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The Underestimated Power of a Euphemism

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Abstract

This intervention aimed to more deeply understand how the naming of a designated activity impacts its relationship to a community. In addition to this, solutions around the intervention focused on how technology has allowed this relationship to be more vastly impacted by creating more accessible and larger non-physical spaces for members of a community to come together.

This study specifically focused on gay men within the LGBTQ+ community and their relationship to Party and Play, the named activity for the mixture of risky sex and high drug use. Findings found that the naming of an activity turns it into a euphemism and slang within a community. This allows the activity to be protected, tied to group membership and identity, as well as gives the activity power to shift human behavior and attitudes. This is significant because it shows the great power language holds in constructing meaning and involvement. This construction often coming from systems of power which do not represent the vibrant subcultures of our society which are already systematically disadvantaged. This is extremely dangerous when the named activity is harmful and serious to a community that is already at risk, leading to the problem to often go unnoticed to members of the larger society for decades.

Keywords: Party and Play, LGBTQ+, sex, drugs, gay, technology, social construction
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Introduction

It was only a few months after I first came out and slowly became part of the gay community that I noticed how big sex and drugs were. A quick scroll through Twitter and it practically seemed like a personality trait of being a gay man was doing drugs. It was soon after that I first heard about a concept called Party and Play; a time where gay men had sex and did drugs. And as I continued my journey of learning about everything gay, I continued to see the term pop up over and over again. It was so intriguing to me how two words paired together symbolized an activity so engrained and known in the gay community.

As I became more a part of the community, I began to realize the larger issue of drug use and risky sex that existed within our community that hid behind Party and Play but wondered why this didn’t feel like common knowledge. First, this isn’t a straight issue and, in a world, where being straight is the norm, it sadly makes sense why this issue has never received the attention it deserves. Second, language is extremely powerful, and we often don’t take the time to make ourselves aware of this full power. Whether you identify anywhere on the spectrum of LGBTQ+ or identify as heterosexual, this project is important because language is something that impacts us all. Language impacts the way we feel about actions around the world, impacts how we make decisions around our body, and impacts what is important to the communities we surround ourselves with.

Rationale

This topic is extremely important because it focuses on a very large problem in the gay community that most people aren’t aware of and or don’t take the time to notice if they don’t have close ties to the community. As the gay community is a high context group in a low context
society, an almost second language exists where typical meaning and context around specific words is not of knowledge to most people outside of the primary group. This means that Party and Play could be openly discussed on the internet or in person and someone would completely ignore it, not knowing sex and drugs are being discussed.

This is also and never has been a heterosexual issue and in a society that is straight by default, this issue has not been a top priority for action to be taken. There is also very limited LGBTQ+ communication research and studies. And the research that does exist is often not from the perspective of someone in our community. This is a very big issue as much of the knowledge and information about the gay community cannot be found from a book or on a website. Knowledge is learned, observed, and passed from others in the community but one has to be deeply assimilated and integrated into the gay community for this to happen.

**Conceptualization of Communication**

When considering the fittest theory to guide the work of this project, it was almost obvious to take the perspective of the larger critical communication theory and more specifically the social construction theory. Much of this project centers around the use and power of language as well as how that connects to a sexual minority group that has lacked power for decades in a world where heteronormativity is the norm.

Even if we are unaware of it, much of the language we use even daily has been heavily influenced and shaped by systems of power. The critical theory acknowledges this, noting that “systems of powers always subtly infiltrate the language we use and so play a role in shaping what we mean” (Canary et al., 2020). And the keyword here is subtle. One may have a wide vocabulary of "seemingly power neutral" words but the critical theory would challenge that and in good faith. That's because the critical theory treats communication as "deeply contextual,
contingent, and influenced by power-laden processes that are social, cultural, and historical". This is why critical theory is such a useful tool. It pushes us to turn subtly into obvious. It pushes us to understand the "context-specific complex workings of power that impact communicative practices". It pushes us to be critical.

