Communication Apprehension: Exploring Intergroup Relationships Between Heterosexuals and the Gay Community

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Abstract

This study aims to determine whether there is communication apprehension among individuals of the heterosexual community, when speaking or interacting with members of the gay community (gays, lesbians, and bisexuals). 131 respondents answered 32 questions to an online survey regarding their attitudes toward communicating with members from different cultures, as well as the gay community specifically. Two (2) open-ended questions asked the respondents to explain their reasoning, and six (6) questions collected demographic and psychographic information. Respondents of all sexual orientations were accepted; however, only responses from heterosexuals received thorough analysis.

Results showed that 29% and 21% of respondents, respectively, reported feeling medium-high levels of communication apprehension when communicating with people of different cultures and in the gay community. 40% of respondents felt excited about meeting new people and learning about new cultures, while 15% of respondents attributed their communication apprehension to a fear of offending the person due to unfamiliarity with other cultures. 45% and 29% of the respondents, respectively, reported feeling low apprehension with the gay community because they believe that gays are the same as heterosexuals, or they do not care about/are not affected by sexual orientation.
Introduction

In recent years, several groups and organizations have taken serious measures to push for sexual orientation equality. Today, 32 states in the country have legalized same-sex marriage, 23 of those states having legalized it within the last two years. Additionally, gay couples are becoming more prevalent in the media, and overall, people seem to be generally more accepting of the gay lifestyle; however, there still seems to be a disconnect between the intergroup relationships of heterosexuals and gays. While some individuals openly express homophobia and others deny being homophobic, there seems to be communication apprehension when it comes to heterosexuals interacting with gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Furthermore, research shows that heterosexuality is perceived as the “norm” in the United States, and that we believe someone to be heterosexual until we learn otherwise (O’Flynn, 2005; Slagle, 2009; Kelly & Robinson, 2010). This phenomenon is known as *heteronormativity*, and it results in heterosexuality being viewed as the “dominant” group in society, while members of the gay community are perceived as having a lower social status than their heterosexual counterparts.

This thesis aims to discover which factors influence communication apprehension among heterosexuals when talking to members of the gay community. Through an online survey, this study explores the attitudes that heterosexuals employ when it comes to interacting with members of different cultures, particularly examining their attitudes toward interacting and communicating with the gay community.

Rationale

The importance of this study can be summarized through a quote by Shonda Rhimes, a television screenwriter, director, and producer. When one viewer asked her why
there were so many gay and lesbian storylines in her shows, Rhimes emphasized the importance of the media and its role in positively influencing peoples’ opinions regarding civil rights. She said, “As long as we are willing to sit by while one person is not free, none of us are free... as long as someone feels like it is okay to ask the question, ‘Why all the gay people on your shows,’ ...like it’s unusual... we have a long way to go” (Rhimes, 2012).

Acceptance of homosexuality and the gay community, which includes having the ability to communicate with this group, is a topic of communication that regards basic human rights and equality. Therefore, the sooner we explore the reasons and factors behind discomfort when it comes to heterosexuals communicating with this group, the sooner we can understand what measures to take towards alleviating this apprehension. While this study is intended to perform merely exploratory research, the findings may be used to aid some civil rights media campaigns in the future.

In addition to exploring communication habits regarding the gay community, it is important to research communication apprehension as a general topic. According to Dance’s Helical Model of communication, we are always communicating (West & Turner, 2010). Our communication is continuous and progressive; it is always evolving. Dance also believes that communication is irreversible; once you say something you cannot unsay it (in West & Turner, Introducing communication theory: Analysis and application, 2010). With that, communication and language are two of the most important skills to possess. Without language it is impossible to convey thoughts and meaning in an effective manner. With the clear importance of having the ability to communicate, researching communication apprehension is worthwhile because it helps us determine which factors influence communication apprehension. Studying communication
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apprehension across contexts, such as from the heterosexual group to the homosexual group, helps us see how people react differently, and how their levels of anxiety in communication, vary in different social contexts.

Definitions

Throughout this study, the term “gay community” will be used to describe individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. While the term “LGBT community” adequately describes these groups, this term is inclusive of transgender individuals. For the purpose of this study, transgender individuals will not be analyzed, as being transgender is not indicative of sexual orientation; rather, it is a term used in association with gender identity.

