



Public displays of affection in same-sex versus opposite-sex couples and the influence of loved ones' approval

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ABSTRACT

Though progress has been made over the past few decades regarding acceptance of same-sex relationships and the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) community as a whole, the negative stigma associated with being a member of the community is still prevalent in our society today [1]. Frost [1] explains that negative stereotypes surrounding intimacy as it is expressed in same-sex relationships generate and encourage opportunities for heterosexual relationships to continue conveying affection, while obstructing those same principles from same-sex couples. Individuals involved in same-sex relationships may abstain from engaging in public displays of affection (PDA) out of fear of social disapproval or judgment [2]. Beyond this, limited literature is available addressing PDA in same-sex couples. There is equally little research available regarding parental approval of same-sex couples, particularly regarding college-aged same-sex relationships. This study found significant differences between PDA and sexual orientation. This study also looked at the impact of social approval.

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There has been limited research that has explored the topic of public and private displays of affection and differences based on sexual orientation. Though there has been an increase in individuals reporting homosexual orientation, there are still limited populations to learn from. In addition, there are many instances where stigma regarding homosexuality limits the amount of people who report as homosexual. Baumeister and Bushman [3] reference a study in which male and female confederates asked passersby on the street for spare change. In one trial of the study, participants wore blank black t-shirts, while in the other, subjects wore black t-shirts that had the words "Gay pride" written in large red letters. It was found that pedestrians were far more likely to offer change to the participants wearing the blank shirts than those with the words on it [3]. Their research supports the notion of stigma; more specifically, the blatant rejection of individuals in support of or identifying as members of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) community may experience in modern society, which can be expected to just as

easily translate to the disapproval that members of this group may face while attempting to engage in public displays of affection (PDA).

Inbar et al. [4] introduce the theory of disgust, which has typically been associated with minority groups, such as the LGBT community. In their first study, it was discovered that people were more likely to report that a behavior was conducted purposefully if they believed that the specified behavior was morally wrong. In a study conducted, the participants were tasked with reading a scenario in which a director encouraged both an opposite-sex and a same-sex male couple to French kiss in public for a music video. Upon being explicitly asked how they felt about the scenario they had just read, "The majority of participants (73%) responded that there was nothing wrong with gay men French kissing in public, exceeding the percentage of participants (55%) who said that there was nothing wrong with straight couples French kissing in public" [4].

In the second study, participants completed an Implicit Association Test, which ultimately tested their inherent feelings toward gay individuals

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versus straight individuals. Given a variety of words and images, participants were asked to sort through them by categorizing them as either “pleasant” or “unpleasant.” Participants implicitly assessed gay people more negatively than they did straight people; additionally, participants who were found to have an increased sensitivity to disgust completed less favorable evaluations of gay people. Through both studies, the researchers found that some people initially perceive same-sex public behavior as being inappropriate [7].

A dictatorship and a strong presence of Catholicism are factors cited by de Oliveira et al. [5] as making social change and widespread acceptance of homosexuality difficult in Portugal. Though an article of the Portuguese Republican Constitution has been edited to express that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is prohibited, other laws and societal influences still encourage the repression of homosexuality [5]. Through resilient protesting, Portuguese LGBT groups successfully managed to encourage the government to respond to the debate regarding same-sex marriage, which ultimately lead to its legalization. Fourteen LGBT-identifying Portuguese were interviewed so that researchers could gather a comprehensive sense of the discrimination that they had faced on the basis of their gender and sexual orientation. The researchers ultimately concluded, based on the participants’ responses, that Portuguese LGBT individuals feel the need to engage in PDA strategically, so as to avoid facing discrimination [5]. Same-sex couples worldwide who are aware of the stigma that is associated with engaging in PDA may similarly refrain from doing so.

Public Displays of Affection

Approval of PDA is important and relevant. Doan et al. [6] distinguish between what they call formal rights and informal privileges. Formal rights are defined as legal rights, such as those a married couple is granted. Informal privileges are discreet but distinct benefits that the majority group is able to enjoy that a minority group might not be, such as PDA. Kent and El-Alayli [2] note that couples use physical affection as a means of demonstrating love to their partner; same-sex couples, however, may reduce their PDA if they feel that their relationship

will be susceptible to social disapproval. It has been proven that individuals in same-sex relationships do not engage in fewer private displays of affection, demonstrating that same-sex participants engage in lower levels of affection only when they are out in public [2].

