TNA Students' Opinions and Stereotypes about a Hypothetical Gay Black Teen

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Abstract

Past research suggests stereotypes of gay men being feminine are common in today's society and acceptance depends on age, gender, and religious belief. The purpose of this study was to show how African American high school students view a fictional peer's homosexuality. Participants read a profile of a fictional male teen and then answered questions about their interest in being his friend and rated his personality. Half got a teen with a boyfriend and the other half got a teen with a girlfriend. We found that the gay fictional teen was seen as more feminine than the straight profile, which supported our hypothesis. Age did not play a part in participants' friendship interest, so our second hypothesis was not supported. Third, consistent with our hypothesis, males were less accepting. Last, there were no differences in acceptance between religious and non-religious people. This suggests that gay men will always be seen as feminine but we suggest that in today's society that it is more common to be openly gay and accepted regardless of age or religion.

Introduction

Stereotyping is a common way to get a feel for someone else when they are unfamiliar (1). This can lead to discrimination against minorities, like gay males, who often have negative stereotypes placed on them by straight people. As a result of these stereotypes, gay students in schools are often excluded and bullied by others (2). The purpose of this study was to see if African American high school students are likely to hold typical gay stereotypes and see if factors like race, age, religion, and gender affect the acceptance of gay teens. This is important because school officials can use this information to help find solutions to the problem of anti-gay bias.

Sexual orientation and gender expression are different, but important concepts (3). Sex is biological and based on the DNA a person is born with: male, female or intersex. Gender refers to the characteristics of males and females that society creates. Gender expression is how an individual presents gender; it includes attire, outward personality, and speech. Sexual orientation refers to the gender a person is attracted to. It includes categories like homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, etc. A stereotype could be a positive or negative judgment about a person.

Stereotypes are not always true. Stereotyping one's gender and sexuality can cause unfair and unequal treatment (4). Gender stereotyping breaks down into different categories. The one that we think is important to this study is personality traits: straight men are seen as aggressive and confident and gay men are seen as feminine. In this study, we tested if TNA high school students will stereotype a gay black teen as feminine. Stereotypes work because when a person is unfamiliar with another person, they put them into different groups. However, the human brain inflates the differences between groups and makes people in groups seem more similar (1). When it comes to sexual orientation, homosexual men are grouped into the same category as heterosexual females because they both like the same gender. Because humans group them due to sexual orientation, people seeing gay men as feminine is a false belief people have when they overlap a person's sexual orientation with their gender expression. This creates the false idea that gay men are always feminine.

Gay Stereotypes

Stereotypes of gay people often relate to their personality traits. Research suggests gay women are seen differently. The researchers Wheeler and Nelson gathered 40 college students and gave them a fake study profile about breakfast, but they were rating personality traits of gay and straight women. Researchers found that gay women have similar attributes as heterosexual women, with the only difference being gay women are seen as more sensitive (5). Participants rated both women as similar in strength, aggressiveness, femininity, and consideration. The reason why this is important to our study is because stereotypes are not always true and as a result, a person could be treated unfairly.

The most common stereotypes gay men and women face are related to masculinity and femininity. Blashill and Powlishta had 110 undergraduate students, both male, and female reviewed one of four different fake profiles of gay and straight males and females and asked about their perceptions of the profiles (1). They found that males, regardless of orientation, were seen as more masculine and females, feminine. But then they looked more into each gender, they found that gay males come off as more feminine than straight, and gay women as more masculine than straight women. Interestingly, gay women were seen as less masculine than straight men. This is important because the researchers argue that gender stereotypes exist overall, and are reversed within each gender for gay men and women. Stereotypes like these are bad because they are not always true; one's physical ability is not determined by gendered stereotypes and as a result, people can be mistreated.

Fingerhut and Peplau gathered 152 heterosexual undergrad students (70 men, 82 female) (6). The students received different profiles about homosexual males of given social roles (gay father, gay truck driver, gay single man, etc) the students were supposed to rate them based on masculine and feminine adjectives. The adjectives describing masculinity were ambitious, competitive and leader and femininity were affectionate, nurturing, and sensitive. The researchers found that the gay single man was rated more masculine than the gay truck driver because the truck driver role is not common for gay men. For most feminine, the students rated the gay father as the most feminine and the truck driver as the least. The importance of this study is to show that stereotypes of gay men depend on their social role (6). In the current study, we investigated the social role of a Black high school student, and therefore we wanted to see if there will be similar adjectives given to that role, compared to gay men overall.

