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"If I Am Straight You Are Askew": Labelling Heterosexuals as Straight Worsen Gay Men's Perception

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ABSTRACT
A robust stream of research has shown the detrimental influence of slurs and derogatory epithets on attitudes toward minority groups. Extending prior work, we explored the influence of positive labels ascribed to the majority group on the evaluation of the minority group. Specifically, three studies tested the possibility that the label "straight," generally linked with the concept of morality, would promote a negative evaluation of gay men. Study 1 exposed English speakers to an individual person described as straight (vs. heterosexual) while Study 2 exposed English speakers to a target person described as straight (vs. heterosexual vs. no label). Study 3 considered a non-English sample (i.e., Italian adults) and experimentally induced the association between the straight label and the concept of heterosexuality. In each study, participants were asked to express their attitudes toward a gay target after the manipulation. Results showed that heterosexual participants exposed to the label "straight" reported more negative attitudes toward gay men than heterosexual participants exposed to the label "heterosexual" (or when they were not exposed to any label). Critically, such an effect emerged only among highly religious participants. Implications for policies and prejudice reduction are discussed.

Research on prejudice and intergroup relations has long recognized the role of communication in the development and maintenance of negative attitudes toward minority groups (Taylor & Usborne, 2007). If on the one hand language can be conceived as an explicit (e.g., hate speech) or implicit (e.g., Linguistic Intergroup Bias; Maass, 1999) expression of aversion, on the other hand it is likely to forge person and group perception (Karasawa & Maass, 2008), promote social boundaries, enhance stereotyping and prejudice (Collins & Clément, 2012).

Social category labeling plays a key role in shaping the relationship between social psychological processes and language. As argued by Allport, labels (such as black and white, gay and straight) are "exceedingly salient and powerful … tend[ing] to prevent alternative classification or even cross-classification … These symbols act like shrieking sirens, deafening us to all finer discriminations that we might otherwise perceive" (Allport, 1954, p. 179). Category labels may distort the recipient's perception even when they are neutral and primarily used for their denotative function. As shown by the literature (Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963; see also Krueger & Clement, 1994), neutral labels applied to nonsocial stimuli foster categorization, introduce discontinuity in a continuum, maximize intra-category similarities and inter-category differences. In the same vein, more recent studies (Foroni & Rothbart, 2011, 2013) revealed that labels referred to social categories (e.g., "anorexic" or "obese") persistently increased within-category similarity (i.e., assimilation) and reduced across-category

similarity (i.e., contrast). In turn, these distortions and the accentuation of the social categorization effects are likely to have a well-known detrimental influence on intergroup relations (Perdue et al., 1990; Tajfel et al., 1971).

Although social category labels *per se* have relevant social consequences, these effects might be significantly enhanced by the type of epithet. For instance, young individuals' behavioral responses are affected by the use of the label *old* instead of *elderly* applied to mature people (Bustillos et al., 2012) and relatively negative labels (e.g., *illegal aliens* vs. *noncitizens*) referred to immigrants engender prejudice, punitive behavioral intentions, and support for punitive policies (Rucker et al., 2019).

However, the more adverse consequences on social perception arise when social category labels are openly offensive and derogatory. Prior research has widely highlighted the harmful effects of derogatory epithets referred to minority groups (Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985). Derogatory category labels engender a broad range of prejudiced responses toward the referenced group such as negative emotions, hostility, and criticism, stereotyped associations, behavioral distancing, dehumanization, and unfair distribution of resources (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007, 2008; Carnaghi et al., 2011; Fasoli et al., 2015, 2016; Simon & Greenberg, 1996).

Remarkably, this robust strand of research has exclusively focused on the aversive effects toward minority group members of offensive labels referred to stigmatized groups. Yet, to the best of our knowledge, no prior experimental work has