Building on this, the social construction theory further pushes at this idea of language gaining its meaning from the context with an importance put on the human aspect of communication. People generate meaning together constantly in the spaces they take up and this meaning is both fluid as well as dynamic (Camargo-Borges & Rasera, 2013). This is important when so much of the world around is rapidly changing and new meaning is constantly being created. As this project focuses on one specific group in the context of a larger society, the social construction theory will help to guide how knowledge has been created and adjusted through shared interactions with others in that group. In addition to this, the theory will guide how knowledge has also been created and adjusted based on exchanges, relationships, and dialogue with people in our larger society. Finally, the social construction theory is valuable to this project as it opens “up the potential for social change”. By taking the time to understand how language has been established and engrained in the culture of a group, one can work to a new understanding as well as start a larger conversation about change. Essentially, this final part is where the power of the social construction theory can open other’s eyes to the meaning and use of language, they have become accustomed to by default.

**Literature Review**

**Sexual Minority Stress**

Plain and simple; being gay or part of any minority group can be hard. For someone coming into or even confident in their sexuality, a wide array of reasoning can contribute to the
sexual minority stress one might feel. Being closeted, coming out, and or being rejected from family and friends can be initial and never-ending stressors (Dorey et al., 2007). Imagine living your whole life as one person and having that completely change or having to balance multiple different lives with different groups of people. These new experiences can not only be overwhelming but also never-ending as one never fully stops coming out with their sexuality. And this idea of adjusting to your "new life" and unpacking your identity comes at an emotional cost. Oftentimes one will experience a "range of conflicting emotions, from excitement and enthusiasm to apprehension and fear".

In addition to this, men have to define themselves concerning their sexuality while also having to meet the standards of our heteronormative masculine society. Being gay or less than society's standard of the hypermasculine “perfect” man is also likely to lead to feelings of both depression and stress as you figure out to fit into a community where you are not the norm. There is no guidebook or clear and concise information on what it means to be gay which means at times that burden can solely lay on only you. And this can lead to many new stressful experiences without knowledge of what you might experience; essentially going in blind.

Even if one considers themselves very out or prideful in their sexuality, many other stressors can exist such as worry about HIV, gay social networks, early adverse life experiences due to being gay, and the continuous role of forming and maintaining your sexual identity. Not only are each of these stressors extremely intersectional, meaning one might be experiencing a few or all of them at the same time, but one can also face intersectional discrimination and harassment based on their race, ethnicity, or presentation of gender (Ayala et al., 2010). This means not only dealing with being a sexual minority but also being a minority in other groups.
When one is already dealing with some form of “rejection, isolation, and or discrimination because of their sexual attractions/relationships in a society where everything is oriented towards straightness, dealing with additional forms of discrimination can create an even more unbearable burden of stress on someone (Dorey et al., 2007).

Since heterosexuality is defined as normal and healthy in our society, our society has continued to reward this definition through “privileges in basic social institutions like legal and family systems” (Baurermesiter, 2008). This also can be seen in the exposure of sexual relationships and attraction in mainstream culture. Due to this definition of heterosexuality in our society, most exposure to sex, attraction, and or relationships is that through the heterosexual lens. Think back to the middle school classroom. Sex, if even fully portrayed, only occurs between a man and a woman. In addition to this, abstinence is the priority of sex education reducing the importance of the many other topics that should be discussed surrounding sex and sexuality.

**Human Desire for Sex**

In their 1990 hit song, Let’s Talk About Sex, Salt-N-Pepa invited the world to have and talk more about sex, bringing to life something most people in the US wouldn’t dare to admit thinking about even if it was on their mind daily. And in Rhianna’s 2016 song, Sex with Me, she repeatedly sings sex with me so amazing, but why is sex so amazing? A topic rarely talked about and seen as taboo in our society, there are more reasons to have sex than just bearing a child. All the time; people have sex who don’t want to have babies, who can’t have babies, engage in intimate acts of sex with no penetration, and or independently explore themselves sexually. In one of the most comprehensive studies to date on reasons why people have sex, researchers
discovered 237 distinct and unique reasons (Buss & Meston, 2017). At the top of this list; love and commitment, physical pleasure, and most importantly stress reduction.