Characteristics Affecting Acceptance of Gay Students

Poteat and Espelage wanted to see if straight students will be willing to go to school with gay peers (2). A survey of 20,509 students in 2005 ranging from middle to high school students was gathered to participate in the experiment. The researchers found that younger students and boys were less willing to go to school with gay peers and less willing to remain friends with a peer who came out to them. Additionally, more racially diverse schools were more accepting, suggesting being exposed to different people can make them more open (2). This is important to schools and principals so they can understand how to best help students by advocating for them because they know where the problem starts.

Other researchers have also investigated acceptance in schools by age and gender, but Horn, Szalacha, & Drill also researched the effect of race and religion in accepting gay people (E). The researchers gave out a survey to 9-12th graders, with descriptions of hypothetical students, some of who were gay. They asked if it was okay to tease or bully the person, and why they thought so. They found that children have different understandings of gay and lesbian peers. About 20% of students thought being

gay was wrong, 33% saw it as neither wrong nor right and 25% said was right. This suggests teens were of many minds about homosexuality. The three main justifications for teasing or not teasing were fairness, human equality, and personal choice. Also, the younger a student was the more likely they were to judge. Black students were seen as less accepting compared to their white counterparts. Finally, Catholics (who were mostly white) were more accepting and Baptists (who were mostly Black) were less. This is important because people's understanding of gay people can come from their religion, age, race, and gender.

Study Hypotheses

Overall, research says that stereotypes about feminine attributes and gay men in society are common (C, B). Research also suggests that gender, age, and religion affect one's acceptance of homosexuality (D, E). Therefore this study investigated if similar stereotypes would be attributed to a fictional gay black teen and if participants' characteristics would affect acceptance. In our study, we presented TNA students with one of two fictional character profiles, one gay and one straight. We presented the survey as one about friendship and personality and asked students questions related to acceptance and different adjectives to describe the person.

First, we hypothesize that the gay fictional student will be seen as more feminine, this is because research says gay men are often stereotyped as feminine (6). Second, we hypothesize that (1) younger students, and (2) males will be less accepting of gay peers (D, E). Lastly, we expect that participants' religious beliefs might affect acceptance, but research is limited in exactly how it will (E).

Results

        The purpose of this paper was to measure acceptance of homosexuality among African American high school students. We did this by giving out a survey to 9th-11th grade students at a local private high school with a 100% African American student body. The survey consisted of three friendship questions to see if they would be friends with Jordan outside or inside of school. The first question we asked is "If Jordan was to attend [school], how interested are you in becoming his school friend?" The second question asked, "Outside of the [school]'s school day, how interested are you in becoming his friend?" The third question asked, "If a teacher assigned Jordan to you as a partner on a school project, how open would you be to working with him?" We expect that the gay fictional teen would be seen as more feminine and that age, gender and religiosity affect acceptance.