addressed the possible detrimental consequences on intergroup relations of positive category labels when they are applied to the majority group. This lack of research is particularly surprising given that social psychology has long recognized modern prejudice to be subtle, indirect, invisible to the perpetrator, and revealed more by ingroup favoritism than explicit outgroup derogation (e.g., Dovidio, 2001; Greenwald & Pettigrew, 2014). To fill this gap, we tested the possibility that the use of specific category labels referred to the majority group would negatively affect the perception of minority group members. In particular, in the line of research on homophobic epithets (e.g., Carnaghi & Maass, 2007), we investigated possible undesirable effects of the label *straight* used to describe the heterosexual category. Although the expression of sexual prejudice is publicly condemned, negative attitudes toward sexual minorities are alarmingly high (Brambilla & Butz, 2013; Herek, 2007; Herek & McLemore, 2013). Indeed, opinion surveys have revealed that a substantial number of U.S. and European citizens feel hostility toward sexual minorities (FRA-European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020; Vezzali et al., 2017; Wilcox & Norrander, 2002) and the media has reported that anti-homosexual hate crimes are widespread (Herek, 2007). Against this background, sexual minorities seem an appropriate context for the study of the role of language in shaping intergroup hostility.

Although English speakers commonly use the label *straight* to indicate heterosexual people and perceive the words *straight* and *heterosexual* as perfectly interchangeable (Miller & Ryan, 2011), the former might evoke more positive associations than the latter. This is plain to see when we look at the dictionary where, in addition to being heterosexual, *straight* is defined as continuing in one direction without curving (adv.), being without bend (adj.) or honest and respectable. In this vein, a recent study explicitly investigated the association between the spatial dimension of straightness and the abstract concept of morality (Pacilli et al., 2018). This research started from the analysis of the everyday language that is imbued with expressions in which straightness refers with the spatial dimension of morality (e.g., rectitude). This proved to be true not only in the European language but also in Chinese, Arabic, and Russian, thus suggesting this relation to be spread in different cultural contexts. Moreover, Pacilli et al. (2018) experimentally showed that people tend to associate implicitly morality-related words (e.g., respect) with straight figures rather than with curved ones and to prefer straight images after recalling moral (vs. immoral) events. Therefore, these prior studies empirically support the hypothesis of a robust association between straightness and the perception of moral integrity. This finding could be integrated with recent advances showing that morality plays a primary role in social judgment (see for a review, Brambilla & Leach, 2014). Specifically, moral behaviors or traits are much more critical to define individuals' and groups' positivity than clues related to other dimensions (e.g., competence, sociability).

Building on those findings, one may argue that employing the label *straight* to refer to heterosexual people might implicitly suggest that gay men are less moral and righteous than the majority group. This would be in line with prior work suggesting the uniqueness of attitudes and social identities processes when the moral dimension is concerned (Parker & Janoff-Bulman, 2013): Differently from other types of classification, morality-based groups are characterized by the dichotomous categorization of two groups in opposition to one another. Therefore, because of these contrasting representations of ingroup and outgroup, morality-based social identities (in this case, of heterosexual majority group) would lead to strong negational components ("if we are moral, then they are not moral"; see Zhong et al., 2008).

This emphasis on the moral characteristics could be particularly effective in worsening the image of the minority group, given that morality is a critical dimension of sexual stereotyping. Indeed, the literature on sexual prejudice and homonegativity has revealed that gay men (much more than lesbians) are stereotypically perceived as licentious, depraved, and dissolute (Madon, 1997; Vezzali et al., 2017). Moreover, lesbian and gay people are likely to elicit social disgust in the majority group members because they threaten a sense of moral purity, violating traditional rules of "appropriate" sexual behaviors (De Zavala et al., 2014). In line with this hypothesis, at an anecdotal level, in Italian (that is the native language of the authors of the present paper) the label *straight* to indicate heterosexual people does not exist but the derogatory epithets *deviant* ("deviato") and *perverts* ("pervertito"), denoting a person diverting from the straightforward pathway, are referred to gay people. In light of this evidence, we expected that employing the label *straight* to name an individual of the majority group would worsen the attitudes toward gay men.

Furthermore, we tested whether the hypothesized effect would be more pronounced according to some individual beliefs. Importantly, prior research has shown that high levels of religiosity are generally related to more negative views of sexual minorities (e.g., Cragun & Sumerau, 2015), and sexual stereotyping (for a review, Herek & McLemore, 2013). Religious people are more prone to hold negative stereotypes about nonreligious individuals and to exhibit negative attitudes toward targets perceived to violate religious worldviews (Johnson et al., 2012). Highly religious heterosexuals typically manifest higher levels of sexual prejudice than do nonreligious ones (Herek, 2000; Herek & Capitanio, 1996). Indeed, religious people are more likely than others to express negative affect toward gay people and to oppose policies and laws prohibiting employment discrimination against them (Brint & Abrutyn, 2010; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008; Herek, 2002; Olson et al., 2006). More specifically, in a meta-analysis, Whitley (2009) found that anti-gay prejudice was significantly predicted by fundamentalism, church attendance, and self-reported religious conviction. Critically, highly religious individuals morally reject sexual minorities. In other words, religious people are more likely to endorse negative moral stereotypes and perceive gay men as immoral and depraved (Herek & McLemore, 2013). Based on this, it would be reasonable to expect that the label *straight* to name an individual of the majority group would worsen the attitudes toward gay men, especially for religious individuals.