Sex can be a powerful stress reducer when thinking about the wide array of human wants and needs just one act of sex can check off. Sex can provide a place for adventure and new experiences when much of our everyday life may be filled with the same routine and accompanying stressors. Sex can provide a place for affection and the desire to please where you or your partner can become the primary focus when that is often not prioritized among our busy lives. Sex can provide opportunity and connection leading to moments of intimate discussion that help to relive so much of the stress we hold in. And this act of intimate discussion is best known as pillow talk.

Pillow talk, or the intimate moments of talking with your partner before, after, or during sex allows for not only an emotional closeness but also a time to step away and debrief about the stressors in your life. Pillow talk allows for one to have discussions about topics and thoughts they might not be comfortable talking about during a date at a restaurant or even during a normal day. It is the vulnerable and intimate nature around the space of sex that allows these conversations to be so unique.

The stress reduction doesn’t just stop though once you get out of bed or stop having sex. In a secondary study done with sexually active couples, participants reported enhanced satisfaction even 48 hours after a single occurrence of sex (Bradbury et al., 2017). In addition to the mental and stress relieving benefits of pillow talk; sex triggers physical reactions in the body further leading to more stress reduction.

And these physical reactions lead to what has been coined by popular media as post-nut clarity. Orgasming after sex gives you a natural high when endorphins rush throughout your
body, similar to the “mental high you get after a run or a night of actually decent sleep” (Andrews, 2019). At the same time, your body is also being flooded with hormones like dopamine and oxytocin after your orgasm; leaving you with feelings of happiness and satisfaction. The combination of these two physical reactions in the body causes one to have greater clarity at the moment, reflect more meaningfully on their life, and stay more focused on being productive.

**Human Desire for Drugs**

Although the primary function of drugs is oftentimes the high associated with them; the experience and mindset shift that comes with that high is at the core of what makes drugs so desirable to humans. Similar to sex, drugs provide both pleasure and stress reduction for the user. The pleasure from drugs though is on a much higher level and almost incomparable to sex in terms of the dopamine being rushed throughout your body. These are drugs such as amphetamines, cocaine, ecstasy, molly, ketamine, and cannabis.

In a study working to understand the functions of why humans, and especially those coming into adulthood use drugs, researchers found five top functions that were endorsed by over eighty-five percent of the sample (Boys et al., 2001). These functions included to "help relax", "get intoxicated", "keep going", "enhance activity", and "feel better". Each of these functions plays into both the larger pleasure and stress reduction associated with drugs. When dealing with the stresses of life and or new experiences, drugs serve as a fast escape route.

A fast escape route at the start though can quickly turn into a stress reducer integrated into one’s everyday lifestyle as a result of continued stress and anxiety that returns after the drug wears off. This can be more easily understood by the tension reduction theory (Bein et al., 2000).
The use of drugs allows for a designated and controlled time to step away from the world where your tensions are temporarily at bay. Not only do drugs provide a designated and controlled time to step away from the world but they lend themselves to be a natural form of experimentation for those coming into adulthood. That's because of experimentation and exploration in general "increase during emerging adulthood and some experimentation with substances…is seen as normal" (Lee et al., 2006). And this level of experimentation and exploration only increases for one coming into their sexuality.

**Party + Play**

For decades, Party and Play has existed within the gay community. Acting as a time where gay men could express their full true selves while being in the company of others just like them, Party and Play was able to name the designated and controlled time to step away from the world. The play standing for sex and the party standing for drugs (Johnson, 2017).

Gay men were horny and stressed. Having sex and getting high temporarily satisfied both of those needs. While Party and Play reduced some tensions, like the stress of being gay in a hypermasculine and heteronormative society, it also induced others like the stressors related to being social around other gay men. This influx further increased drug usage before, during, and after events where Party and Play occurred.

Although the concept of Party and Play has evolved, it often occurs today at events tagged as circuit parties (Buchbinder et al., 2001). Circuit parties are only often publicly advertised as times for gay men to come together for social activities and dancing, yet simply mask the name Party and Play for the actual activities that gay men take part in at these events.
These gatherings can be as large as a publicly attended event or a casual gathering at one’s house.