The term “gay” is used in this study to describe predominantly men who are sexually and romantically interested in men, but also includes women who sexually and romantically prefer women. The term “lesbian” refers exclusively to women who sexually and romantically prefer other women. Finally, the last term relating to homosexuals in this study is “bisexual,” which pertains to both men and women who have sexual and romantic interests in both sexes. When using the term “homosexual” in this study, the person described can be either gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

“Heterosexuals” in this study are people who are sexually and/or romantically attracted to people of the opposite sex. This is true for both cisgender (relating to someone who identifies with the sex which they were assigned at birth) and transgender (relating to someone whose self-identity does not conform to their biological sex) males and females. For example, if a transgender male is attracted to females, he is recognized as heterosexual
in this study. The words “heterosexual” and “straight” will be used interchangeably throughout the study.

Finally, the term “heteronormativity” will be used in this study to describe the phenomenon in which society believes people to be straight unless they are told otherwise. While existing stereotypes may “out” someone as gay, most people are assumed to be straight until they actively choose to opt out. This perception has, in essence, allowed heterosexuality to become the “dominant” sexual orientation, or the “norm.” These attitudes may contribute to the presence of homophobia, or a feeling of distaste toward, or prejudice against homosexuals, in certain groups.

Literature Review Overview

Several themes arise when it comes to the interaction between heterosexual and homosexual groups. One theme is heterosexism, or the bias associated with heterosexuality and being in favor of opposite-sex relationships and sexuality. Several studies (Clarkson, 2008; Slagle, 2009; Kelly & Robinson, 2010; Dessel, 2010) show how several people and groups typically show bias in favor of heterosexuality. Additionally, Thurlow (2001) explores the use of homophobic pejoratives and verbal abuse of the gay community, ultimately suggesting that “relentless, careless use of homophobic pejoratives” will continue to negatively impact the psychological health of young gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, by “insidiously constructing their sexuality as something wrong, dangerous or shameworthy (p. 36).”

The following literature review discusses stereotypes that have been assigned to the gay community, as well as how these stereotypes and perceptions of the gay community affect the ways in which heterosexuals communicate and interact with gays. Certain
themes in studied research include, but are not limited to communication schemas, stereotyping of homosexuals, homonegativity as a result of perceived gender roles, and homophobia/heteronormativity.

**Communication Schemas**

The subject of heterosexuals’ perceptions of gays, and how these perceptions influence communication patterns between the two groups, play an important role in overall attitudes toward the gay community. Hajek and Giles (2006) studied the effect of gender on communication schemas between gay and heterosexual targets; they defined communication schemas as “themes that represent the types of conversations in which individuals may engage. They... include not only perceptions of a conversational partner, but perceptions of self in dialogue” (p. 78). Communication schemas allow individuals to predict any patterns of discourse by serving to “mediate actual, situated, intergroup encounters, much like stereotypes” (Hajek & Giles, 2006, p. 78).

After exploring the interactions between heterosexual males and gay males, as well as interactions between heterosexual females and gay males, Hajek and Giles (2006) found significant gender differences in regards to perceptions of homosexuals and stereotypes, along with relational development desires. Through the study, the researchers discovered that male participants desired more relational development with a heterosexual partner than with a gay partner. In contrast, female participants desired more relational development with a gay partner than with a heterosexual one. While females expressed various levels of homonegativity, males still conveyed higher levels than did their female counterparts.
Stereotyping of Homosexuals

Males also engaged in gay stereotyping more often, presenting the gay target as “recruiting homosexuals, thinking all straight people are gay, being overly emotional or sensitive, crying in movies, wearing pink, being prissy, expressing a lot of pride, adopting either male or female sexual roles, and choosing his lifestyle” (Hajek & Giles, 2006, p. 83). Additionally, Brewster (2004) found that verbal and nonverbal stereotypical traits exist when it comes to identifying known gay males, along with males who are likely gay. Verbal stereotypes describe gay males as soft-spoken, speaking with a lisp, talkative, high-pitched, well-spoken, extensive colorful language, open with discussion, and talking fast. Nonverbal traits include gesturing when speaking, dressing fashionably, walking with fingers out, and touching other guys a lot.

A possible interpretation of these findings is that gay stereotypes and homonegativity result in communication apprehension among heterosexual males during interaction with gays. Data from a study by Clarkson (2008) shows that straight-acting gay males believe that transgressive gender performance— as opposed to mere same-sex desire— is the root of antigay attitudes. Clarkson (2008) discovers this argument by examining the online gay community, StraightActing.com, where self-proclaimed gay men discuss and debate the nature of their own, and other gay men’s, visibility. In this article, Clarkson (2008) describes the “straight-acting” gay’s attitudes towards the “flamer” and other “gay-acting” gender performers. Additionally, Clarkson (2008) reports that straight-acting gay men “demonize an effeminate gay stereotype” – which they perceive to dominate media representations of gay men – because they fear that it will “construct a normative gay identity that is promoted by other gay men” (p. 369). In other words, the “flamer” and other
“gay-acting” gender performers are often criticized for fear that they will teach gay and straight people that one particular type of gay person is the norm.