        Our first hypothesis was that the fictional profile containing "boyfriend" would be seen as more feminine than the straight fictional teen. We removed seven people, four who said described themselves as gay, and three who did not answer the sexuality question. So that leaves 49 straight and seven bisexual people in the study. Also, we had to remove one straight person because they did not respond to the adjective part of the survey. An independent t-test was used to calculate if the gay fictional teen was more feminine than the straight fictional teen. The femininity score was the sum of the three adjectives: caring, affectionate, and sensitive on a 1-5 scale from the survey. We found that the gay fictional teen (M=11.1, SD=1.3) was seen as more feminine than the straight (M=9.5, SD=2.4) teen (t(54)=2.98, p=0.0022, Figure 1).
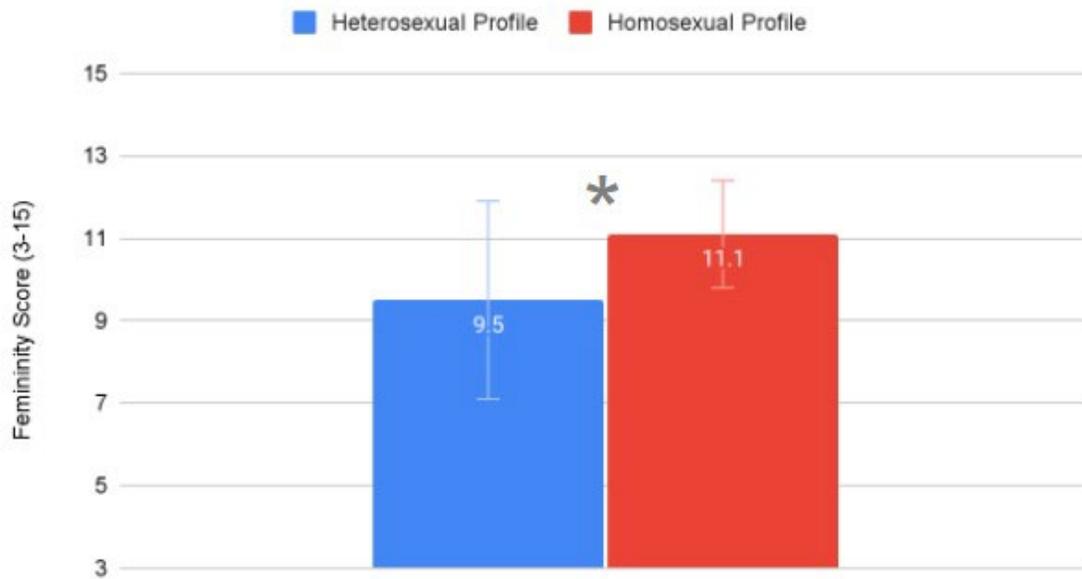
Figure 1. Heterosexual Profile vs. Homosexual Profile: Femininity Scores. *Femininity scores were calculated from scores for three adjectives describing the fictional teen on the survey: sensitive, caring and affectionate. Participants scored the homosexual profile as significantly more feminine (p<0.05).*

We wanted to see if the gay fictional teen was preferred as a friend outside of any of the hypotheses that we had. Across all three levels of friendship, there were no significant differences but the gay fictional teen was scored slightly higher (Table 2).

	Homosexual Profile n=28	Heterosexual Profile n=28	two-tail p-value
School friend	3.7 (0.8)	3.3 (1.0)	0.06
Outside friend	3.0 (1.1)	2.7 (0.9)	0.22
School partner	4.6 (0.6)	4.4 (1.0)	0.41

Table 2. Friendship Interest by Type of Friendship and Profile's Sexuality. *In all three categories of friendship, the gay fictional teen was more desired, but no differences were statistically significant.*

Next, we hypothesized that younger students will be less accepting of the fictional teen. We looked at acceptance through a school friend, outside friend, and school partner across all three grades:

9th, 10th, and 11th. A one-way ANOVA test for independent samples found no differences in the willingness to be the gay fictional teen's school friend across grades ($F_{(2, 25)}=3.2$, $p=0.06$). While tenth graders were the most interested (M=4.3, SD=0.8, n=13), it was not significantly different than the 9th (M=3.7, SD=0.8, n=7) or 11th grade (M=3.3, SD=0.9, n=8) scores. In addition, a one-way ANOVA independent test found there was not a significant difference in interest in being an outside friend ($F_{(2, 25)}=0.24$, $p=0.78$). The ninth graders were least likely to be interested in being Jordan's friend (M=2.9, SD=1.1) but it was not significantly different from the tenth graders (M=3.2, SD=1.0) or the 11th graders (M=3.0, SD=0.9). Finally, we also wanted to see if they would be willing to be a partner on a school project. A one-way ANOVA test found no difference across grades ($F_{(2,25)}=0.24$, $p=0.12$). All three graders were interested in being his partner, with no real differences.