We tested these hypotheses in three experiments in which the social category label referred to the majority group was manipulated (i.e., *straight* vs. *heterosexual*; *straight* vs. *heterosexual* vs. control) and the social judgment about a minority

group member (i.e., a gay man) and the participant's religiosity were assessed. Two experiments have been carried out by considering native English speakers living in the UK, where the label *straight* is commonly used, whereas the third experiment was conducted on an Italian sample. The studies were conducted in accordance with the guidelines defined by the Declaration of Helsinki, were approved by the local ethics committee, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The raw data supporting the findings of these studies are openly available in OSF at https://osf.io/5sz4v/.

Study 1

Participants

An a priori power analysis was conducted for sample size estimation using G Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007). The power analysis for a regression with three predictors (two predictors and their interaction), an α =.05, power = .80, and a medium effect size (f^2 = .15) suggested at least an *N* of 77. We enrolled 162 participants who started the online questionnaire.

Twenty-three participants were excluded from the sample because they declared themselves to be non-heterosexual or non-exclusively heterosexual. Therefore, the final sample comprised 139 participants (M_{age} = 26.57; SD_{age} = 9.15, range 18–67 years; 94 women). All participants lived in the UK.

Materials and Procedure

The study was devised by means of the software Qualtrics, and the link was circulated through e-mail and social networks. On the first screen, participants learned that they were about to participate in a study on impression formation, and informed consent was obtained.

Next, participants were presented with a fictitious Facebook profile providing the picture and some personal information about the first social target, James. Specifically, the page reported the target's sexual orientation (i.e., straight vs. heterosexual), his relationship status (i.e., married), employment (i.e., accountant), age (i.e., 41), education (i.e., undergraduate degree), and his hobbies (i.e., football, films, documentaries). Information on the target's sexual orientation was experimentally manipulated: Half of the sample read that James was *straight*, the other half read that James was *heterosexual*. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions. In the subsequent page, participants were asked to recall James' occupation, hobbies, and sexual orientation.

Then another fictitious Facebook profile was presented, reporting the picture and some personal information about a second social target, Chris. Specifically, the page described the target's sexual orientation (i.e., gay), his relationship status (i.e., married), employment (i.e., engineer), age (i.e., 35), education (i.e., undergraduate degree), and his hobbies (i.e., TV series, reading). The target description was the same for all participants. The pictures of the two targets did not differ on attractiveness. To avoid a distortion of the results due to an interference of the picture on the impression formation, the visual stimuli were kept constant. Indeed, given that the

manipulation of the category label was between-participants, we employed the same picture to describe the heterosexual (vs. straight) target across participants. In a similar vein, the gay target was described employing the same picture for all participants.

Participants were further asked to recall Chris' occupation and sexual orientation and to express their general impression (i.e., "*What is your general impression of Chris?*" *I like Chris …* ").

Furthermore, they were presented with a list of seven positive traits (e.g., Friendly, Trustworthy, Honest, Sincere, Kind, Competent, Intelligent) and asked how much they attributed such characteristics to Chris.

Next, the participants' religiosity was assessed through two items (i.e., "*How much do you have religious beliefs?*"; "*How much do you visit your place of worship?*"). Moreover, to explore the anticipated relationship between religiosity and homonegativity, (prejudice toward gay men) the 12-item Modern Homonegativity Scale – Gay Men (e.g., "*Many gay men use their sexual orientation so that they can obtain special privileges*"; "*Gay men do not have all the rights they need*"; Morrison & Morrison, 2002) was used. All the answers were given on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (= *not at all*) to 7 (= *very much*).

Finally, participants were asked to provide personal information (age, gender, nationality, languages, sexual orientation), thanked, and debriefed.