From the heterosexual perspective, Brewster (2004) analyzed stereotypical perceptions of the communication behaviors of gay males, and learned that when considering whether someone is homosexual based on his or her conformity to the normal gender roles, the sex of the participant is crucial (Wong et al., 1999). Specifically, men who act in accordance with social expectations are viewed as masculine, and therefore, heterosexual. In contrast, men who act in a manner perceived as more feminine are considered abnormal, and are assumed to be homosexual. Kite and Whitley (1996) studied sex differences in attitudes toward homosexual persons and behaviors, finding that our judgments about others “reflect an assumption that if others are masculine or feminine in one aspect of their behavior, they are likely to be masculine or feminine in other aspects of their behavior” (p. 337). Furthermore, Kite and Whitley (1996) suggest that we believe that characteristics such as roles, traits, and physical appearance form a coherent package, and knowledge about one gender-associated component provides insight on the other components. This is especially true when it comes to gay males – when provided with the label “male homosexual,” college students infer that the mans’ characteristics are similar to those of straight females (Kite & Deaux, 1987).

**Homonegativity as a Result of Perceived Gender Roles**

When it comes to heterosexual attitudes towards homosexual persons, Kite and Whitley (1996) found that men were more likely than women to have negative attitudes toward homosexuals, especially pertaining to gay men. They explain that gender-associated beliefs are clearly linked to attitudes toward homosexuality, and gender-associated beliefs
about men are more rigid than those about women; as a result, violating those roles is more serious for men than it is for women. Because of this, men find it in their best interest to maintain traditional sex roles “through derogation of individuals who violate those roles” (p. 345). On the other hand, women seemingly have less to lose by accepting gay men and lesbians, which explains why they are overall more accepting of homosexuals, including gay men. These findings support the concerns of the openly gay males in Clarkson’s (2008) study, showing that when it comes to heterosexual perceptions, there is not only a strong association between gay males and femininity, but also that these stereotypes hold negative stigmas regarding the implications of traditional sex roles.

**Homophobia and Heteronormativity**

Stereotypes about the gay community is just one of the hardships that gays, lesbians, and bisexuals face. O’Flynn (2005) describes the communication issues and hardships that the gay community – specifically the LGBT youth – faces on a daily basis. For instance, the threat of homophobia results in young gays to always be cautiously looking out for abuse (p. 148). Next, stigmas attached to being gay hinder young people’s abilities to effectively communicate through any confusion they may have with their sexual identities, which is a burden that straight youth do not face (p. 151). Furthermore, O’Flynn (2005) notes that homophobia differs from racism or other discrimination, saying that even if one has experience combatting either or both of these prejudices, homophobia is significantly different because it is “structured by the contrary demands for secrecy, on the one hand, and for telling all, on the other” (O’Flynn, 2005, p. 147).

Halley (1993) validates this claim, asserting that despite being represented as monolithic, the classification of heterosexual is a “highly unstable, default categorization for
people who have not marked themselves or been marked by others as homosexual” (p. 149). Slagle (2009) reinforces this analysis, explaining, “In most Western cultures... other types of relationships are either considered ‘less than’ or they are rendered invisible” (p. 3). He recalls an interaction he had with his father, who denies being homophobic. Slagle (2009), a gay man, recounted his father's disapproval of a bumper sticker on his car that read, “Homophobia is a Social Disease.” Slagle's (2009) father expressed discontentment with Slagle's (2009) “need” to make himself visible; furthermore, the father argued that he didn’t need to carry around a sign announcing his heterosexuality. Slagle (2009) responded by telling his father that people “already assume heterosexuality unless they have reason to believe otherwise” (p. 4). O'Flynn (2005) also attests that heterosexual is an assumed category, from which one must “actively opt out” (p. 149). Finally, Kelly and Robinson (2010) exemplify this, finding that LGBT members with communication impairments reported experiencing bias towards a heterosexual orientation by their clinicians. Respondents said that bias occurred when clinicians assumed that their patients were straight, and patients felt that it was left up to them to correct this assumption. All of these studies reiterate that heterosexuality is so strongly perceived as the “norm” in American culture that in order to identify as non-heterosexual, one must actively remove himself from the category.

