When is Self-labeling Seen as Reclaiming? The Role of User and Observer's Sexual Orientation in Processing Homophobic and Category Labels' Use

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Abstract

Reclaiming involves self-labeling with derogatory labels. This behavior can be processed differently depending on contextual factors: type of label, user, and observer. Sexual minority and heterosexual participants saw a vignette depicting either a gay or a heterosexual man who self-labeled with a derogatory or a category label. Sexual minority participants perceived the act of self-labeling with a derogatory label by a gay man as less offensive than heterosexual participants did. Sexual minorities, more than heterosexual participants, perceived self-labeling as powerful.

Keywords

reclaiming, reappropriation, derogatory labels, sexual orientation

June is Pride month, with parades celebrating lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) people. Celebrations are generally festive and involve both sexual minorities and heterosexual allies. At these events, people proudly express their LGBTQ+ membership in different ways, such as holding signs involving derogatory labels referring to the self (West, 2017). This is an act of linguistic *reclamation* with the sexual minority members taking possession of a label used by the majority group to stigmatize them (Galinsky et al., 2003). This practice is common among other groups too. For instance, derogatory labels are routinely used by Jewish people claiming to be "yid" (Wilczyńska, 2022) or by Black people who refer to themselves with the N* word (Kennedy, 2003).

Derogatory group labels (DGL) convey negative attitudes toward a group and its members; however, their meaning depends on the use and user's intents (Croom, 2011, 2013a) and evolves over time (Hom, 2008). Although DGLs have been conceptualized as terms with expressive content (Hedger, 2013), DGLs can be interpreted differently when picked up by the minority group and used in non-malicious ways (Croom, 2013b, 2018; Rahman, 2015). For instance, racial and sexist DGLs used among ingroup members are perceived as non-derogatory (Kennedy, 2003; Kleinman et al., 2009), fostering bonds and solidarity among ingroup members (Croom, 2011). According to Galinsky et al.'s (2003) model, reclaiming involves two processes. First, a DGL is *reframed* from a pejorative to a neutral descriptive connotation. Second, the stigmatized group members make the label their own and use it to self-label in an act that challenges the status quo imposed by the dominant group, namely the *re-appropriation* process. Reclaiming goes through different phases (Galinsky et al., 2003) with the ultimate goal of having DGLs lose their derogatory connotation for both minority and majority group members (e.g., "queer", Zosky & Alberts, 2016). Reclaiming is however a risky behavior as it requires others to recognize it as such (Brontsema, 2004; Fasoli et al., 2019) and such recognition depends on multiple factors. This research examines the role of label, user, and observer in influencing the perception of self-labeling as reclaiming.

Focusing on labels, DGLs are offensive terms specifically expressing prejudice toward a group and are different from taboo or swear words (Croom, 2013a), while category group labels

(CGL) are supposedly neutral terms that describe a group (Bianchi et al., 2019; Carnaghi & Maass, 2008). Previous studies have suggested that reclaiming is specific to self-labeling (Galinsky et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2017) and affects the perceived offensiveness of a DGL but not of a CGL (Galinsky et al., 2013; Fasoli et al., 2019).

Users' identity plays an important role in language perception (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Both the users' identity and their intentions affect the perception of their message's offensiveness and acceptability (Almargo et al., 2022; O'Dea et al., 2015), and identity is often taken as an indicator of intent (Gibson et al., 2020). For instance, sexist slurs targeting a woman are perceived as more offensive when used by a man than a woman (Fasoli et al., 2015). When looking at the user's identity and power, research has found that individuals whose identity was not disclosed and who self-labeled with a DGL were perceived as empowered by observers (Galinsky et al., 2013; Whitson et al., 2017). However, in a recent study (Fasoli et al., 2019), while gay speakers were seen as similarly powerful when using a DGL than a CGL, heterosexual speakers were seen as 'losing' power if they self-labeled with a DGL. Indeed, it is not clear whether it is effective and appropriate for a majority ally to actively participate in the re-appropriation process. On the one side, majority individuals self-labeling with a minority-related DGL may be seen as threatening group boundaries and violating norms (see Radke et al., 2022). On the other side, majority members using DGLs toward minority individuals described as friends are seen as bonding (O'Dea et al., 2015; O'Dea & Saucier, 2017) and DGL use in environments supporting the minority (e.g., protest) is seen as felicitous (e.g., Gaucher et al., 2015). Hence, in certain contexts (e.g., Pride parades), DGL self-labeling can be a way for majority allies to provocatively support the minority group by showing that the DGL can be embraced and that there is no fear of being called that way. In doing so, majority allies may endorse a common identity that expresses solidarity (Selvanathan et al., 2020), making statements against heteronormativity and, thus, helping DGL *reframing*.