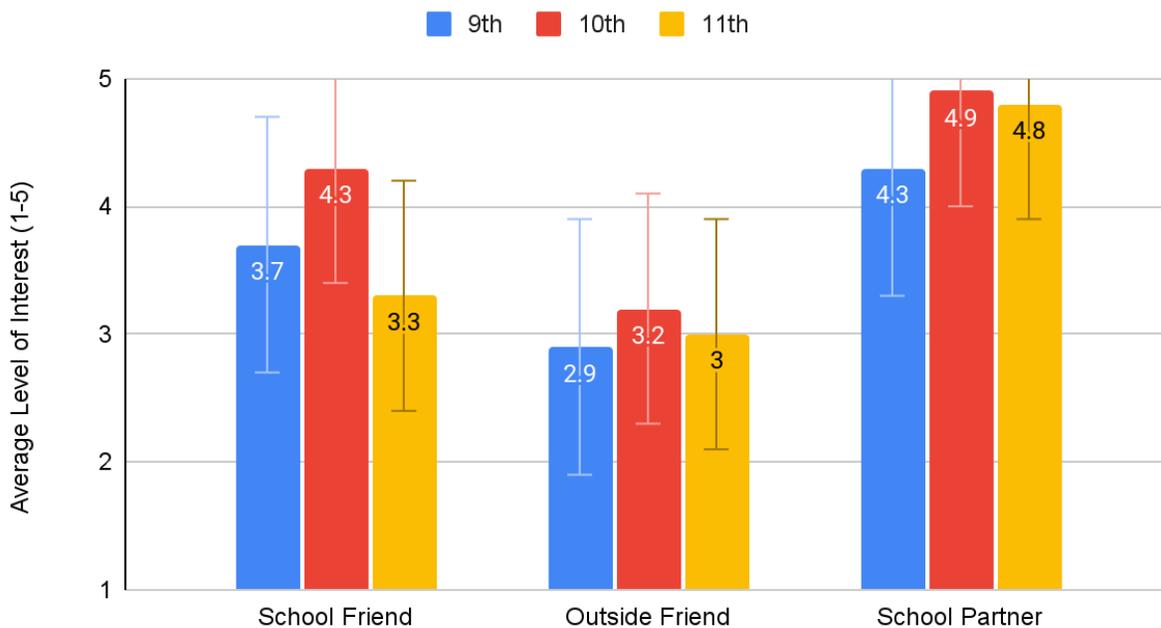Acceptance of Fictional Gay Teen by Friendship and Grade Level

Figure 2. Acceptance of Fictional Gay Teen by Friendship and Grade Level. There were no significant differences in grade levels for any of the types of friendship.

We hypothesize that males will be less accepting of the gay fictional teen. We looked at acceptance through outside friendship, school friendship, and school partners across the 9th, 10th, and 11th grades. An independent t-test ($t(26)= 1.82$, $p=0.04$) found that males were less accepting of being Jordan's school friend (M=3.3, SD=0.5, n=11) while females were more accepting of the gay fictional teen (M=3.9, SD=1.0, n=17). We also wanted to see if they would be his friend outside of school and