Vaquera [7] examined differences in PDA between interracial and intra-racial couples, and hypothesized that a multitude of factors impacted an individual’s willingness to engage in PDA, including age, home environment, religiosity, and the couple’s comfortability with one another.

Relationship Support

There are generally few differences in relationship dynamics between same-sex and opposite-sex couples as far as commitment, quality, or even satisfaction levels. Differences lie in the social support that each type of couple receives, with same-sex couples receiving less support overall. Same-sex relationships lacking support from family has been shown to produce commitment issues, anger, and decreased happiness in the relationship in general [8]. Relationship stability can be affected by the perceived support that a couple receives from family. Malnar [9] states that this perceived support is actually far more important than actual support that the couple receives because an individual can only benefit from support that they are aware of. Furthermore, support and approval from others that the couple is not aware of will do little to affect the couples’ perceptions of relationship acceptance. Felmlee [10] also posits that relationships are heavily influenced by the partners’ social networks, specifically citing disapproval/lack of support as one of two major factors which affect a couple’s relationship stability.

Relationship Approval

Relationship approval is extremely important for a couple, as Belous and Wampler [11] reported that the relationship satisfaction ultimately declines as support from family and friends decreases. Though the research alluded to in this study was conducted on a relatively small number of couples who had only been married for a short period of time, the results show that same-sex couples experience higher levels of satisfaction and intimacy, as well as

a decrease in conflict as compared to opposite-sex couples. Additionally, same-sex couples were found to have been better at communicating with one another, which lead to an increase in constructive interactions between the couple [11]. Felmlee [10] differentiated between different forms of approval; direct approval was identified as positive reactions the couple might openly receive, such as being told that they look good together, while indirect approval occurs when individuals are treated as a couple without necessarily being referred to as such. While the effects of approval on a relationship are indisputable, researchers debate over whether the approval of friends, parents, partner's parents, or other loved ones have the greatest impact on a couple.

Lee et al. [12] hypothesized that the relationship approval from an individual's parents will ultimately be more influential, and therefore more predictive of a couple's potential for distress in the relationship than would approval from a partner's parents. As most previous studies only seemed to include the approval of the parents of one member of a couple, their second proposed research question sought to examine how the approval of both partner's parents related to the couple's levels of potential distress. Lee et al. [12] identified strong ties as those between a participant and his or her parents, while weak ties were, thus, used to denote the relationship an individual has with his or her partner's parents. Though this particular study aimed to increase the web of individuals whose acceptance is considered crucial in influencing a heterosexual couple's overall happiness by including the parents of each member of a given couple, examining solely the parents' relationship approval and excluding peer approval remains a limitation of this study and similar research [12].

Reczek [13] conducted extensive interviews with thirty gay and thirty lesbian individuals in relationships lasting over 7 years, and found that parental disapproval lead to relationship conflict and strain in just over seventy percent of these relationships. Respondents in this study reported increased strain both individually and within their relationship, a decrease in contact with unaccepting parents, but also an intensification of resiliency within their relationship [13]. This study highlights both the

distressing and beneficial effects that lack of parental approval may have on a same-sex relationship.

The current study was both a replication and extension of Kent and El-Alayli's [2] study, using their Assessment of Public and Private Physical Affection (APPPA) to examine seven physical affection items as part of the survey found in Appendix A. The seven items measured originally in Kent and El-Alayli's [2] study were presented to participants twice, assessing their willingness to engage in the specified behaviors both in private and in public. Additionally, a measurement of perceived approval of the relationship by loved ones was assessed using the five items from the *Social Network Approval Measures* section of Felmlee's [10] study.

Though some studies have been conducted on PDA and same-sex couples, Doan et al. [6] research, thus far, has been primarily focused on LGBT individuals' personal acceptance of both same-sex PDA and opposite-sex PDA. Little research has been conducted regarding the willingness of individuals within same-sex relationships to engage in PDA themselves. The current study examined opposite-sex couples in an attempt to determine if they will be more willing to engage in PDA than will same-sex couples. The proposed reasoning for the difference in willingness between the two groups is the stigma that is associated with being involved romantically with a member of the same sex.