Another aspect that deserves attention concerns the role of the observer. Galinksy et al. (2003) suggested that re-appropriation happens within the minority group before being

acknowledged by the majority group. Minority group members use DGLs to self-label and label each other non-pejoratively allowing them to bond (see Bianchi, 2014; Croom, 2014; Rahman, 2015). Hence, minority, more than majority individuals, may be likely to recognize a DGL self-labeling use as an instance of reappropriation. Less is known about how observers perceive the majority using a DGL in a non-derogatory way. A study by O'Dea and Saucier (2020) on racial DGL showed that both White and Black observers perceived racial slurs as similarly inoffensive when used in a friendship context. This suggests that both minority and majority can recognize a DGL's use as descriptive if contextual factors (i.e., friendship) provide a rationale to do so (see Croom, 2011). However, these findings did not refer to a situation in which self-labeling was involved. Minority and majority group members may perceive majority self-labeling in different ways – a threat to group boundaries or an attempt to support the minority.

Overview

We examined whether self-labeling is perceived differently as a function of the label, the user, and the observer. We assessed the perceived valence of the label and the user's perceived power following Galinsky et al.'s model. As part of the *reframing* process, we expected that the DGL ('faggot') would be perceived as less offensive when used by a gay than by a heterosexual man. The user's sexual orientation was not expected to impact perceived CGL ('gay') offensiveness (H1a). Also, as part of the *reappropriation* process, we expected a gay man self-labeling with a DGL to be perceived as feeling more powerful and being more influential than a heterosexual man doing the same. No user's sexual orientation difference was expected when a CGL was involved (H1b). Finally, we expected that participants' (observers) sexual orientation would play a role. The first step in the re-appropriation process (Galinsky et al., 2003) assumes that stigmatized group members engage in self-labeling and use DGL between them making them prompter to recognize reclaiming than the majority. Hence, we hypothesized that sexual minority, more than heterosexual participants, would be more prone to perceive the DGL as less offensive (H2a) and the user as

feeling and being more powerful (H2b) if the label was used by a gay (vs. heterosexual) man. No

user or observer's sexual orientation differences were expected in the CGL condition.

Finally, we explored whether participants perceived the act of self-labeling as creating a

positive situation and promoting support for the LGBTQ+ community depending on the different

factors involved.

Method

Participants

After excluding 1 underage participant and 194 participants who did not provide consent for data

use, the final sample consisted of 407 participants (217 men, 180 women, 10 non-binary; M_{age} =

28.65, SD = 8.84). Participants identified as either heterosexual (N = 196) or as part of a sexual

minority (N = 211; gay/lesbian: n = 163, bisexual: n = 38, other: n = 10). Most participants held a

degree (N = 201) and were politically progressive (M = 17.23, SD = 21.19, on a scale from 0 =

Progressive to 100 = Conservative). Participants were either students (n = 194) or workers (n =

168). A G*Power sensitivity analysis was calculated taking into consideration the interaction effect.

It indicated that a sample of 407 for a between-participants design with 8 groups, $1 - \beta$ = .80, α =

.05 allowed us to detect a small to medium effect size of f = .14 (Perugini, Gallucci, & Costantini,

2018).

Procedure

Participants were recruited in Italy via the researchers' contacts and social media. They completed

the study online. After agreeing to participate, participants were presented with a vignette. Next,

they rated the label and the valence of the situation. They also completed the perceived power and

action supportiveness measures. For other variables that were assessed, see S2 in the Supplementary

Material in the online version. Answers for all scales were provided on a 5-point Likert scale from 1

(*Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*). Ratings were averaged to create scores. Before being thanked and

debriefed, participants reported their demographics.

Materials

Vignette. Participants saw a picture depicting a man holding a sign while marching at a Pride parade. The sign involved a message (in Italian) representing an instance of self-labeling. According to the experimental condition, the label was either a CGL ("Sono gay" ["I am gay"]) or a DGL ("Sono frocio" ["I am a fag"]). The picture was combined with a short caption introducing the user as a 27-year-old man called Marco who attended to support the minority group (see S1 in the Supplementary Material in the online version). We manipulated the *user sexual orientation* by presenting him as either gay or heterosexual. As part of the manipulation check, participants indicated whether the target was gay or heterosexual. Nobody was wrong.

