

**Analyzing Predictors of Postsecondary Agricultural Education Students' Attitudes Toward
Lesbian and Gay Identities**

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Introduction

Schools in the United States have overwhelmingly been found to have homophobic school cultures driven by heteronormativity and heterosexism (Bishop & McClellan, 2016; Kosciw et al., 2014; Walters & Hayes, 1998). Homophobia in schools leads to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) students, and those perceived to be gay, at a higher risk of victimization and harassment (Aguirre et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2018). Findings suggest that homophobic and transphobic bullying, harassment, and assault result in detrimental impacts on LGBTQIA+ students including lower self-esteem, lower sense of belonging, and decreased academic achievement (GLSEN, 2019; Heck et al., 2014). Schools uphold these heteronormative cultures through discriminatory policies and the lack of teacher intervention (GLSEN, 2019). Teacher preparation programs also lack adequate training for pre-service teachers to work with LGBTQIA+ students (Meyer, 2008). Rural areas pose greater challenges for the LGBTQ+ community given minimal resources (e.g., affirming healthcare, group housing, etc.) and a lack of anonymity to protect themselves from victimization (Gottschalk & Newton, 2009; Movement Advancement Project, 2011). Religious groups continue this cycle of stigma, as they often advocate for overturning policies that protect LGBTQIA+ individuals from discrimination (Herek & McLemore, 2013).

Conceptual Framework

Chevrette (2020) termed straight fragility as, “fears, discomforts, and shame produced when those who align with straightness [heterosexuality] encounter queerness” (p. 106). Fragility surrounding sexualities is evident in (1) the refusal of heterosexual individuals to enter queer spaces (e.g., gay bars, LGBTQ-owned businesses); (2) the need of heterosexual individuals to reaffirm their sexuality before speaking about sexuality issues; and (3) in heterosexual individuals fear of being approached/hit on by queer individuals (Chevrette, 2020). The concept of sexual prejudice relates to fragility as Herek (2009) describes *sexual prejudice* as, “internalized sexual stigma that results in the negative evaluation of sexual minorities” (p. 74). Sexual prejudice allows for an explanation of motivation behind negative behaviors toward sexual minorities (Herek, 2009).

Methodology

Undergraduate students enrolled in the fall agricultural education courses at the University of Kentucky provided a convenient sample ($n = 45$) for this study. Participants in this study responded to a 27-item questionnaire developed by Gato et al. (2012; 2014) titled the *Multidimensional Scale of Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men* (MSATLGM). The instrument consisted of four constructs that asked five to eleven questions each. Constructs evaluated perceived attitudes toward lesbian women and gay men in the following dimensions: (1) rejection of proximity – rejecting the presence of/avoidance of gays and lesbians; (2) pathologizing homosexuality – believing that homosexuality is a mental disorder/disease; (3) modern heterosexism – heterosexist opinions of parenting, marriage and visibility of lesbians and gays; and (4) support – attitudes of support for equal rights and visibility of various sexual orientations. In addition to the MSATLGM instrument, additional questions were asked that addressed the individual’s characteristics. Regression modelling was used to determine the relationships between the constructs and characteristics.

Findings

It was revealed in the data that degree of religion was a significant predictor the variance of responses in each construct (See Table 1). Religion predicted twenty percent of variance to rejection of proximity ($\beta = .40$; $p \leq .01$), twenty-three percent of variance to pathologizing homosexuality ($\beta = .43$; $p \leq .01$), thirty percent of variance to modern heterosexism ($\beta = .38$; $p \leq .01$), and twenty percent of variance to support ($\beta = -.44$; $p \leq .01$). Credit standing was also significant in predicting the variance of responses to modern heterosexism ($\beta = -.31$; $p = .03$).

Table 1

Regression of Demographic Variables to Predicting Construct Responses (n = 45)

Variable	R	R ²	b	β	t	p
Rejection of Proximity	.44	.20				
Credit Standing ^a			-.12	-.15	-1.00	.31
Home Residence ^b			.12	.71	.48	.63
Degree of Religion ^c			.38	.40	2.70	.01*
Pathologizing Homosexuality	.47	.23				
Credit Standing			-.15	-.15	-1.04	.30
Home Residence			.09	.05	.33	.74
Degree of Religion			.48	.43	2.82	.01*
Modern Heterosexism	.55	.30				
Credit Standing			-.33	-.31	-2.31	.03*
Home Residence			-.05	-.03	-.19	.85
Degree of Religion			.45	.38	2.71	.01*
Support	.45	.20				
Credit Standing			.11	.09	.65	.52
Home Residence			-.16	-.07	-.48	.63
Degree of Religion			-.56	-.44	-2.88	.01*

Note. ^aCoded: Freshman = 1, Sophomore = 2, Junior = 3, Senior = 4; ^bCoded: Rural = 1, Suburban = 2, Urban = 3; ^cCoded: Not Religious = 1, Slightly Religious = 2, Moderately Religious = 3; Very Religious = 4. * $p \leq .05$

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The perception of how convicted the post-secondary students evaluated their devotion to faith revealed significance of attitudes that support distancing and attribution toward homosexuality. The more religious the respondents identified themselves, the more likely they were to respond with attitudes that reflect (a) a desire for proximal distance from gay and lesbian individuals, (b) beliefs that homosexuality is a disease, and (c) heterosexist ideologies. Although not statistically significant for all constructs, students with higher credit standings responded with more accepting views in each construct.

Recommendations from these findings include (a) providing more resources for pre-service and in-service teachers on how to create inclusive environments for LGBTQIA+ individuals, (b) broaden the scope of multicultural education courses to help students recognize diverse identities that may conflict with personal biases, and (c) encompass LGBTQIA+ individuals' experiences in agricultural education scholarship.

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