Not only do we assume heterosexuality upon meeting someone, but studies (Thurlow, 2001; O’Flynn, 2005; Unks, 1995) show that we also add insult to injury by implementing prejudices towards homosexuality and the gay community. Thurlow (2001) suggests that homophobia and homophobic abuse are ubiquitous, finding that “homophobic pejoratives constitute one of the most predominant categories of abusive
language among young adolescents” (Thurlow, 2001, p. 32). In addition, O'Flynn (2005) reports that homosexuals are arguably the most hated group of people in the United States. Using language to exemplify this, Unks (1995) notes that while Americans usually avoid openly racist language, anti-queer expletives are used almost routinely. For example, young people use the word “gay” to describe anything of which they do not approve. Behaviors like this are consequential to the fact that “the first communication that young people experience or participate in, in relation to Queer sexualities, is likely to be abusive and derogatory” (O'Flynn, 2005, p. 152). As a result, young people are conditioned to believe that it is acceptable to express homophobic sentiments, while also perceiving homosexuality as something that one would not wish to be, or admit to being.

While youth exposure to homophobia is reason for concern, prejudices towards members of the gay community exist among adults as well. Carnaghi, Maass, and Fasoli (2011) define sexual prejudice and homophobia as “a negative reaction toward an individual because of his/her sexual orientation” (p. 1656). They believe that homophobic insults are used to maintain a distinct heterosexual identity among heterosexual males, in order to appraise their own sexual identity. Specifically, “homosexual men objectively share the same sex category as heterosexual men but at the same time they blatantly violate the definition of masculinity” (Cargnaghi, Maass, Fasoli, 2011, p. 1656). Because of this “violation,” homosexuality stands as a threat to the gender identity that likely motivates straight men to reject gay men, while at the same time, reaffirming their own masculine identity.

Dessel (2010) explores another facet of homophobia in adults, finding that most education professionals “are neither comfortable nor equipped” to work with gay youth (p.
559). From her study, Dessel (2010) saw that education played a beneficial role in changing these negative attitudes, noting some positive changes in teachers’ attitudes, feelings, and behaviors regarding gay, lesbian, and bisexual students and parents after participating in an intervention dialogue group. However, some teachers remained apprehensive and still portrayed homophobic characteristics. Concerns about the response they might receive from parents, students, and fellow teachers was found to be a significant factor that demotivated teachers from teaching about LGB issues. Additionally, teachers reported feeling anxious about the topic. Benner (2002) created an experiment that used four intervention formats to assess changes in attitudes among college students regarding homosexuality. From the study, she found that all four intervention types succeeded in promoting immediate positive changes in attitudes toward homosexuals, while none promoted negative attitude changes. However, the positive changes in attitudes were not upheld over time, suggesting that brief interventions “may not be sufficient to make any lasting impression on homophobic attitudes and behavioral intentions” (Benner, 2002, p. 79).

As previously mentioned, Kelly and Robinson (2010) also examine homophobia in an adult, professional setting, focusing on membership disclosure of LGBT individuals with communication impairments. After distributing a web-based survey that yielded 192 respondents, Kelly and Robinson (2010) found that only four percent (4%) of the respondents who sought services for hearing impairment disclosed their sexual orientation to their clinicians. Those with language and speech impairments had higher disclosure rates, with 35% and 43% of respondents, respectively, reporting that they disclosed their sexual orientations. Survey respondents provided several reasons for not disclosing their
sexual orientation to their clinicians, with fear of bias of discrimination and previous
negative experiences serving as the two most common responses. Furthermore, respondents felt that disclosure would pose a barrier to seeking and receiving services.

In contrast to the aforementioned study, Epstein and Johnson (1998) examined student responses to sexual orientation disclosure when a teacher told his students that he was gay. The students kept it a secret, saying that people in the school did not respond favorably to homosexuality. Furthermore, one student reported that some parents would perceive a gay teacher to be a bad teacher, or might make the assumption that they may attempt to the turn their pupils gay. While the children clearly had a sense of protectiveness over their teacher, Epstein and Johnson (1998) speculated that the fear of being classified as gay themselves also motivated the children to keep their teacher's sexual orientation a secret.

In order to further understand this topic, two communication theories will be used to explore communication patterns between heterosexual and homosexual groups – Communication Apprehension Theory and Social Identity Theory. These two theories provide supplemental insight into the research detailed throughout this proposal.