Results

After reversing the negatively phrased items in the questionnaire and testing the scale reliability, we computed composite scores of religiosity (*M* = 2.25, *SD* = 1.56; α = .84), prejudice toward gay men (Modern Homonegativity Scale – Gay Men; *M* = 2.93, *SD* = 0.91; α = .81) and positive traits attributed to the gay target (*M* = 5.26, *SD* = .91; α = .94).

First, in order to investigate the effect of the category label manipulation (straight vs. heterosexual) on the impression toward the social target (the gay man) and the positive traits attributed to him, we computed two between-participants *t*-tests. The analyses yielded neither an effect on the general impression, $t(137) = .23$, *p* = .82, nor on traits attribution, $t(137) = .01$, *p* = .99.

Then, in order to explore if the category label attributed to the majority group affected the participants' judgment on the minority group member depending on their level of religiosity, we computed moderation models using PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017; model 1; 5,000 bootstrap resampling). The label was the independent variable (straight was coded as 1 and heterosexual as 0), religiosity was the continuous moderator, and the impression of the social target and positive traits attribution were the dependent variables.

The model computed on the impression about the target revealed a significant interaction effect between the label and religiosity, B = −.41, SE = .11, *t* = −3.68, *p* = .001, 95% CI = [−.64, −.19]. As shown in Figure 1, for low levels of religiosity (= 1.00) the perception of the gay man was more positive in the *straight* than in the *heterosexual* condition, B = .47, SE = .22, *t* = 2.15, *p* = .030, 95% CI = [.04, .90]. In stark contrast and in line
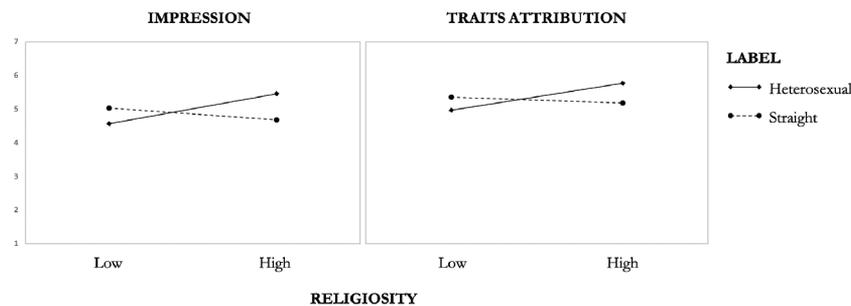
Figure 1. Moderation models, Study 1. Interaction effect between label and religiosity on the impression on the social target (i.e., a gay man) and attribution of positive traits.

with the hypotheses, for high levels of religiosity (= 4.00) the perception of the minority group member was worse in the *straight* than in the *heterosexual* condition, B = −.78, SE = .26, t = −2.93, p = .004, 95% CI = [−1.30, −.25]. A similar pattern arose on the attribution of positive traits to the target: The moderation model yielded an interaction effect between the label and religiosity (see Figure 1), B = −.33, SE = .10, t = −3.34, p = .001, 95% CI = [−.53, −.13]. For low levels of religiosity, participants ascribed more positive traits to the gay man when exposed to the *straight* label than to the *heterosexual* label, B = .39, SE = .23, t = −2.57, p = .01, 95% CI = [−1.06, −.14]. For high levels of religiosity, such an attribution was lower in the *straight* than in the *heterosexual* condition, B = −.60, SE = .23, t = −2.57, p = .010, 95% CI = [−1.06, −.14].

As expected, the participants' religiosity and their level of prejudice toward gay men proved to be positively correlated (r = .19, p = .03). Furthermore, to explore if individuals' religiosity and prejudice had a comparable influence on the labeling effect, we computed the moderation models using prejudice toward gay men as the moderator variable. In line with the prior analysis, the model computed on the impression about the social target revealed a significant interaction effect between label and prejudice, B = −.58, SE = .20, t = −2.89, p = .004, 95% CI = [−.97, −.18]. For low levels of prejudice toward gay men (= 2.00) the use of the label *straight* instead of *heterosexual* improved the perception of the gay man, B = .54, SE = .25, t = 2.17, p = .030, 95% CI = [.05, 1.02]. In contrast, for high level of prejudice (= 3.92) the attribution of the label *straight* instead of *heterosexual* led to a worse perception of the minority group member, B = −.57, SE = .27, t = −2.11, p = .004, 95% CI = [−1.10, −.04]. On traits attribution, the model did not reveal significant effects (ps > .180).

