, 32(6), 605.
- Eder, D., Evans, C. C., & Parker, S. (1995). *School talk: Gender and adolescent culture*. New Brunswick.
- Eder, Donna. 1991. The role of teasing in adolescent peer group culture. In *Sociological studies of child development*, edited by S. Cahill. Greenwich, CT: JAI.
- Eisenberg, A. R. (1986). Teasing: Verbal play in two Mexicano homes. *Language socialization across cultures*, 3, 182-198.
- Espelage, D. L., Basile, K. C., Leemis, R. W., Hipp, T. N., & Davis, J. P. (2018). Longitudinal examination of the bullying-sexual violence pathway across early to late adolescence: Implicating homophobic name-calling. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 47(9), 1880-1893.

- Espelage, D. L., Merrin, G. J., & Hatchel, T. (2018). Peer victimization and dating violence among LGBTQ youth: The impact of school violence and crime on mental health outcomes. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, 16*(2), 156-173.
- Felix, E. D., Furlong, M. J., & Austin, G. (2009). A cluster analytic investigation of school violence victimization among diverse students. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 24*, 1673–1695.
- Gaffney, H., Ttofi, M. M., & Farrington, D. P. (2021). What works in anti-bullying programs? Analysis of effective intervention components. *Journal of School Psychology, 85*, 37-56.
- Harter, S., & Whitesell, N. R. (1989). Developmental changes in children's understanding of single, multiple, and blended emotion concepts.
- Hatchel, T., Espelage, D. L., & Huang, Y. (2018). Sexual harassment victimization, school belonging, and depressive symptoms among LGBTQ adolescents: Temporal insights. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 88*(4), 422.
- Humphrey, T., & Vaillancourt, T. (2020). Longitudinal relations between bullying perpetration, sexual harassment, homophobic taunting, and dating violence: Evidence of heterotypic continuity. *Journal of youth and adolescence, 49*(10), 1976-1986.
- Ingram, K. M., Davis, J. P., Espelage, D. L., Hatchel, T., Merrin, G. J., Valido, A., & Torgal, C. (2019). Longitudinal associations between features of toxic masculinity and bystander willingness to intervene in bullying among middle school boys. *Journal of School Psychology, 77*, 139-151.
- Jones, D. C., Newman, J. B., & Bautista, S. (2005). A three-factor model of teasing: The influence of friendship, gender, and topic on expected emotional reactions to teasing during early adolescence. *Social Development, 14*(3), 421-439.
- Keltner, D., Capps, L., Kring, A. M., Young, R. C., & Heerey, E. A. (2001). Just teasing: a conceptual analysis and empirical review. *Psychological Bulletin, 127*(2), 229.
- Keltner, D., Capps, L., Kring, A. M., Young, R. C., & Heerey, E. A. (2001). Just teasing: a conceptual analysis and empirical review. *Psychological Bulletin, 127*(2), 229.
- Kerr, D., Ding, K., Burke, A., & Ott-Walter, K. (2015). An alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use comparison of lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual undergraduate women. *Substance Use & Misuse, 50*(3), 340-349.
- Kowalski, R. M. (2003). *Complaining, teasing, and other annoying behaviors*. Yale University Press.
- Ledley, D. R., Storch, E. A., Coles, M. E., Heimberg, R. G., Moser, J., & Bravata, E. A. (2006). The relationship between childhood teasing and later interpersonal functioning. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment, 28*(1), 33-40.

- Lewis, G. B. (2003). Black-white differences in attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 67(1), 59-78.
- Lie, S. Ø., Rø, Ø., & Bang, L. (2019). Is bullying and teasing associated with eating disorders? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 52(5), 497-514.
- Lowry, D. T., Nio, T. C. J., & Leitner, D. W. (2003). Setting the public fear agenda: A longitudinal analysis of network TV crime reporting, public perceptions of crime, and FBI crime statistics. *Journal of communication*, 53(1), 61-73.
- Menzel, J. E., Schaefer, L. M., Burke, N. L., Mayhew, L. L., Brannick, M. T., & Thompson, J. K. (2010). Appearance-related teasing, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating: A meta-analysis. *Body Image*, 7(4), 261-270.
- Meyer, J. C. (1977). Humor in member narrative: Uniting and dividing the work. *Western Journal of Communication*, 61, 188-208.
- Miller, E., Culyba, A. J., Paglisotti, T., Massof, M., Gao, Q., Ports, K. A., ... & Jones, K. A. (2020). Male adolescents' gender attitudes and violence: Implications for youth violence prevention. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 58(3), 396-406.
- Miller, S. A. (2017). "How you bully a girl": Sexual drama and the negotiation of gendered sexuality in high school. In *Exploring Education* (pp. 431-444). Routledge.
- Mills, C. B. (2018). Child's play or risky business? The development of teasing functions and relational implications in school-aged children. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 35(3), 287-306.
- Moyano, N., & del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes, M. (2020). Homophobic bullying at schools: A systematic review of research, prevalence, school-related predictors and consequences. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 53, 101441.
- Odenbring, Y., & Johansson, T. (2021). Just a joke? The thin line between teasing, harassment and violence among teenage boys in lower secondary school. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 29(2), 177-193.
- Pascoe, C. J. (2005). 'Dude, you're a fag': Adolescent masculinity and the fag discourse. *Sexualities*, 8(3), 329-346.
- Pexman, P. M., Glenwright, M., Krol, A., & James, T. (2005). An acquired taste: Children's perceptions of humor and teasing in verbal irony. *Discourse Processes*, 40(3), 259-288.
- Poteat, V. P., Mereish, E. H., DiGiovanni, C. D., & Koenig, B. W. (2011). The effects of general and homophobic victimization on adolescents' psychosocial and educational concerns:

- the importance of intersecting identities and parent support. *Journal of counseling psychology*, 58(4), 597.
- Proschan, M. A., & Waclawiw, M. A. (2000). Practical guidelines for multiplicity adjustment in clinical trials. *Controlled clinical trials*, 21(6), 527-539.
- Rawlings, J. R., & Espelage, D. L. (2020). Middle school music ensemble participation, homophobic name-calling, and mental health. *Youth & Society*, 52(7), 1238-1258.
- Rawlins, W. K. (1992) *Friendship Matters: Communication, Dialectics, and the Life Course*. New York, NY: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Russell, S. T., Sinclair, K. O., Poteat, V. P., & Koenig, B. W. (2012). Adolescent health and harassment based on discriminatory bias. *American journal of public health*, 102(3), 493-495.
- Sherer, S. L., & Clark, R. A. (2009). Changes in teasing patterns from early adolescence to adolescence. *Communication Research Reports*, 26(3), 175-187.
- Sinclair, J., Taylor, P. J., & Hobbs, S. J. (2013). Alpha level adjustments for multiple dependent variable analyses and their applicability—a review. *International Journal of Sports Science and Engineering*, 7(1), 17-20.
- Sinclair, K. O., Bauman, S., Poteat, V. P., Koenig, B., & Russell, S. T. (2012). Cyber and bias-based harassment: Associations with academic, substance use, and mental health problems. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 50, 521–523.
- Storch, E. A., & Masia-Warner, C. (2004). The relationship of peer victimization to social anxiety and loneliness in adolescent females. *Journal of adolescence*, 27(3), 351-362.
- Strawser, M. S., Storch, E. A., & Roberti, J. W. (2005). The Teasing Questionnaire—Revised: measurement of childhood teasing in adults. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 19(7), 780-792.
- Swearer, S. M., Turner, R. K., Givens, J. E., & Pollack, W. S. (2008). “You're so gay!?”: Do different forms of bullying matter for adolescent males?. *School Psychology Review*, 37(2), 160-173.
- Tucker, J. S., Ewing, B. A., Espelage, D. L., Green Jr, H. D., de la Haye, K., & Pollard, M. S. (2016). Longitudinal associations of homophobic name-calling victimization with psychological distress and alcohol use during adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 59(1), 110-115.
- Voss, L. S. (1997). Teasing, disputing, and playing: Cross-gender interactions and space utilization among first and third graders. *Gender & Society*, 11(2), 238-256.

Worthen, M. G. (2018). "Gay equals White"? Racial, ethnic, and sexual identities and attitudes toward LGBT individuals among college students at a Bible Belt university. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 55(8), 995-1011.

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics (n= 2,161)*

Variables	Mean or percentage	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Dependent variables				
T2 depression	14.09	7.37	0.00	36.00
T2 school belonging	11.86	2.39	4.00	16.00
Independent variables				
Subgroups of homophobic name-calling				
Called names by friends in school	17.31%			
Called names by strangers in school	3.81%			
Called names by rivals in school	23.49%			
Did not experience teasing	55.39%			
School environment				
Number of students enrolled	609.51	223.88	235.00	1332.00
Percentage of White students	27.78	17.41	0.00	66.00
Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch	77.10	18.45	29.00	100.00
Student characteristics				
White	24.78%			
Black	25.71%			
Latinx	35.1%			
Other	14.41%			
Male	51.9%			
Female	48.1%			
Age	13.21%	0.43	13.00	15.00
Treatment group for bullying prevention program	54.46%			
Control group	45.54%			
T1 depression	13.71	7.05	0.00	36.00
T1 school belonging	12.08	2.25	4.00	16.00

Table 2*Multilevel Model Estimates on T2 Depression and School Belonging (n= 2,161)*