found a significant difference (t(26)= 2.43, p=0.01). We found that males were less interested in being Jordan's friend outside of school (M=2.4, SD=0.8, n=11) while females were more accepting (M=3.4, SD=1.1, n=17). Finally, we wanted to see if a teacher was to partner them together how accepting would they be, we found that there was a significant difference (t(26)= -2.00, p=0.02) between males (M=4.1, SD=0.8, n=11) and females (M=4.8, SD=0.4, n=17). Across all levels of friendship, males were less accepting of the gay fictional teen than female students.
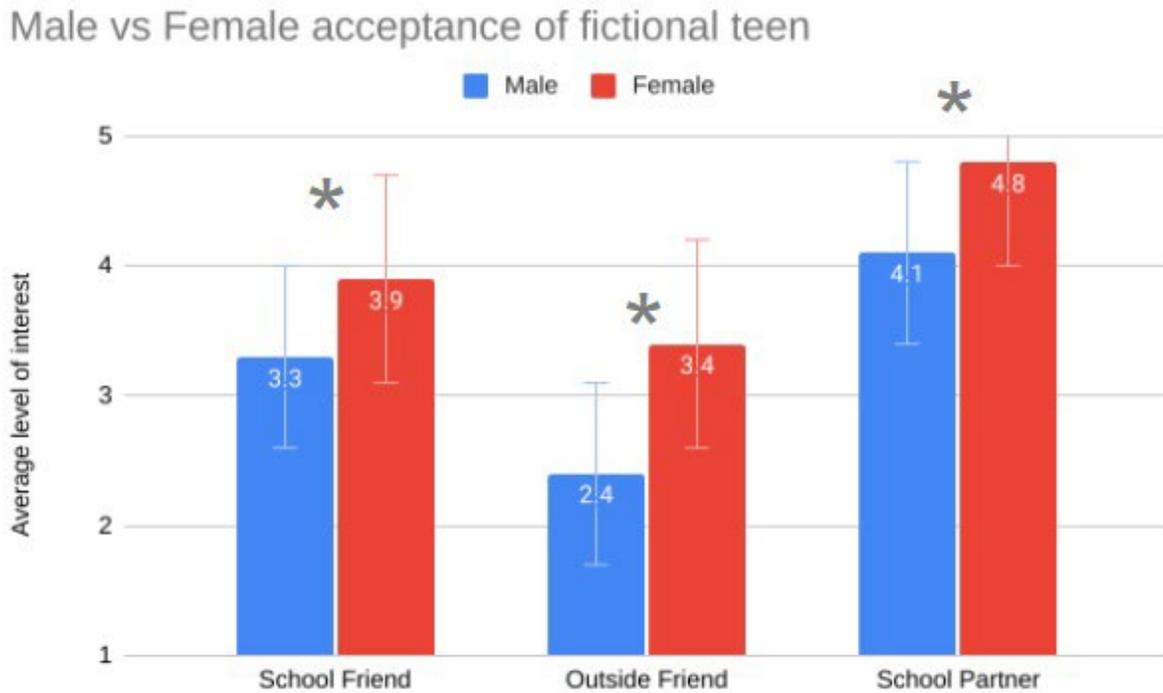

Figure 3. Male vs. Female Acceptance of Fictional Teen. *In general, males found who rated the gay fictional profile were less interested in being his friend than females.*

We hypothesized that being religious might affect acceptance with no specific direction specified. There were a total of 17 people who said they were not religious and 10 people said there were and of those 9 they said they were Christian and one said they were Muslim. A two-tail independent t-test found no difference in willingness to be school friends between religious and nonreligious participants (t(25)=-0.09, p=0.37). Religious participants (M = 3.9, SD =0.9), and nonreligious participants (M = 3.5, SD =0.9) were similar in acceptance. The results were similar for out of school friendships (t(25)= -0.35, p=0.72), non religious people (M= 3.1, SD=1.4) were similar to religious people (M= 3.9, SD=1.0). Finally, both religious (M= 4.6 SD= 0.6) and nonreligious (M=4.4, SD=0.7) participants were similar in their willingness to work with the fictional teen in a group project (t(25)=0.97, p=0.34). In all three groups,