Study 2

Study 1 provided a first empirical support of our initial hypothesis. Thus, when the heterosexual target was named with the label *straight* and the social perceiver's religiosity was high, the impression about the gay target became worse. Starting from this result, Study 2 was designed to replicate the findings and extend them in two different ways: (i) adding a control condition (i.e., no label) to investigate if the effect was driven by the *straight* label worsening the evaluation of gay men as hypothesized rather than by the *heterosexual* one improving such an

evaluation; (ii) using more elaborated measures of social judgment and individual religiosity.

Participants

Based on the previous power analysis, we enrolled 184 participants who voluntarily started the online questionnaire. Five participants were excluded from the sample because they failed the check question, saying that the gay target was heterosexual; 43 participants were excluded because they declared themselves to be non-heterosexual or non-exclusively heterosexual or did not declare their sexual orientation. Therefore, the final sample comprised 136 participants (M_{age} = 31.37; SD_{age} = 13.54, range 18– 66 years; 102 women and 1 did not declare). All participants lived in the UK.

Materials and Procedure

The study was devised by means of the software Qualtrics and the link was circulated through e-mail and social networks. On the first screen, participants learned that they were about to participate in a study on impression formation and informed consent was obtained.

As in the prior experiment, in the first screen, participants were presented with a fictitious Facebook profile providing the photo and some personal information about the first social target, James. Information on the first target's sexual orientation was experimentally manipulated: a first group of participants read that James was *straight*, a second group read that James was *heterosexual*, a third group (control) was not provided with any information on James' sexual orientation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions. In the subsequent page, participants were asked to recall James' occupation and hobbies.

In the subsequent section, the second fictitious Facebook profile was presented, reporting the photo and some personal information including his sexual orientation (i.e., gay) about a second social target, Chris. The target description was the same for all participants. The photos and the personal information about James and Chris were the same of Study 1.

After that, participants were asked to recall Chris' occupation and sexual orientation (i.e., check question). Furthermore, they were presented with a list of seven items to explore attitudes toward Chris – the gay target (e.g., "*I would like to*

keep Chris at a distance"; "*I would like to have nothing to do with Chris*"). Next, the participants' religiosity through six ad-hoc items (e.g., "*How important is your religious belief in your daily life?*") was assessed. All the answers were given.

Finally, participants were asked to provide personal information (age, gender, nationality, languages, sexual orientation), thanked and debriefed.

Results

After reversing the negatively phrased items in the questionnaire and testing the scale reliability, we computed composite scores of religiosity ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.31$; $\alpha = .93$) and attitudes toward the gay target ($M = 6.32$, $SD = .64$; $\alpha = .70$) where higher scores indicate positive attitudes.

First, in order to investigate the effect of the category label manipulation (straight, heterosexual, control) on the attitude toward the gay target, we computed a one-way between-participants ANOVA. The analysis did not yield a significant effect, $F(2, 133) = 1.54$, $p = .22$. Hence, participants showed the same attitude toward the gay target when the majority group member was described as heterosexual, straight ($M = 6.18$, $SD = .73$) or when no label was employed ($M = 6.39$, $SD = .73$).

Then, as in Study 1, in order to examine the interaction between the label and participants' religiosity, we computed moderation models using PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017; model 1; 5,000 bootstrap resampling) with the label as independent variable, religiosity as continuous moderator, and attitude toward the gay target as dependent variable (see Figure 2).

Then, as in Study 1, we contrasted the straight condition with the control and the heterosexual conditions (where heterosexual + control was coded as 0 and straight as 1). Analogously to Study 1, the model revealed a significant interaction effect between label and religiosity, B = −.21, SE = .09, $t = -2.24$, $p = .027$, 95% CI = [−.40, −.02]. For low levels of religiosity (= 1.00) the label did not affect attitude toward the gay man, B = −.03, SE = .14, $t = -.19$, $p = .85$, 95% CI = [−.31, .25]. In stark contrast and in line with the hypotheses, for high levels of religiosity (= 3.03) the attribution of the label *straight* to the majority group member led to more negative attitudes, B = −.45, SE = .16, $t = -2.87$, $p = .005$, 95% CI = [−.77, −.14]. In a second model we contrasted the heterosexual condition with the control and

Figure 2. Moderation model, Study 2. Interaction effect between label and religiosity on attitudes toward the social target (i.e., a gay man).

straight conditions (where straight + control was coded as 0 and heterosexual as 1). In this case the interaction between religiosity and label was not significant, B = .10, SE = .09, $t = 1.16$, $p = .25$, 95% CI = [−.07, .28]. Therefore, the analyses support the hypothesis that the label *straight* worsens the judgment of the minority group member among highly religious people. In contrast, the label *heterosexual* did not improve the attitude toward the gay target.