Communication Apprehension Theory

Communication Apprehension Theory defines communication apprehension as an individual experiencing fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons (McCroskey, 1977). Dessel (2010), in exploring the effects of intergroup dialogue of public school teachers and sexual orientation prejudice, asked teachers their feelings on being more proactive in teaching about LGB rights. Most teachers reported feeling anxious about the topic. Communication
apprehension is also relatable to other factors, such as social phobia. Through research, Pearson et al. (2011) found that those with high levels of communication apprehension reported higher levels of social phobia. Neuliep and McCroskey (1997) explore a more specific type of communication apprehension, studying intercultural and interethnic communication apprehension. They define intercultural communication apprehension as “the fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated interaction with people from different groups, especially different cultural or ethnic groups” (p. 147). Furthermore, they attest that high levels of uncertainty lead to increased anxiety, and “one type of communication situation that is potentially replete with novelty, unfamiliarity, dissimilarity, and uncertainty is intercultural communication” (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997, p. 147). Research also shows that communication apprehension may be correlated with an individual’s self-identity (Pearson et al, 2011), which the Social Identity Theory further explains.

**Social Identity Theory**

Hajek and Giles (2006) analyze how Social Identity Theory relates to communication patterns between gays and heterosexuals. According to the theory, “different processes are involved when two individuals communicate in terms of their social group memberships versus their idiosyncratic characteristics, such as personality, mood, and temperament” (p. 77-78). Pearson et al. (2011) further explain Social Identity Theory, explaining that an individual may be more or less willing to communicate in different situations based on the way they identify their role in society. Based on this theory, Hajek and Giles (2006) suggest that one possible reason that male heterosexuals
engage in homonegativity towards gay males is that they are doing so in order to "validate or affirm" their male identity (p. 78).

Research Questions

This study aims to explore the communication patterns between heterosexuals and homosexuals in the Rochester area. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to answer two major questions regarding the way heterosexuals perceive communication with individuals from different cultures, particularly pertaining to individuals of the gay community. This study explores whether heterosexuals in the Rochester area feel communication apprehension during real or anticipated interaction with people from different cultures/the gay community, followed by an attempt to analyze any underlying themes that provide reasoning for these feelings and attitudes.

The research questions for this study are as follows:

RQ1: Do heterosexuals in the Rochester area feel uncomfortable during real or anticipated interaction with individuals from other cultures?

RQ2: Do heterosexuals in the Rochester area feel uncomfortable during real or anticipated interaction with individuals of the gay community?

RQ3: What, if any, underlying themes exist to help identify the major causes of communication apprehension that heterosexuals feel during real or anticipated interaction with individuals from other cultures/the gay community?

Methods

In order to research communication patterns and the intergroup relationships between heterosexuals and the gay community, an online survey was conducted, with a sample size of 160 people. Of all survey responses, 131 were answered to completion; thus,
29 respondents were dropped from the study. Of the 131 remaining respondents, 106 explicitly reported being straight or heterosexual, with 25 respondents reporting being anything besides heterosexual. Responses other than heterosexual include being gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual, asexual, gray-A demi-sexual, or the respondent answered in a way that did not pertain to sexual orientation (e.g., “male” or “cisgender”).

This survey was modeled after one conducted by Neuliep and McCroskey (1997), which uses two identical surveys to ask respondents to disclose their attitudes, first, toward interaction with members of different cultures; and second, toward interaction with people from different ethnic/racial groups. The survey in this study has been modified so that the second half of the survey represents respondents’ attitudes toward interaction with members of the gay community.

The survey was designed using a 4-point Likert scale, to avoid garnering any neutral responses. In the survey, a low-numbered response (1) indicates strong disagreement with the given statement, while a high-numbered response (4) indicates strong agreement with the given statement. Each respondent (strongly) agreed or (strongly) disagreed with 16 statements according to the Likert scale provided, which alternated between positively and negatively worded statements. This part of the survey was used to determine whether there is discomfort, or communication apprehension, when it comes to communicating with members of different cultures, along with more specific analysis into heterosexual communication apprehension toward the gay community. A 17th open-ended question asked respondents to explain the reasoning behind their responses. The purpose of this part of the survey was to discover the underlying themes and/or reasons for either a presence or absence of communication apprehension. The survey concluded with four
demographic questions and two psychographic/behavioral questions that served to find patterns of attitudes within specific groups. Because the survey was open to people of all sexual orientations, the question that asked respondents’ sexual orientation was left open-ended, so as to not limit the respondent to being heterosexual, gay/lesbian, or bisexual. Since sexuality is an ever-evolving concept, limiting people to a multiple choice response could result in bias, or jeopardize the validity of the study, as some respondents may not have been able to find a sexual orientation with which they identify. The last two questions of the survey asked the respondents to indicate frequency of known interaction with members of the gay community, along with their own perceived level of knowledge regarding gay issues. The final two questions tested whether having experience interacting with members of the gay community, along with being considerably informed about gay issues, are associated with more positive attitudes and less communication apprehension when it comes to communicating with those individuals.