Label offensiveness. We assessed the label and user's intent offensiveness on 9 items (e.g., "How offensive could be considered the label on the sign?"; "Do you think the term [label] is used in an offensive way? α = .89) adapted from Galinsky et al. (2013). Higher scores indicated greater offensiveness.

Perceived power. Three items (e.g., "How powerful do you think the person felt in the situation?", "How much influence do you think the person had in the situation?" see Galinsky et al., 2013; α = .58) were used. Higher scores indicated higher power.

Situation valence. We assessed situation valence on 5 items (e.g., "How positive/offensive would you consider this situation?", α = .85). After appropriate reverse-coding, higher scores indicated negative valence.

Action supportiveness. Participants completed 4 items (e.g., "Do you think is a good way to support the LGBTQ+ community?"; α =.93) assessing how the self-labeling act could support the community. Higher scores indicated greater action supportiveness.

Results

A 2 (Label: DGL vs. CGL) x 2 (User: gay vs. heterosexual) x 2 (Observer: sexual minority vs. heterosexual) ANOVA with three between-participants factors was performed on each dependent variable (for additional exploratory analyses see SI3). Means and statistics concerning the main effects are reported in Table 1. In the text, we describe only significant results. For exploratory analyses, see S3 in the Supplementary Material in the online version.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Label Offensiveness

The labels were overall perceived as not very offensive ($M = 2.17$, $SD = .91$; t-tests against the scale midpoint: t (406) = -18.46, $p < .001$).

Significant main effects of Label, User, and Observer were found (Table 1). The DGL was perceived as more offensive than the CGL and the label used by a gay man was perceived as less offensive than when used by a heterosexual man. Also, sexual minority observers rated the labels as less offensive than heterosexual observers. These main effects were qualified by a 3-way interaction between Label, User, and Observer, $F(1,399) = 5.56$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2_p = .01$ (Figure 1). Sexual minority, but not heterosexual observers ($p = .46$), perceived the DGL as less offensive when used by a gay than a heterosexual user ($p = .005$). Unexpectedly, the CGL was rated similarly by sexual minority observers when used by a gay or heterosexual man ($p = .64$), whereas heterosexual observers perceived it as more offensive if used to self-label by a heterosexual than a gay man ($p = .032$). Looking at the data differently, sexual minority observers perceived the DGL as less offensive than heterosexual observers when used by a gay man ($p = .003$), but no observers' differences occurred when the user was a heterosexual man ($p = .39$). Instead, while the CGL used by a gay man was perceived as similarly offensive by sexual minority and heterosexual observers ($p = .73$), the CGL used by a heterosexual man was seen as less offensive by the sexual minority than heterosexual observers ($p = .003$).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Perceived Power

The main effects of User and Observer indicated that the gay man was perceived as more powerful than the heterosexual man and that sexual minority observers perceived the target as more powerful than heterosexual respondents did, respectively. Moreover, a 2-way interaction between user and observer, $F(1,399) = 3.92$, $p = .048$, $\eta^2_p = .01$, emerged: Both sexual minority and heterosexual observers perceived the gay user as more powerful than the heterosexual user ($ps < .007$). However, while the gay user was perceived as similarly powerful by sexual minority and heterosexual observers ($p = .383$), the heterosexual user was perceived as more powerful by sexual minority than heterosexual observers ($p < .001$; see Figure 2).

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Situation Valence

The main effects of Label and User indicated that a situation was perceived as less negative when it involved a CGL (vs. DGL) and a gay (vs. heterosexual) user. The main effect of Observer showed that sexual-minority participants judged the situation as less negative than heterosexual participants.

Action Supportiveness

The main effects of Label, User, and Observer showed that participants perceived the self-labeling behavior as more supportive of the LGBTQ+ community when it involved a CGL than a DGL, when it was performed by a gay than a heterosexual man, and when the observers were sexual minority rather than heterosexuals.