Study 3

The first two studies consistently showed that the label *straight* assigned to a majority group member induced a more negative perception of a gay man in highly religious participants, if compared to the label *heterosexual*. Both experiments were conducted among participants who commonly used the word *straight* to indicate an heterosexual individual (i.e., native English speakers). Study 3 aimed at testing our hypothesis using a different paradigm and exploring whether the reported pattern of results might emerge using another language. To do so, Study 3 was conducted in Italy. Since Italians do not use the label *straight* to identify heterosexual people, the association between the labels *straight* and heterosexuality was experimentally and artificially induced.

Participants

Based on the previous power analysis, we enrolled 137 participants who voluntarily started the online questionnaire. Three participants were excluded from the sample because they failed the check question, saying that the gay target was heterosexual; three participants were excluded because they declared themselves to be non-heterosexual or non-exclusively heterosexual or did not declare their sexual orientation. Therefore, the final sample comprised 131 participants ($M_{age} = 24.39$; $SD_{age} = 7.30$, range 18–60 years; 117 females). All participants lived in Italy.

Materials and Procedure

The study was devised by means of the software Qualtrics and the link was circulated through e-mail and social networks. On the first screen, participants learned that they were about to participate in a study on impression formation and informed consent was obtained.

In the first part of the survey, participants were presented with 20 pictures to be classified. Ten pictures represented heterosexual couples; 10 pictures depicted non-romantic partners (e.g., two police officers; two schoolmates). In the experimental condition, participants were required to categorize the people portrayed in the picture as "straight" ("retti" in Italian) when they were in a romantic relationship or as "other" when they were not in a romantic relationship. In the control condition, participants were required to categorize the people portrayed in the picture as "yellow" ("gialli" in Italian) when they were in a romantic relationship or as "other" when they were not in a romantic relationship. The word "gialli" was selected because this is a common, neutral adjective, related to a visual feature (in this case, color instead of shape) and unrelated to sexual orientation.
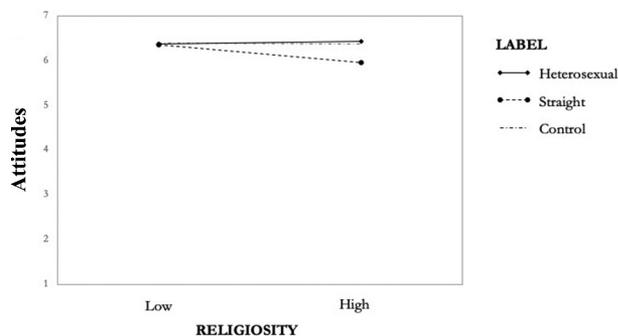
The order of the pictures was randomized, and participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions.

In the subsequent section, the same fictitious Facebook profile used in prior studies was presented, presenting the picture and personal information, including sexual orientation (i.e., gay) of the social target, Giorgio. The target description was the same for all participants. After that, participants were asked to recall Giorgio's occupation and sexual orientation (i.e., check question).

Furthermore, they were presented with a list of 11 items to explore their attitude toward Giorgio, the gay target (e.g., "*I would like to keep Giorgio at a distance*"; "*I would like to have nothing to do with Giorgio*"). Next, the participants' religiosity through six items was assessed. All the answers were given on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (= *not at all*) to 7 (= *very much*).

Finally, participants were asked to provide personal information (age, gender, nationality, languages, sexual orientation), thanked and debriefed.

Results

After reversing the negatively phrased items in the questionnaire and testing the scale reliability, we computed composite scores of religiosity ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 1.22$; $\alpha = .90$) and attitude toward the gay target ($M = 5.97$, $SD = .73$; $\alpha = .86$) where higher scores indicate positive attitudes.