Additionally, it was expected that individuals whose family and friends approve of their relationship will be more likely to engage in PDA than will be their peers whose relationships do not have the approval of respected loved ones. Studies on PDA, even those using LGBT individuals as participants, are limited due to solely investigating their subjects' feelings towards these public displays, rather than their personal willingness to engage in them.

Parental approval may not be the sole determinant of an individual's willingness to engage in PDA; other members within the individual's social circle may have an equal or greater influence on how comfortable this individual feels with his or her partner, making these individuals' approval of the relationship more impactful than the parents'. Because some studies on relationship approval have been restricted to merely parents, this study will expand the circle of individuals whose approval may influence an individual's willingness to engage

in PDA to an individual's family and friends as well as their partner's family and friends.

It was hypothesized that individuals in same-sex relationships will engage in fewer displays of affection in public than those in opposite-sex relationships. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that private displays of affection will be more prevalent in same-sex couples than in opposite-sex couples. Finally, it was hypothesized that individuals whose relationships have the approval of loved ones will be more likely to engage in PDA.

Method

Participants

Participants were a convenience sample of individuals enrolled in a higher-education institution. All were in a current relationship. Out of 327 individuals who completed the survey, 303 participants' responses were used. 24 participants' responses were not included because they failed to complete the survey in full. The mean age of participants was 21 though the youngest participant was 16-year old, and the oldest 51. In regards to gender, 58 participants were male, while 244 were female, and one identified as other. In terms of sexual orientation, 241 identified as heterosexual, 27 as homosexual, 29 as bisexual, 5 as other, and 1 preferred not to say. Nearly, 45 participants reported being in a same-sex relationship and 258 participants reported being in an opposite-sex relationship.

Procedure

Participants were acquired primarily through the university's online participant scheduling system, while others received a link to the survey through text message or email. A link to the survey was also accessed by some participants through Facebook. After reaching the survey's website, participants were presented with a consent form; participants were informed that consent would be given if they proceeded to the survey. Some individuals received credit for their courses through completion of the survey though no other compensation was given to the participants. All data were acquired through means outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA) ethical guidelines and the Institutional Review Board.

Participants began the survey by responding to several prompts regarding demographic

information. Statistics including age, gender, grade point average, sexual orientation, relationship type (either opposite-sex or same-sex), relationship length, levels of personal relationship commitment and perceived relationship commitment from a current partner were collected from the participants.

Participants were then asked to complete the APPPA [2] twice. The assessment included a list of seven questions which were answered using a seven-point Likert scale. The first time, participants were asked to answer the seven questions regarding their willingness to engage in the prompted acts in private; together, the scores of the seven questions were totaled to create the PRIVATEsum. Participants were then presented with the same list of questions, this time asking them to assess their willingness to engage in the same acts in a public setting; in the same manner, the scores of these seven questions were summed to get the PUBLICsum. Finally, participants completed the Social Network Approval Measures Questionnaire [10], a list of five questions used to measure the level of relationship approval an individual perceived receiving from their family, friends, partner's family, and partner's friends. As in Sprecher and Felmlee's [14] study, the responses to the fifth question were ultimately discarded, and only the first four questions were amassed to produce the APPROVALsum.

Reliability

Though limited to using only female participants, Kent and El-Alayli's [2] Assessment of APPPA measured the frequency with which women claimed to engage in affectionate behavior with their partner in public on a seven-point scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$). Lee et al. [12] study used a five-point Likert scale to assess participants' interpretations of their parents' and their partner's parents' approval of their relationships. The researchers examined previous studies, which successfully used single-item measures to assess relationship approval, and found these single-item measures to have been reliable and valid in investigating similar measures [12]. Malnar's [9] RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE) questionnaire similarly assessed participants' relationship quality, as well as parental approval of the relationship, and was found to have high internal consistency (between 0.70 and 0.90), and to have been both valid and reliable, as proven by an alpha test and test-retest.

Results

Relationship type was measured on two levels, between same-sex and opposite-sex couples. A 1×3 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to test the effect that relationship type would have on one's willingness to engage in private displays of affection, PDA, and perceived relationship approval. Homogeneity of variance-covariance can be concluded by looking at Box's test (found in Table 1); the significance level was found to be 0.140, which indicates that there is not significance, meaning there is equality amongst both relationship types, regardless of the difference in size between the groups.