there were no real differences due to religion, although religious people appeared slightly more accepting across all three types of friendship.
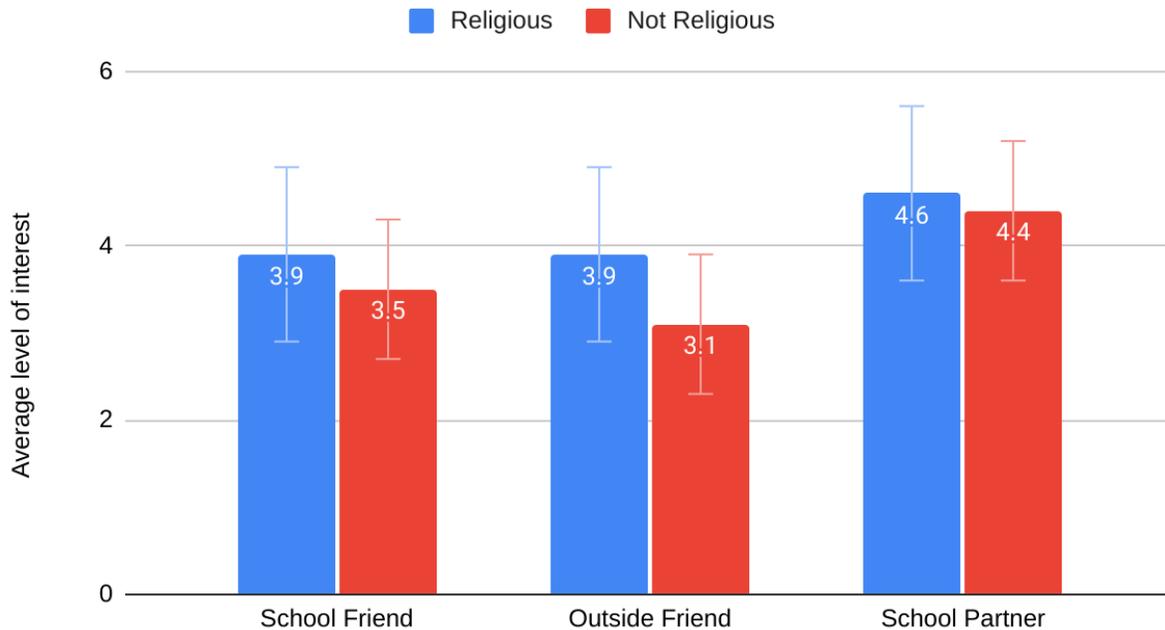
Acceptance of fictional teen by religion

Figure 4. Acceptance of Fictional Teen by Religion. There were no significant differences in interest between religious and non-religious participants, but religious people were slightly more interested in being the gay teen's friend.

Discussion

Our first hypothesis was the gay fictional teen would be seen as more feminine than the straight profile. Our hypothesis was supported because students saw him as more feminine **(Figure 1).** The second hypothesis dealt with two things: younger students and males will be less accepting. We found that our hypothesis for younger students was not supported, there was no significant difference between grade levels, for all three types of friendship **(Figure 2)**. Our hypothesis was supported by males being less accepting across all types of friendship. Interestingly even though males were less accepting they were indifferent as opposed to not hating him **(Figure 3)**. Lastly, we expect that participants' religious beliefs might affect acceptance, but this hypothesis was not supported, there were no significant differences, but for all three friendship types, religious people were slightly more accepting **(Figure 4).**

In a 2006 study, Fingerhut and Peplau found that the homosexual profile to be more feminine depending on the social role. Consistent with their findings, our study also found that the gay teen was

seen as more feminine. Across the decades of 2006-2022, there is a stereotype that is placed of gay men that they are seen as feminine. This suggests the stereotype will always be around and is locked in society. "Jordan" in our study was not hated even at his worst, the score for male raters was a 2.4 out of 5 for outside friendship, which is not all that negative, and the fictional gay teen was desirable as a school partner, with religious participants rating him a 4.8 out of 5. The stereotype of gay males being seen as feminine is negative, however, gayness, in general, maybe more acceptable in this group of students.

Researchers Poteat and Esplage 2005 found that boys were less willing to remain friends or go to school with a homosexual student than girls. Horn, Szalacha, and Drill found boys thought teasing and excluding a gay student was not wrong. In our study, we found that males were less accepting than females but there was no problem being his school partner even though they were less interested in being his friend outside of school. These results are both consistent and inconsistent, they did not appear negative toward the fictional gay teen but both were less accepting still. This might suggest times have changed because in today's society being gay and open might be more common and acceptable. A survey by Gallup revealed that 1 in 5 adults identify in the LGBTQ+ community, double that of 2012 (8). This shows how society has changed quickly, and even though gay men are still seen as feminine and straight males are less accepting, being gay is more common and others are possibly more tolerant than ever.

One major limitation of our study was that our findings are only applicable to the school we did it in. The survey was given out to a school called The Neighborhood Academy, a private, faith-based, small, college prep school, with a 99% African American student population. Therefore people should take the results with caution. We recommend that further researchers should go to a different environment and repeat the experiment to find if the findings are true everywhere or just in The Neighborhood Academy. The second limitation was that many of the participants thought the fictional teen was boring. This might affect how students rate him. Some of the participants when handing back the survey told me that he was not interesting; for example, "he doesn't seem to have fun, all he does is volunteer'' while another participant referred to Jordan as "dry." In our effort to pick the most neutral activities we didn't take into account how boring they were. Future researchers should test out the fictional teen on an audience to make sure he is seen as more fun.