To test reliability of the survey questions, each set of questions was tested using Cronbach’s Alpha. The first set of statements pertaining to attitudes regarding communication with cultural differences yielded a score of 0.949, which is indicative of internal reliability. The second set of statements, regarding attitudes toward communicating with people in the gay community, scored a 0.968, also indicating internal reliability of this set of questions.

After verifying internal reliability, each respondent’s numerical answers were added up to find an average score (between 1 and 4) for each set of questions. The two average scores represented overall communication apprehension as the two main variables to be analyzed, with respect to different cultural groups and the gay community.
To run tests with regard to sexual orientation, responses were coded by numerical values – heterosexual or straight responses were coded as 1, and any response besides heterosexual or straight was coded as 2. Since the scope of this study remains focused on attitudes of heterosexuals, the coded results were filtered to reflect only the responses of reported heterosexuals. Additionally, because the survey contained statements that were both positively and negatively worded, the negative statements were recoded as different variables, and values were swapped so that a high number (4) indicated strong disagreement, and a low number (1) indicated strong agreement. A mean value closer to 1 suggests higher levels of communication apprehension, while mean values closer to 4 are indicative of lower levels of communication apprehension. After recoding these variables, descriptive statistics tests were performed to analyze levels of communication apprehension among heterosexuals when it comes to real or anticipated communication with people of different cultures, as well as members of the gay community.

Of the 106 heterosexual respondents, 90 surveys were used to analyze whether there are existing themes from respondents’ open-ended responses. 16 surveys were discarded from open-ended analysis because they failed to answer the question, or their open-ended response contradicted their responses to the first sixteen statements.

Results

The overall mean for communication apprehension in heterosexuals communicating with people of different cultures was 3.2022 with a standard deviation of 0.499. The mean for communication apprehension in heterosexuals communicating with people in the gay community was 3.3685, with a standard deviation of 0.539.
Out of the 106 heterosexual respondents, 29% had a mean communication apprehension score that was less than three in the cultural differences category, while 21% of respondents had a mean communication apprehension score less than three in the category measuring apprehension towards the gay community.

A Pearson Correlation test indicated a strong positive relationship between apprehension when dealing with different cultures and in the gay community. The R-value of the test was 0.449 at the 0.01 level of significance.

Discussion

Overall, reported communication apprehension was fairly low for both variable groups. However, 29% and 21% of respondents, respectively, reported feeling moderate-to-high levels of communication apprehension when communicating with people of different cultures and in the gay community. Open-ended questions were analyzed to determine any underlying themes found when people reported feeling or not feeling communication apprehension toward these groups.

Communication Apprehension when Communicating with Different Cultures

15% of respondents that reported feeling communication apprehension when communicating with people from a different culture explained that their apprehension stemmed from the fear of offending the person, or not knowing cultural norms and practices. Seven percent (7%) of respondents reported feeling apprehensive when it comes to language barriers and accents. About four percent (4%) of respondents clarified that they have communication apprehension when speaking with anyone, not just limited to people from different cultures. Contrarily, 40% of respondents reported typically feeling excited about meeting new people and learning about new cultures. Approximately 22% of
respondents felt that communicating with people from different cultures had few differences than communicating with people from their own culture, providing little reason to feel any nerves or tension when communicating with people outside their direct culture. Finally, eight percent (8%) of respondents reported having experience living in other countries, or have recently studied abroad, referring to past experiences as a reason for feeling ease of communication with people from different cultures.

**Communication Apprehension when Communicating with the Gay Community**

When respondents were asked about the gay community, the open-ended question analysis provided more insight on why this sample does not feel communication apprehension during interaction with those who identify as gay.

Two main prevalent themes emerged, explaining a lack of communication apprehension when interacting with members of the gay community. 45% and 29% of the respondents, respectively, reported that “[gay] people are people” or they do not care about, nor are they affected by sexual orientation; and they grew up either around gay individuals or with a tolerant mindset, or have experience interacting with members of the gay community. Approximately six percent (6%) of respondents reported naturally feeling comfortable around homosexuals and/or wishing to maintain an open mind.