MANOVA results indicated that relationship type does significantly affect the combined PRIVATEsum, PUBLICsum, and APPROVALsum. The significance threshold was set at 0.005, and identical significance was found in the four multivariate tests, as evidenced in Table 2. A post-hoc test was not required because there were fewer than three levels within the factor for relationship type. Table 3 demonstrates that because there is significance on the dependent variables overall, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was necessary to determine which of the dependent variables was individually impacted by relationship type.

Though not hypothesized, it is interesting to note that relationship type (Table 3) was not found to have a main effect on the perceived level of relationship approval an individual received from family and friends [$F(1, 301) = 2.274, p > 0.05$]. Despite this fact, the means found in Table 4 demonstrate that opposite-sex couples perceived having a slightly higher level of relationship approval from their loved ones than did same-sex couples.

Hypothesis 1: PDA

As was evidenced by univariate tests (Table 3), relationship type was shown to have a main effect on willingness to engage in PDA [$F(1, 301) = 4.846, p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.016$]. When looking at the means presented in Table 4, it was again clear that opposite-sex couples were more likely to report being willing to engage in PDA than were individuals in same-sex relationships.

Hypothesis 2: Private Displays of Affection

Univariate tests (Table 3) concluded that relationship type did not have a main effect on an

individual's willingness to engage in private displays of affection [$F(1, 301) = 1.986, p > 0.05$]. The means calculated in Table 4, however, demonstrated that same-sex couple individuals were more willing to engage in private displays of affection on average when compared to opposite-sex couple individuals.

Hypothesis 3: Relationship Approval and PDA

A Pearson's correlation was used to compare two of the dependent variables: the PUBLICsum and the APPROVALsum. As can be seen in Table 5, the results of the Pearson's correlation suggested that there is a weak but statistically significant correlation between the two variables [$r(302) = .305, p < 0.001$]. This suggested that an individual whose relationship has the approval of family and friends would be more likely to engage in PDA.

Discussion

The results of this study are overall supported by previous research. These findings suggest there is an unequal willingness to engage in PDA across relationship types. Because this data is merely quantitative, there is no way of determining precisely why there might be a significant difference between relationship types. For this reason, there are any number of inferences that can be made about the data produced from this study. For instance, it is possible that individuals in same-sex couples might engage in lower levels of public affection due to the fact that they demonstrate enough affection in private to feel that their affection needs are met. Another possibility is that opposite-sex couples might simply have less desire to engage in private displays of affection because they feel just as comfortable engaging in these acts in public and therefore have no reason to engage in them as frequently in private settings. Despite being conducted online, there may have also been cultural implications surrounding the region in which this study originated; the fact that a majority of the participants were accustomed to a more liberal environment may have impacted the results. Finally, it is also important to consider the effect that personality factors play in determining an individual's willingness to engage in public or private displays of affection. It is conceivable that personal characteristics or preferences may be a more determinant factor for engaging in PDA than the type of relationship a person is in.

Limitations

The study was skewed in terms of the gender of the respondents, with the female participants making up 80.5% of the population of participants, and vastly outnumbering the remaining 19.1% of male participants. Furthermore, the type of relationship participants were in was greatly disproportionate, as only 14.9% of the participants reported being in same-sex relationships, as opposed to the majority, 85.1%, which reported being in an opposite-sex relationship. Still, these percentages are significantly higher than what one might expect given that the most recent estimate from 2016 regarding the percentage of the American population identifying as LGBT was just 4.1% [15]. The disparity in these statistics might suggest that an increased number of young adults feel comfortable either identifying as LGBT, or more specifically, being in same-sex relationships, when they are in college. This might further suggest that college presents individuals with an opportunity to explore their sexual identities outside of the restrictions of their homes or the limitations of the professional world after graduating.

Additionally, the personal bias that accompanies self-reported data must be taken into account. It may have been difficult for participants to gauge on a numerical scale how comfortable they actually felt engaging in certain acts in either public or private. Asking respondents to measure the level of approval or disapproval that they feel they receive from family members or friends might have been an equally challenging task. Conducting a study that produces qualitative data also limits the extent of the study's results; this particular study, for example, is not able to answer why individuals may feel more or less comfortable engaging in either private or public displays.