First, in order to investigate the effect of the experimental manipulation (straight vs. control) on the attitude toward the gay target a between-participants t-test was computed. The analysis did not yield a significant effect, $t(129) = .004$, $p = .99$: participants showed the same attitude toward the gay man in the straight condition ($M = 5.97$, $SD = .69$) than in the control condition ($M = 5.97$, $SD = .77$).

Then, as in Study 1 and Study 2, in order to explore the interaction between the experimental condition and participants' religiosity, we computed moderation models using PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017; model 1; 5,000 bootstrap resampling) with condition as independent variable (control was coded as 0 and straight as 1), religiosity as continuous moderator, and attitude toward the gay target as dependent variable (see Figure 3).
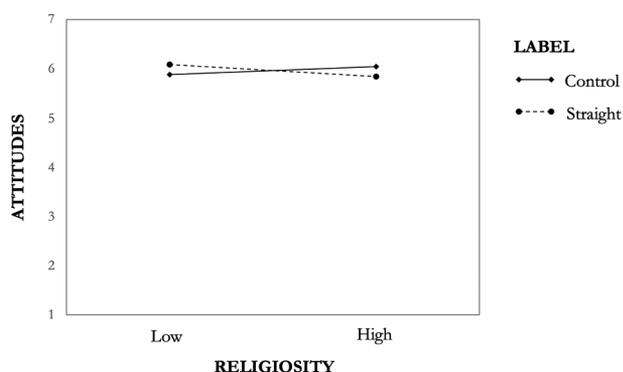

Figure 3. Moderation model, Study 3. Interaction effect between experimental condition (straight vs. control) and religiosity on attitudes toward the social target (i.e., a gay man).

The model revealed a significant interaction effect between condition and religiosity, $B = -.21$, $SE = .10$, $t = -2.02$, $p = .04$, 95% CI = $[-.42, -.005]$.

The analysis revealed that the difference between the experimental conditions did not reach the significance for both low level, $B = .21$, $SE = .16$, $t = 1.28$, $p = .20$, 95% CI = $[-.11, .53]$, and high level of religiosity, $B = -.21$, $SE = .17$, $t = -1.29$, $p = .19$, 95% CI = $[-.54, .11]$. However, the two patterns go in the opposite direction and the comparison between the two beta-scores was significant, $z = 2.37$, $p = .02$.

General Discussion

The everyday language of the majority group members, and especially of the highly prejudiced people, are imbued with labels and expressions referred to the minority groups that not only denote negative attitudes but also engender discrimination and stigmatization. In the most adverse cases, such epithets become open slurs and insults (e.g., Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985; Rubini et al., 2017). However, these uncensored demonstrations of hostility are not the only form that prejudice takes: In contemporary society ingroup-directed favoritism and accentuated positive feelings, such as sympathy and admiration, toward ingroup members could be the "modern" basis for discrimination (Greenwald & Pettigrew, 2014; Meertens & Pettigrew, 1997). In this vein, the present research investigated possible detrimental effects on the perception of minority group members when positive labels are addressed to majority groups. In line with the first hypothesis, three experimental studies consistently showed that, when the label *straight* was associated with a heterosexual target, the social judgment about a gay man worsened for highly religious participants. Furthermore, the effect arose on different variables ranging from the attribution of general positive traits to an overall impression and explicit attitudes toward a gay man. In fact, although the social category label *straight* is generally perceived as non-prejudiced, such an epithet could activate positive concepts, due to its strong association with morality and integrity (Pacilli et al., 2018).

Importantly, in line with the second hypothesis, the critical outcome of labeling arose only for highly religious people; for low levels of religiosity, the use of *straight* instead of *heterosexual* (or a neutral word) did not impact negatively the perception of the gay man. This result is in line with the literature that highlighted an association between religiosity and sexual stereotyping (Herek & McLemore, 2013) and the tendency of religious people to hold negative attitudes toward social groups that jeopardize their worldview (e.g., Johnson et al., 2012). Two points in the present results are worth noting. First, the same pattern of results arose across different samples: native English speakers and Italian adults, to whom the word *straight* to indicate heterosexual people is not familiar. Second, the level of religiosity in our samples was very low and the explicit attitudes toward the minority group are positive: this suggests that labeling effects could be even stronger if we would have considered a sample of participants characterized by deeply-rooted religious beliefs.