Discussion

The act of self-labeling can be perceived differently depending on who the user and the observer are, as well as the type of label involved. Participants perceived the labels as less offensive, the situation as less negative, the user as more powerful, and the act as more 'supportive' when self-labeling was done by a gay rather than a heterosexual man. Hence, self-labeling can be seen as a communicative way to proudly reaffirm minority group identity (Giles, 2018) and, when it involves

a DGL, as an act of *reappropriation* (Galinsky et al., 2013). Sexual minority, more than heterosexual observers, were overall likely to perceive self-labeling as less offensive, the user as feeling and being powerful, and as an act supporting the LGBTQ+ community. Importantly, in line with H2a, sexual minority observers perceived the DGL, but not the CGL, as less offensive when used by a gay man to self-label than heterosexual observers did. This result is in line with the process of *reframing* and the model by Galinsky et al. (2003, 2013; see also Fasoli et al., 2019), suggesting that sexual minorities are more prompt to recognize the DGL self-labeling as an act of reclamation. Heterosexuals may be less familiar with the reclaiming idea and, hence, may be reluctant to judge a DGL as not offensive. This possible explanation is supported by the result that DGL was overall perceived as creating a less positive situation and as less likely to support the LGBTQI+ community than CGL. Interestingly and contrary to the hypothesis of intergroup threat boundaries, sexual minority observers were more likely than heterosexual observers to see a heterosexual user self-labeling as gay, with either a CGL or a DGL, as feeling and being powerful. It is possible that, in the context of the Pride parade, the sexual minority participants were more prone to see self-labeling as an attempt to subvert norms overall (see Croom, 2014). They may have also regarded the heterosexual user as powerful because straight men are usually worried about being miscategorized as gay (Bosson et al., 2005) and hence recognize the act as 'courageous'. Self-labeling may also signal active perspective-taking, a process that is critical for majority mobilization (Mallett et al., 2008). Heterosexuals may not have recognized or were unsure about the act as it goes against the norm. Indeed, samples of mostly heterosexual observers have been found to judge straight-sounding individuals engaging in self-labeling as 'losing' power (see Fasoli et al., 2019).

Altogether these findings show that reclaiming is a risky process, especially when it involves labels (e.g., 'faggot') that have not been fully reframed. DGLs change and evolve (Croom, 2014; Hom, 2008), but the process goes through different phases including an ambivalent one in which DGLs can be simultaneously perceived as reclaimed and derogatory (see Jeshion, 2020). Our

study shows that, to understand the reappropriation stage of a label, we need to look at contextual factors. In the context of our data collection, the label 'faggot' is generally seen as offensive, but to a less extent if used by a gay, meaning *reframing* is occurring, especially in the eyes of sexual minorities. Hence, sexual minorities should use DGLs in a positive and non-malicious way with the intent of changing their meaning (see Austin, 1975), but should be aware that such use may not be entirely understood as reclaiming, especially by heterosexual others. *Reappropriation* entails changes in power dynamics, and as such is a more complicated process. Our findings suggest that self-labeling is associated with more power if the user and observers are minority members, regardless of the type of label. DGL self-labeling did not increase power perception or support for the LGTQ+ community. Hence, individuals seem to be aware of the risks DGL self-labeling carries when the label is under reclamation.

It is worth noting that the study has a number of limitations that future studies might overcome. First, we only tested a DGL referring to gay men without considering already reclaimed labels (e.g., 'queer'; see Bianchi, 2014). Future research should include labels that have been reclaimed and expand such investigation to labels concerning other minority groups (e.g., lesbian women, ethnic minorities). Second, since the perceived power reliability was low, results should be taken with caution. Also, we did not assess actual changes in power dynamics between the majority and minority groups as a function of self-labeling. Third, we assessed DGL use in a supportive context (Pride parade) that facilitates the perception of DGL as reappropriated (see Gaucher et al., 2015) and we only focused on self-labeling. Analyzing different contexts and user/observers' relationships (e.g., friendship, see O'Dea et al., 2015; O'Dea & Saucier, 2020) would allow us to understand when self-labeling is successful. Fourth, our study involved a convenience sample, not representative of the Italian population. Indeed, our sample mostly consisted of young adults who reported to be politically 'progressive', suggesting they may have endorsed more liberal ideologies. Use and acquisition of LGBTQ+ slurs vary across age groups (see Edmonson, 2021) and perception of DGL's social acceptability is associated with political ideologies (Cervone et al., 2021). Hence,

our results are silent about potential differences in gender, age, education, geographic areas, and political orientation. Fifth, the evidentiary value of the present study is limited to the appraisal of a vignette through self-reported measures. A field study analyzing reactions to DGL self-labeling occurring at pride events would allow us to better understand how such behaviors are interpreted.

 To conclude, reclaiming is a complex phenomenon in which, not only the user's identity but also the observer's is key in understanding how DGL and CGL use is perceived.