Finally, in hindsight, this study may have benefited from including a measure of relationship satisfaction within the survey. Relationship satisfaction has been found to have a cyclic relationship with willingness to engage in PDA [2], so including a measure of relationship satisfaction might have allowed for it to be a comparable factor to the PUBLICsum and PRIVATEsum, and even the APPROVALsum. However, it is also possible that PDA is not a true indication of relationship satisfaction, which is why including a measure of relationship satisfaction might be useful in future studies. Individuals who

engage in PDA might do so in an attempt to suggest to others that they are happier with their partner than they actually are.

Additionally, the “opposite-sex” and “same-sex” relationship type identifiers were exclusionary, as they restricted participation from those who might identify as transgender, non-binary, gender fluid, etc. While this study was intentionally constructed to examine differences between cisgender participants, future studies may seek to expand to include other members of the LGBT community.

Future studies may benefit from attempting to find more evenly matched groups of participants in terms of gender. It might be equally as interesting to conduct the study in a different region of the nation, where a different political or cultural climate might have an impact on the results of the study. Future studies may also seek to study why, in particular, individuals across relationship types demonstrate more or less willingness to engage in either private or PDA, and might benefit from doing so using a qualitative study. Interviewing participants might give researchers a better understanding of under what circumstances individuals feel comfortable engaging in PDA, why they perceive having a higher or lower level of friend or family relationship approval, etc. Because personal bias might have impacted the self-reported responses participants gave to the survey, future researchers might also opt to perform an observational study, in which they themselves sit in a public location and keep track of the number of individuals who pass by them engaging in PDA. This might give the researchers a more comprehensive idea of just how often couples engage in PDA without personal bias skewing the results. In conclusion, it is evident that relationship type has an effect on whether or not an individual will feel comfortable engaging in PDA. Same-sex couple individuals are more reluctant to engage in PDA, and report feeling like they receive less approval from their own family and friends as well as their partner's family and friends. Individuals within opposite-sex relationships are more likely to engage in PDA themselves and report feeling supported in their relationship. Those who feel like they have an increase in relationship approval therefore seem to be more likely to engage in PDA. While to some seemingly trivial, the inequality across relationship types in regards to willingness to engage in PDA could have lasting

implications on same-sex couples. Research from other studies show that relationship satisfaction could be hindered by a lack of PDA, which means that society might inadvertently be dampening same-sex couples' overall quality of relationship.

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Appendix

Table 1. Box's test of equality of covariance matrices across relationship types.

Box's M	9.916
F	1.611
df1	6
df2	34663.07
Sig.	.140

Box's Test used to test the null hypothesis that the observed covariance matrices of the dependent variables are equal across groups.

Table 2. MANOVA summary table for relationship type by combined dependent variables.

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Relationship type	Pillai's Trace	.075	8.123	3.000	299.000	.000	.075
	Wilk's Lambda	.925	8.123	3.000	299.000	.000	.075
	Hotelling's Trace	.081	8.123	3.000	299.000	.000	.075
	Roy's Largest Root	.081	8.123	3.000	299.000	.000	.075

MANOVA used to test the independent variable (relationship type) across the combined dependent variables.

Table 3. One-way ANOVA summary table for relationship type by individual dependent variables.

Source	Dependent variable	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta squared
Relationship type	PRIVATEsum	130.426	1	130.426	1.986	.160	.007
	PUBLICsum	502.521	1	502.521	4.846	.028	.016
	APPROVALsum	39.374	1	39.374	2.274	.133	.007

One-Way ANOVA conducted to examine each of the dependent variables independently against the independent variable (relationship type).

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of dependent variables compared to relationship type.

	Relationship type	Mean	Std. deviation	N
PRIVATEsum	Same-sex	39.6667	7.63961	45
	Opposite-sex	37.8217	8.18079	258
	Total	38.0957	8.11715	303
PUBLICsum	Same-sex	30.1111	11.26181	45
	Opposite-sex	33.7326	9.98726	258
	Total	33.1947	10.24816	303
APPROVALsum	Same-sex	23.3778	3.84524	45
	Opposite-sex	24.3915	4.21294	258
	Total	24.2409	4.16999	303

Means of the dependent variables were compared across levels of the independent variable (relationship type).

Table 5. Pearson's correlation comparing perceived approval to willingness to engage in public displays.

		APPROVALsum	PUBLICsum
APPROVALsum	Pearson Correlation	1	305**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	303	303
PUBLICsum	Pearson Correlation	305**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	303	303

Pearson's correlation test was used to compare two dependent variables against one another.

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).