Gay bars can also serve as more permanent spaces for the aesthetic and structure of circuit parties to exist every weekend. Sometimes gay bars can also be the only positive community spaces for gay men alike and different to gather together (Bein et al., 2001). They are extremely effective in serving as spaces that shape behaviors. When drugs are introduced into these spaces and bars, the use of drugs can quickly be shaped into one's lifestyle and act as a starting point for the integration of long-term drug use into one's life (Bein et al., 2001).

This is extremely important because, with both circuit parties and gay bars, these experiences, especially for a young adult coming into their sexuality can be a crucial time for them to assimilate into the gay community (Dorey et al., 2007). This pressure of wanting to belong and being in an already new experimental phase can increase their intentions to use drugs as well as engage in risky sex. In addition to this, times, when they are coming out, are likely to result in increased intentions to use drugs (Bauermeister, 2008).

Although most gay men report doing only one drug during regular weekends of going out, during circuit parties or high intense gay club events, gay men report doing four or more drugs simultaneously and at a much more intense level (Buchbinder et al., 2001). These drugs are oftentimes ecstasy, ketamine, meth, and marijuana. Viagra, MDMA, and GHB are also sometimes used besides or exchange of one of these drugs (Green et al., 2005).

Mixing multiple drugs not only provides an insane high but an intense designated and controlled time to step away from the world. Although this isn't a healthy way to step away from the stress of the world, it does help to understand the reasoning for heavy drug usage by gay men and the continued habit of engaging in risky behavior.
As an important part of the concept of Party and Play is also sex, these drugs not only offer a time for one to step away from the world but also enhance the experience of sex. One of the most popular Party and Play drugs is poppers; which produce an almost instant high and rushing feeling, making anal sex easier and more pleasurable (Hartney, 2019). Although the experience of having anal sex on drugs can be intense and extremely pleasurable, it also encourages gay men to use a drug like poppers over and over again. Essentially conditioning sober sex as not as enjoyable and promoting the use of drugs to replicate this euphoric experience more intensely each time.

**Naming Process**

You hear someone talking about lettuce and only a few days later someone talking about grass. Much later you look both these terms up and realize they were talking about marijuana. All the time, slang and euphemisms are used around us and deeply engrained in how we communicate each day. Even if we are not aware of it, much of the language we use daily are euphemisms that have become standard.

Slang has been prominent in both the drug and LGBTQ+ community for years (Fan & Zhou, 2013). Two groups under the oppressive power of the larger society, both groups found it hard to exist both physically and part of any mainstream culture. When slang and euphemisms began to be used more in both of these communities, the sphere of human activity that already existed underwent serious euphemizing (Ryabova, 2013). This euphemizing allowed for protection, stronger group membership + identity, and the power to shift human behavior towards activities happening in the community.
Among this euphemizing and naming process, Party and Play was born. And naming it allowed to become well known. To become an activity that you could be invited to, that you could host, or that you could do on a day where you had no plans.

This process of naming not only changes the way people speak around an activity but also their perceptions. In a sense, naming follows almost sort of a linguistic Heisenberg principle where “as soon as you label a concept, you change how people perceive it” (Alter, 2013). Over time this perception evolves and soon that becomes almost the stand in definition for that concept.

Through this labeling and euphemizing, a word can also become the "property" of a specific group or organization as well as the grammar associated with it (Fauzia & Putri, 2017). Although they most likely don’t own the actual word, they are in control of the larger context and evolving meaning behind the slang word. Therefore, if you are someone who is deeply engrained in a group where this slang exists, it can be a powerful tool to show loyalty but also group experience. A powerful tool to show you are one of the “qualified members among a certain distinct group” (Fan & Zhou, 2013). And if you are someone trying to gain access and tie your identity to a new group, using their slang is a fast route to assimilation into the group. You might pick up slang and partial meanings but constantly using these euphemized terms to fit into the community of the group as soon as possible. It is simply human nature to want to belong to a group and often much of our identities become wrapped up in the groups we belong to. This can cause us to be blind to the “larger picture” behind slangs and euphemisms.

