

COMM 100W Sec 17

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It's So Gay to Say "That's So Gay"

During the summer of 2018, I was asked to babysit my thirteen-year-old nephew while his parents went out of town for business. Even though my nephew was old enough to handle himself, my aunt and uncle still wanted me to watch over him and their house while they were gone for the week. Sometime midweek, my nephew asked if I wanted to play Fortnite. **As I feel that video games are an unproductive use of one's time, I declined his offer and obliged to sit next to him on the couch while I read eBooks on my phone (Interpretive Claim).** While swiping page after page, I watched as my nephew expressed the various emotions of online gaming: cheering, sighing, taunting, random outbursts of shouting—the whole shebang. All was fine until his last game; he came in second after the winner ambushed him with a shotgun. Out of frustration, my nephew raged, forcefully tossing his Xbox controller on the couch, and blurted out, "This game is so gay!" I retorted back asking, "Really? When did Fortnite come out of the closet?"

I was deeply displeased by how my nephew used the term *gay* in such a defamatory fashion. In fact, I have always been irked by those who use the expression "That is so gay" to describe something as stupid, bad, or lame. Not only is this expression offensive and demeaning to those of the LGBTQ+ community, but it also takes away the group identity that those of the community have established for themselves. Yet, the term *gay* has come a long way from its conceptualization to how it is used today; from the time of its conceptualization in the early 13th

century to the present-day, the term *gay* has undergone a plethora of definitions due to changes in historical backgrounds, social contexts, and everyday conversation.

In its earliest form, *gay* was used as a light-hearted adjective to describe those that were bright, lively-looking, or showy (Value Claim). Furthermore, the term gained another positive connotation in the early 15th century elucidating to an idea of being carefree, free-spirited, and jovial. In the early 16th century, however, there would be a shift in societal perspectives and the term would go on to describe those that were promiscuous or frivolous—a definition that especially targeted prostitutes in brothels. From the late 16th century on, the term *gay* had erratic positive and negative connotations ranging from calling something attractive, describing someone of good health, and deeming something as reckless. Though, it was in the early 1900s when the slang form of *gay* would become the globally known label to describe those that identify as homosexual (Oxford University Press, 2020). Additionally, the term obtained another slang definition in the 1970s, meaning to call something “lame, dull, or boring”, as Urban Dictionary user joe1970 defined in their entry (2010, *That’s so gay*). This definition of *gay*, along with the homosexual label connotation, are now ravaging our everyday conversations in the present and are the most used interpretations of the word.

Gay, which usually is specifically directed to identify homosexual males, has become an umbrella term to represent those of sexual orientations that are not heterosexual. Although the term did create an identity for the LGBTQ+ community, it was still used by the heteronormative society to degrade those of the community and deem them subpar to the rest of society. Yet, even with the unpleasant implication that *gay* has, it is still much preferred to represent gay persons as the term *homosexual* is linked to ideas that gay people are “somehow diseased or psychologically/emotionally disordered” (GLAAD Media Reference Guide, 2016). By the 1960s,

the term would hold power in that it was redefined as a pride of self-identification and group communication of the oppressed gay and queer communities fighting for equal rights (“Origin of Everything”, 2018). Through this power, the gay and queer communities were able to take back the word *gay* and present it proudly as a banner for change calling for the betterment of LGBTQ+ rights and treatment in our country. Although the definitions of *gay* have changed over time, the derogatory nature of the term can still be seen in the present, especially in the media.

In a 2015 episode of *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, cast member Joe Giudice used the phrase “That’s so gay!” as a “figure of speech,” as explained by his wife, Teresa Giudice. In a post-show interview with Andy Cohen, it was clear that her co-star Danielle Staub was offended by Joe Giudice’s use of the expression, detailing that the only man that was ever in her life was gay and that his words hit too close to home for her. Yet, instead of empathizing with Staub and comforting her, her other co-stars justified and normalized Joe’s use of the expression, saying that “everyone in New Jersey says it” and that Staub was only hurt by the words because she wanted to create drama. Thankfully, Cohen, who is an openly gay man, took it upon himself to let the stars know that, like Staub, he was also offended by the use of the expression (Cohen, Diefenbach, & D’Agostino, 2015). The refutation and condemnation of using *gay* in such normative contexts is critical as by allowing such phrase to be said on TV, and any other medium, influences audiences to think that it is okay and acceptable to say the phrase and use *gay* in that connotation—when it is absolutely not. And even off-screen, in the real world, the use of this saying and this context of *gay* is still prevalently seen and continually poses a problem for those that are LGBTQ+.

According to the 2013 study “‘That’s so Gay’: Heterosexual Male Undergraduates and the Perpetuation of Sexual Orientation Microaggressions on Campus,” 65%, or about 899, of the

2,568 student participants reported saying the phrase “that’s so gay” at least once on the University of Michigan campus in the past twelve months. In the same study, it was found that around 90% of the survey takers had heard the phrase on the campus at least once, with 63% saying they heard it more than ten times in the twelve-month span (Woodford et al., 2013). **The concluding results clearly underscores that this derogatory form of *gay* is still frequently used today despite efforts to educate people and condemn this context (Passive Voice).** As a result of this phrase’s usage, those in the LGBTQ+ communities are demeaned, shamed, and humiliated by this disparaging heteronormative overtone on the term.

As a society, we should rethink and reevaluate how we view and use the term *gay* in our everyday lives and conversations. We owe it to the oppressed and marginalized LGBTQ+ communities to be a voice and advocate for those affected by the harsh mistreatments and wrongdoings of our society. With programs and advocacy ads, such as those created and produced by GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network), organizations are banding together to better educate the youth of today and are hoping to spread awareness for the cause. For example, GLSEN’s campaign *ThinkB4YouSpeak* upheld the idea of watching what one and others say at school to prevent the saying of slurs and other detrimental figures of speech (*ThinkB4YouSpeak*). With celebrities such as former U.S. president Barack Obama, Lady Gaga, Elton John, and many more backing the movement of reinventing and supporting the pride connotation of *gay*, let’s hope that one day it will be gay to say “That’s so gay.”

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