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Table 1. Means (Standard Deviation) Referring to the Main effect of Label, User, and Observer Across Dependent Variables.

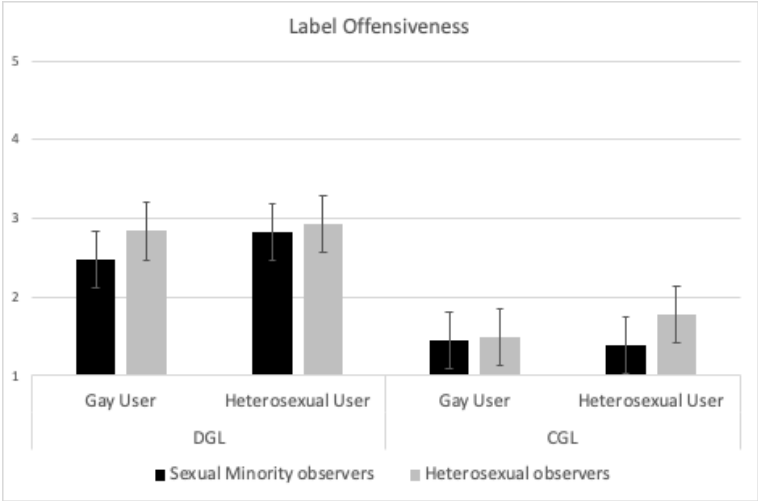|		Label Offensiveness	Perceived Power	Situation Valence	Action Supportiveness
			Variable		
Label	CGL	1.52 (.50)	3.43 (.83)	1.55 (.75)	3.98 (1.05)
	DGL	2.76 (.78)	3.60 (.82)	2.30 (.54)	3.22 (1.07)
Main Effect		$F(1,399) = 367.30, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .47$	$F(1,399) = 1.25, p = .26, \eta^2_p = .003$	$F(1,399) = 138.44, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .25$	$F(1,399) = 53.35, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .12$
User	Gay	2.09 (.84)	3.68 (.71)	1.85 (.63)	3.73 (1.20)
	Heterosexual	2.24 (.96)	3.25 (.84)	2.04 (.86)	3.46 (1.05)
Main Effect		$F(1,399) = 6.88, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .02$	$F(1,399) = 32.64, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .07$	$F(1,399) = 10.37, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .02$	$F(1,399) = 7.02, , p < .001, \eta^2_p = .02$
Observer	Sexual Minority	2.03 (.89)	3.58 (.80)	1.83 (.75)	3.73 (1.14)
	Heterosexual	2.26 (.90)	3.34 (.80)	2.07 (.73)	3.47 (1.10)
Main Effect		$F(1,399) = 12.68, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .03$	$F(1,399) = 10.14, p < .002 \ \eta^2_p = .02$	$F(1,399) = 12.97, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .03$	$F(1,399) = 5.87, p < .02, \eta^2_p = .01$

Figure 1. Label offensiveness across type of label, user sexual orientation, and observer sexual orientation. Error bars represent standard errors.
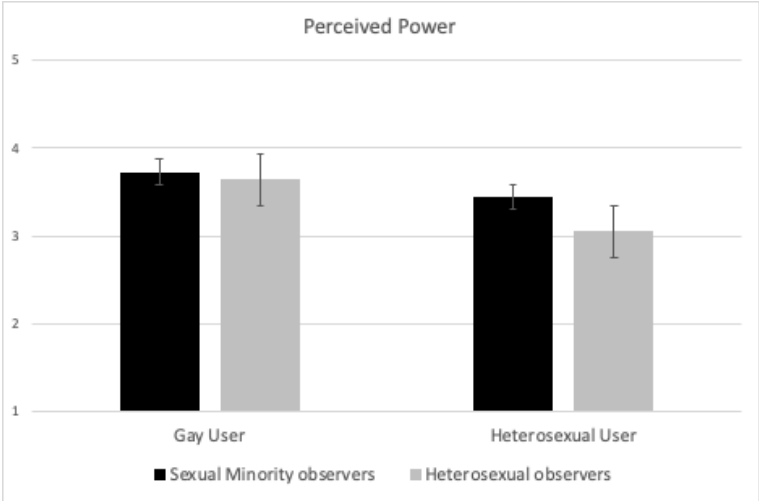
Figure 2. Perceived power across user sexual orientation and observer sexual orientation. Error bars represent standard errors.

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