While very few respondents indicated reason for feeling communication apprehension when interacting with the gay community, the most prevalent responses included feeling recruited, harassed or hit on, or a fear that others would assume that they, too, are gay.

Despite the fact that there were not many themes regarding communication apprehension during interaction with this group, individual responses provided interesting
insight on some of the discomforts that people [may] experience when interacting with the gay community. For instance, one respondent justified his discomfort by saying he felt judged, while another felt discomfort because he didn’t feel that he had much in common with the gay community. While this respondent did not feel any negative feelings toward those who are gay, because this community lies outside of his cultural schema, he feels nervous or tense when interacting with people who are gay. Another respondent accredits his communication apprehension to a fear of offending people due to a lack of information about the subject and culture. Only one respondent explained that the reason for his response was because he morally believes that homosexuality is wrong, and he finds it difficult not to disclose his opinion to members of the gay community. He does not necessarily experience communication apprehension when interacting with the gay community, but he strongly dislikes communicating with them because their behaviors are against his beliefs.

Some individual responses also provided interesting insight when it comes to people who enjoy interacting with the gay community overall, but still experience communication apprehension when doing so. For example, one person is comfortable interacting with the gay community, and enjoys being involved in interpersonal and group discussions. However, he feels nervous to speak up due to a lack of experience interacting with this community, and would prefer to listen instead of speak. Still, this does not deter him from interacting with the community, like many other respondents with communication apprehension toward this group reported. Another person feels conflicted because of his religion – he is supportive of the gay community and believes that members of the community are equal to those of the straight community. Nonetheless, his beliefs,
which come from a Muslim background, have taught him otherwise. This respondent also reported that he would not mind interacting with a gay person, but he has never met one or had a known encounter with a member from that community.

One respondent that reported feeling low communication apprehension and provided a fairly positive outlook regarding the gay community indicated some potential underlying prejudice. For instance, he reported that he doesn't feel communication apprehension because ultimately gay people are the same as straight people, but gave a disclaimer that not everyone who is gay acts gay. This statement may be indicative that when gay someone does act outwardly gay, he would not be comfortable interacting with this person. In other words, this person may feel that gay people are the same as straight people, but only when they are acting as if they are straight themselves. When it becomes apparent that this person is gay, comfort in communication may dissipate.

Interaction Experience and Knowledge of Gay Issues

Other variables that may influence a presence or absence of communication apprehension during interaction with the gay community are frequency of known interaction with gay individuals, and perceived knowledge of gay issues and its surrounding history. All respondents except two who reported feeling communication apprehension had no known interaction with gays, or rarely or infrequently knowingly interacted with someone who is gay. They also reported being either not informed at all about gay issues, or somewhat informed. These two response choices were the lower two choices for the question. Two respondents in this category reported daily interaction with gays, one of whom reported being very informed on gay issues, while the other reported
being informed. These two responses were the higher two response choices for the question.

Of those who did not indicate feeling communication apprehension toward the gay community, 27% of respondents feel that they are somewhat informed about gay issues, 21% of respondents feel that they are very informed, and 52% of respondents feel informed about gay issues.

One interpretation of these findings could be that communication apprehension is less frequent and overall attitudes toward the gay community are more positive when people have experience interacting with this group, and when they are more informed about gay issues. Not one respondent that reported feeling mild to no communication apprehension perceived themselves as being completely uninformed on these issues; contrarily, almost all respondents that felt moderate to high communication apprehension, or held overall negative beliefs about the gay community, had limited knowledge or less regarding gay issues and the history/evolution of this group.

Limitations of Study

There are three main limitations of this study: sampling method, sample size and survey design flaws. While these limitations could have impacted the study more significantly than they did, they may still provide bias or skewed data nonetheless.

For this study, the survey was distributed online using a convenience sample, via a personal Facebook account, two Rochester-based collegiate Facebook pages, and on three subreddit pages on the social network, Reddit. Two of the subreddit pages were central to Rochester, New York, while the other one may have collected responses from anywhere in the world. With the likelihood that many, possibly even the majority, of respondents are
from Rochester, it makes sense that the study garnered responses that are generally in favor of the gay community, while also indicating low communication apprehension in heterosexuals when interacting with this group. According to the 2014 Municipality Equality Index from the Human Rights Campaign, Rochester scored 100% on a scale that determines the level of support that a city has for the LGBT community (McCarty, 2014). Furthermore, the City of Rochester was the first municipality in New York State to elect an openly gay person to its City Council. Given this information, Rochester’s use as a primary location for the sample size may offer skewed data in favor of the gay community. This city’s supportive attitude may result in a lower communication apprehension level that is not representative of the United States as a whole. Additionally, a sample size of 160 may be acceptable for the scope of this study, but this sample size also puts a limitation on the reflection of actual attitudes on a larger scale.