In conclusion, we found males less accepting, but age and religion did not matter. In addition, the feminine stereotype still exists. In the future, we think counselors and teachers should spend time talking about where stereotypes come from, why they're not true, and why clubs like GSA's might be helpful. When gay people are more visible, other people know the truth and rely less on stereotyping and more on actual experiences. The problem of homophobia is not solved, but our findings say the future will be brighter because factors like age and religion mattered less, and students were happy to work with a gay school partner.

Method

Participants

The participants in the survey came from a private school in PA. The total participants were 64 students, all identified as African American or biracial. Less than half the students reported being religious. The vast majority of high school students were heterosexual. The exact information can be seen in **Table 1** below.

	9th Grade	10th Grade	11th Grade	Total
n	26	19	19	64
Race	100% African American or Biracial	100% African American or Biracial	100% African American or Biracial	100% African American or Biracial
Age	14.6	15.4	16.6	15.4
Religious?	38% (yes)	53% (yes)	37% (yes)	41% (yes)
Gender	42% female 58% male	53% female 47% male	58% female 37% male 5% other	50% female 48% male 2% other
Sexuality	85% heterosexual 0% homosexual 8% bisexual 8% other 0% no answer	95% heterosexual 0% homosexual 0% bisexual 0% other 5% no answer	52% heterosexual 0% homosexual 26% bisexual 11% other 11% no answer	78% heterosexual 0% homosexual 11% bisexual 6% other 5% no answer

***Table 1. Participant Demographics.** This table contains information about the participants who filled out the survey after reading a profile of a fictional teen. Half of the participants were randomly given a profile of a homosexual student, the other heterosexual.*

Materials

In order to give out the survey, we first gathered eight volunteers who were not part of the study to provide opinions about different topics to be included in the fictional teen's profile. The survey asked about different sports, volunteering, and hobbies, and people rated on a seven-point scale how masculine or feminine each was. We wanted to pick the most neutral to avoid biased opinions other than the teen's sexuality. We included volunteering at a food bank, (M= -0.3, SD=0.5) drawing (M = -0.3, SD=0.7) and cross country (M=0, SD=0) as activities, where zero indicates neutral and negative numbers were considered feminine. We also collected four pictures of black male teens and asked volunteers to rate them as well. All males were reported as masculine (M=1.6, SD=1.4). We included the picture of the

male who had the average masculine rating of (M=1.6) Finally, we wrote a fictional profile of the black teen so we could get opinions. This is a common way to measure gay stereotypes (1, 6, 7). To trigger reactions to homosexuality, half of the surveys said boyfriend, and half said, girlfriend.

To measure acceptance, we asked three questions related to friendship. First, we asked, "If Jordan was to attend TNA [the school], how interested are you in becoming his school friend?" as well as, "Outside of the TNA school day, how interested are you in becoming his friend?" We asked these because in-school and out-of-school friends are different. The third question asked, "If a teacher assigned Jordan to you as a partner on a school project, how open would you be to working with him?" This was included to measure how they would tolerate Jordan, rather than be friends with him. The friend questions were based on if the student taking the survey would be friends with the fictional character if he were to come to this school. Students rated their interest 1-5, with 1 meaning "not at all" and 5 meaning "very much". We measured femininity based on the adjectives: caring, affectionate, and sensitive. These were the same as another source (6). Extra adjectives were added to downplay the purpose of the questions. In the questionnaire's last section of the survey, we asked the students about their sexuality and religion to determine if that would affect their willingness to be friends with Jordan. These were optional because the questions might make some people uncomfortable.

Procedure

First, I entered different classes to pass out the survey. I told the students to read the profile of the fictional teen and then fill out the questionnaire on the back. Students who got the survey thought it was about friendship and did not know some surveys had different sexualities of the fictional teen. The bottom questions were about personal information and they didn't have to fill it out if they didn't want to. After we gathered information from the surveys, it was typed into a Google spreadsheet. The t-test and ANOVA tests were calculated using the website Vassarstats.net.

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