In addition to this, euphemisms also serve as protection for a larger group, especially for a subculture group of a larger society like the LGBTQ+ community. Living in a world that is heterosexual by default, this is essential. Euphemisms and slang allow a community to exist.
outside of their more typical community spaces by serving as a form of secret expression (Fauzia & Putri, 2017). Although this protection is mostly positive to protect the lives of those in society who looked down on as less than, slang also protects negatively. As a larger part of one's lexicon, it can be used to "mild or mask the real nature of things" (Ryabova, 2013). Essentially serving as a form of camouflage that disguises the risk, danger, or negative experiences behind a word.

A perfect example of this is the term enhanced interrogation. Made to sound like simply another technique that can be used by government officials, this term only has loose definitions with only exclusive members of the group truly knowing the full meaning behind the term. A term that has been euphemized and used as slang for systematic torture. Using the slang term enhanced interrogation frames the story and activity of systematic torture in a way that seems more humane, by the books, and necessary for those it's being used on. This framing serves to "have a strong influence on people's attitudes toward the issue" and in this example, it has allowed systematic torture by the United States government to exist with almost no consequences for years (Ryabova, 2013).

Although a more extreme example of the negative protection euphemisms provides, it shows the effectiveness of them in replacing a trigger word with another word that expresses the same or similar idea, all while “allowing the relevant message to be communicated without triggering the emotional response” (Bowers & Pleydell-Pearce, 2011).

This idea of not triggering an emotional response is also essential in understanding the power of euphemisms and why they are so integrated into our everyday lives, even if we are not aware of it. Just as the desire to belong to a group is part of human nature, so is a natural need and want to feel comfortable as humans. Euphemisms and slang perform to do just that.
Words can directly evoke emotional responses, but euphemisms serve to avoid those words that do just that. That’s because it’s scientifically more “stressful to say a word associated with harm or negative consequences than a word associated with positive connotations and feelings”. When slang associated with those positive connotations is used, it can set one free psychologically (Fan & Zhou, 2013). And it’s easier to turn a blind eye to risk when this freeing feeling exists (Ryabova, 2013). A risk like the sexually transmitted diseases that can result from raw sex or the dangers of combining so many different drugs at once.

Euphemisms replace words with unpleasant “repulsive referential meaning” but also words or activities that are seen as impolite, indecent, and unsocial in society. The words drugs and sex fall into both of these categories. However, the words Party and Play do not and instead associate with positive connotations and feelings. Play represents an almost childlike innocence of exploring as well as a time of pure personal enjoyment and pleasure. Party represents the idea of a social gathering; enjoying yourself with others while going out to have fun.

This simple switch of language can not only shift one’s attitude towards a specific activity but also shift a change in their behavior (Fauzia & Putri, 2017). And in a high context community that exists within a low context society, this switch can feel seamless and almost unproblematic. As much of the meaning behind language is tied to the community and fluid in its use, slangs and euphemisms become the primary definition for expressions and or experiences. Hence why Party and Play has existed for decades in the LGBTQ+ community, passed on throughout the years with a consistent meaning from when it was first euphemized.

Born out of communities of gay men coming together in person at underground parties and other social gatherings, the term Party and Play has evolved in the spaces it takes over just as
the gay community has. As so much of our lives are all online now, there are opportunities to be in communication with each other and for gay communities to exist online.

Although sexual minority stress, the human desire for sex, and the human desire for drugs have stayed consistent in their existence, our use of technology has exponentially skyrocketed. This means that the use of Party and Play is more accessible than ever yet still tied to strong group membership, protection, and the power to shift human behavior through its use as slang.

**Research Question**

RQ1: How can the naming of a designated activity impact its relationship to a community?

**Method**

**Problem Characterization**

The problem that this intervention is addressing is the high drug use and risky sex that exists within the gay community but primarily how these two activities have been paired and euphemized to reduce the guilt, risk, and consequences associated with them into positive “self-care”. Technology has exacerbated this and further reinforced Party and Play to exist within the gay community, reaching those even more who may be just coming into their sexuality or don't have an in-person gay community to be part of.

Members of the LGBT community are two times more likely to try ecstasy and cocaine compared to a person identifying as heterosexual and cisgender (Associated Press, 2018). LBGT are also three times for likely to try heroin and meth.