Finally, survey design flaws put limitations on the data results of the study. For instance, a flaw in the survey made it so that the open-ended question asking respondents to explain why they feel comfortable or uncomfortable communicating with the gay community was not a question that required a response. Because of this, several opinions and insights may have been lost from respondents that reported not enjoying interaction with members of the gay community, but failed to provide any reasoning for feeling this way. With such a limited percentage of people reporting any communication apprehension during interaction with the gay community, any input from this group would be crucial to determining any underlying themes that may explain peoples’ apprehension or discomfort. In addition, the repetitive nature of the survey deterred some respondents from completing the survey, which resulted in the total sample size being dropped from 160 to
131 respondents. In an already small sample size, these additional survey responses could have helped solidify the reliability and accuracy of the study. The last survey design flaw that could have negatively impacted the study is that respondents were not provided with this study’s definition of “the gay community.” Therefore, it was left up to the respondent to use his or her own field of experiences to determine what the term “gay community” means to them. Had every respondent understood the specific meaning of the term in this study, data results may have been more reliable.

_Suggestions for Future Research_

This study focuses on only a small facet of issues that the gay community faces when it comes to communication. Specifically, this study analyzed whether heterosexuals experience communication apprehension when communicating with other cultures, members of the gay community, and possible explanations of why this may or may not be. Future studies can use the information collected to further explore patterns; for example, another study may be used to run statistical analyses on whether experience or frequency of interaction with members of the gay community has an impact on communication apprehension, along with perceived knowledge of gay issues, as independent variables.

Additionally, this study was open to all sexual orientations, so the survey collected results from people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and more. However, for the sake of this study, those responses were excluded from any statistical analyses. Another interesting scope for a study like this could include the reverse of the subjects studied; specifically, determining whether members of the gay community experience communication apprehension when interacting with heterosexuals can provide valuable insight on the scrutiny they may or may not face when interacting with different cultural
groups. For even more insight, the study could be broadened to include the entire LGBT community, as opposed to excluding transgender men and women from the study.

Another recommendation for future research would be to repeat this exact study, but allow a neutral response. Since this survey forced people to decide in agreement or disagreement with the statements provided, it may have resulted in response bias. It would be interesting to see how responses differed when given the option to express neutrality toward the statements. Also, some respondents provided reasoning for not feeling communication apprehension when interacting with the gay community, yet not necessarily enjoying the interactions either. For these feelings, a neutral response may be necessary. Obtaining a larger sample size could also collect more representative data, instead of leaning toward more liberal views and more accepting attitudes toward the gay community.

Finally, by fixing the previously mentioned flaws in the survey design, the survey could elicit more accurate and reliable responses. There was a considerable loss when it comes to open-ended questions pertaining to communication apprehension during interaction with the gay community; therefore, repeating this study and obtaining those responses will help gain a clearer understanding of why these respondents reported having a dislike for communicating with the gay community.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the survey, it can be said that heterosexuals in this sample generally do not feel communication apprehension when interacting with people from different cultures, including people from the gay community. There were two main reasons that people do not feel communication apprehension during interaction with the gay
community. First, respondents feel that people are people, and sexual orientation does not affect them. Secondly, people who have experience interacting with gays, grew up around gays, or grew up in a household that was tolerant of all sexual orientations, projected feeling less communication apprehension during interaction with members of the gay community.

The results of this study were not found without limitations; a larger sample size could have been more representative of societal attitudes, as well as collecting a more random sample with more responses from people outside of the city of Rochester. Future research could analyze whether or not members of the gay community feel communication apprehension when interacting with straight people. Additionally, the scope of this study could have been more broad and included attitudes toward transgenders, as opposed to only analyzing the gay community. Finally, this study could be reconstructed to allow neutral responses to the statements, allowing for more variety and accuracy of responses.

Overall, this study provided a sufficient amount of insight and answers as to why people feel the way they do when it comes to communicating with the gay community. However, such results were found on a very small, centralized scale and there is still a large margin of opportunity for more research to discover more representative viewpoints and underlying themes regarding intercultural communication between these two groups.

References