An interesting and unexpected result arose from the analysis of the label effect for low level of religiosity. In fact, whereas

for high levels of religiosity the attribution of the label *straight* (vs. *heterosexual*) to the majority group member led to the anticipated worse perception of the minority group member, for low levels of religiosity the label *straight* had the opposite effect, enhancing the judgment of the gay man. This finding could be in line with the strand of literature that differentiates distinctive pillars of human morality (Haidt & Graham, 2007) and investigates the relation between individual variables and the type of moralities adopted. In this regard, prior research within the framework of the Moral Foundations Theory showed that for liberals the salient moral foundations are those related to harm/care and fairness/reciprocity, whereas conservatives would be more concerned with authority/respect and purity/sanctity (Graham et al., 2009). Basing on these studies, it is possible to speculate that the label *straight*, strictly related to the moral domain, would have evoked different moral concepts in less and more religious people. More explicitly, for less religious people, the label *straight* is likely to induce a sense of fairness, thus leading to a more positive attitude toward the minority group member; on the other hand, for highly religious people, the epithet could arise the sense of purity and moral decency, thus inducing a negative response toward the gay man, stereotypically represented as a menace to moral integrity. Future studies are required to test this interpretation.

In addition to this point that needs further empirical analysis, there are also some limitations to the present research. The use of explicit scales might have distorted the measure of attitudes toward the gay target because of social desirability or constrained the effect (that was quite small in our experiment). Future studies could integrate implicit and explicit methods to assess the participants' attitudes toward the minority group member. These experiments could be carried out in a more controlled setting (e.g., a lab) and using a different recruitment strategy. In fact, as noted by Thornton et al. (2016), the features of samples recruited by social networks are often unbalanced and the survey administration uncontrolled. Moreover, the relationship between religiosity and prejudice merits greater attention. Although religiosity and prejudice proved to be positively related in prior research and in our research as well (Study 1), the relation between these two constructs is complex. As suggested by the literature, the reasons behind individual religiosity might be different (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992): whereas, intrinsic religiosity generally predicts lower prejudice, extrinsic religiosity leads to greater prejudice (Batson & Stocks, 2005; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). Therefore, future studies are needed to explore the relation between the labeling effect and the specific type of religiosity (e.g., religious fundamentalism).

An additional aspect that merits greater attention is gender. The gender unbalance in our samples did not allow us to investigate gender effects systematically. Nevertheless, a large body of research on prejudice shows that heterosexual women tend to have less negative attitudes toward sexual minorities than heterosexual men (Herek, 2002). For this reason, future studies should explore the possible influence of the social perceiver's gender on the labeling effect. Moreover, it would

important to investigate if the social target's gender (gay vs. lesbian) is likely to modulate the findings, or whether the perceiver's sexual orientation might change the pattern of results that emerge.

In the same vein, to explore factors that are likely to enhance or weaken such an effect, it would be informative to manipulate not only the label applied to the majority group members (i.e., straight vs. heterosexual) but also the epithet associated to the minority group members (i.e., gay vs. homosexual). In fact, some studies suggest that the terms *gay* and *homosexual* are not interchangeable (Smith et al., 2018) and that the term *gay* would have more positive connotations than *homosexual*. Therefore, we could hypothesize a different effect of the label *straight* when using *homosexual* rather than *gay* to address the minority group member.

Although we acknowledge that more research is needed to fully capture the effects of positive labels on negative attitudes toward minorities, the present work contributes to the social psychology field in two different ways. First, to our knowledge, it is the first empirical attempt to investigate undesirable effects on intergroup relations elicited by positive labels ascribed to majority group members. Actually, as previously underlined, social psychology literature exclusively analyzed the detrimental consequences of the use of derogatory category labels. Thus, the current studies are likely to open a fruitful area of research that might explore the underlying mechanisms, the type of consequences this positive labeling is likely to induce (e.g., on actual behavior), and the boundary conditions of the effect. Second, this line of research might have relevant implications for social life. Whereas the open hostility and the insults directed to the minority groups are moved by more evident intentions and have manifest consequences, the biases induced by positive labels referred to the majority groups are invisible for the perpetrators, thus being particularly subtle and pernicious. Therefore, a focus on the pro-discrimination beliefs induced by these apparently neutral epithets could be an important step toward the use of more correct and unbiased language.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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