Parameters	Model 1:		Model 2:	
	T2 depression		T2 school belonging	
	<i>b (se)</i>		<i>b (se)</i>	
<i>Level-1 variables</i>				
Called names by friends in school	2.35***	(0.36)	-0.37**	(0.12)
Called names by strangers in school	2.78***	(0.69)	-0.44*	(0.22)
Called names by rivals in school	3.48***	(0.34)	-0.22*	(0.11)
Age	0.00	(0.33)	0.04	(0.11)
Male	-3.26***	(0.27)	-0.05	(0.09)
Black	-0.07	(0.39)	-0.59***	(0.13)
Latino	-0.45	(0.37)	-0.05	(0.12)
Other	-0.18	(0.42)	-0.65***	(0.14)
Treatment group	-0.11	(0.36)	0.20	(0.14)
T1 depression	0.46***	(0.02)		
T1 school belonging			0.46***	(0.02)
<i>Level 2 variables</i>				
Number of students enrolled	0.00	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)
Percentage of White students	-0.02	(0.01)	-0.01	(0.01)
Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch	-0.02	(0.01)	-0.01	(0.00)
<i>Random effects</i>				
Level one intercept	0.32		0.07	
Level two intercept	31.76		3.74	
<i>Fit indices</i>				
-2Log Likelihood	12347.9		9085.4	
AIC	12383.9		9121.4	
BIC	12409.7		9147.2	

Note: the reference category for homophobic name-calling is the group that had never experienced it; the reference category for gender is female; the reference category for race is White.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3*Bonferroni-Adjusted P values of Pair-Wise Comparisons of T2 Depression (n= 2,161)*

	Called names by friends in school	Called names by strangers in school	Called names by rivals in school	Did not experience teasing
Did not experience teasing				
Called names by rivals in school				<.0001
Called names by strangers in school			0.32	<.0001
Called names by friends in school		0.56	0.01	<.0001

Table 4*Bonferroni-Adjusted P values of Pair-Wise Comparisons of T2 School Belonging (n= 2,161)*

	Called names by friends in school	Called names by strangers in school	Called names by rivals in school	Did not experience teasing
Did not experience teasing				
Called names by rivals in school				0.05
Called names by strangers in school			0.33	0.05
Called names by friends in school		0.76	0.26	0.001

Figure 1

T2 Depression by Social Distance to Homophobic Name-Calling Victims (n= 2,161)

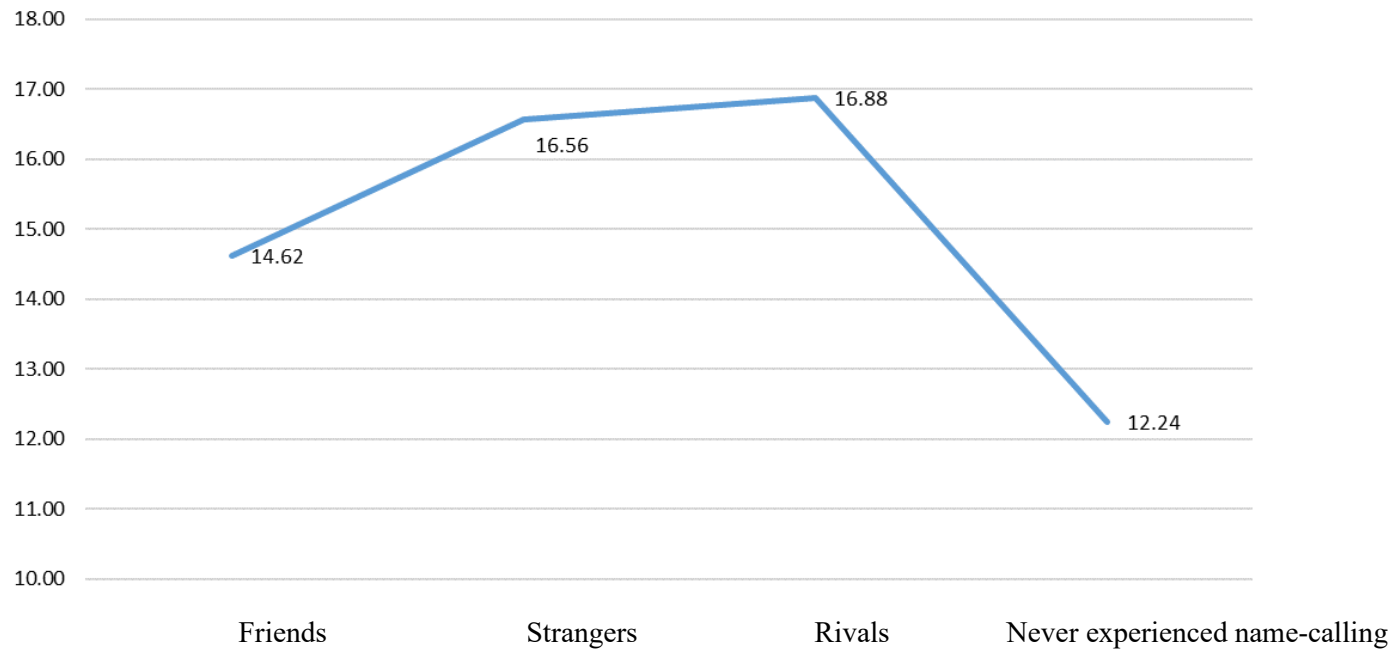


Figure 2

T2 School Belonging by Social Distance to Homophobic Name-Calling Victims (n= 2,161)