**Context for Intervention**

The population that will benefit most from this intervention is men in the gay community. They are most at risk to engage in Party and Play, often using it as a designated and controlled time to step away from the world. By integrating into the gay community and facing the many
items that fall under sexual minority stress, they need an escape or break and the want for sex. This in combination with their status as gay leads them to Party and Play.

More generally, this intervention is important for all people because language is such an integral part of our everyday life. As euphemisms and slang have allowed Party and Play to be deeply integrated into the gay community for years, other euphemisms and slangs also allow meanings to exist in our general society that we often take the time to be aware of. As language heavily affects our daily attitudes and actions, it is essential to understand the power that slang plays in our world.

**Proposed Intervention Outcomes**

Rebranding Party and Play; translating what’s at the core of gay men’s wants and needs when they engage in Party and Play. This intervention will focus on taking those elements, allowing gay men to still have designated and controlled time to step away but while being healthy, safe, and in a positive environment.

For example, a gay male might say; "I wanna get this bussy wrecked and do poppers". What they are wanting at the core of that statement is human connection, pleasure, and time away from the stress of the world.

The intervention will primarily focus on targeting the use of technology and social media for this rebrand using visuals to convey new messaging for community integration. With this is the goal to start the conversation about changing the relationship of Party and Play with the gay community.

For this intervention to be successful, it needs to be more than a gay issue but an issue that all people care about and are aware of. If one considers themselves an ally of the LGBTQ+ community, this is a great opportunity for them to use their voice and platform to make this issue
more known. As this issue is closely tied to social construction, we have the power to make change and put a starting infrastructure in place to reconstruct the feelings and connotations associated with Party and Play.

**Data Collection**

Data will be collected from various mediums of popular media including television, news publications, and various social media platforms for this intervention. The unit of analysis, party and play, will be used as a marker for data to be collected. As Party and Play is also interchangeable with the activities of sex and drug use, these will also stand as notifiers for data to be collected. Data will be specifically collected from these various mediums of popular media that are directly correlated to the LGBTQ+ community. For example, data will be collected from users on social media platforms that identify as part of and or connected to the LGBTQ+ community. All data collected for this intervention will come from online public spaces.

Data analysis for this study will be done through the larger lens of the critical theory, analyzing the power and significance of the language used in each of the data pieces collected. This significance will be important when also analyzing the data through the social construction theory. As meaning is constantly being created and changing, the significance will help to show the size of impact the media has on the community viewing it. As an almost second language exists within the LGBTQ+ community, previously known euphemisms and slang will be essential tools in decoding the data collected for this intervention.

**Findings**

**Overview**
Naming the activity of risky sex and drug use in the gay community as Party and Play has allowed the activity to become a euphemism/slang, where the term is protected, tied to group membership + identity, and given the power to shift human behavior and attitudes.

Euphemisms give the phrase power to shift human behavior/attitude because they shift negative connotations people have associated with the words drugs and sex to be more positive, playful, experimental connotations for the word’s “party” and “play”. Further, technology allows euphemisms to reach a greater audience of the gay community and or someone who might not be able to enter a more traditionally gay physical space. As members of the gay community are more likely to come in contact with euphemisms and slang of the gay community via technology, this reinforces the connection between the named activity and group.

**Group Membership + Identity**

When technology barely existed and physical spaces served as the main meeting points for members of the gay community, drag queens were prominent figures, creating rich cultural heritage that allowed the gay community to grow into what it is today (Carey-Mahoney, 2016). Members of the LGBTQ+ community are indebted to the prominent queens of that time who fought and died for the basic rights of LGBTQ+ members.

One of the most prominent queens that have continued this fight since those days and become one of the main voices for the LGBTQ+ community has been RuPaul. And he has not only served as a voice but combined the art of drag with technology, creating RuPaul’s Drag Race. A competition television show showcasing America’s best drag queens, RuPaul’s Drag Race has made an “entire community of people feel seen” but also opened up a conversation with the world about the LGBTQ+ community (Ramos, 2019).
The show serves as a powerful space for those openly out in their sexuality but also those who may still be in the closet or questioning the validity of their thoughts. Two viewers of RuPaul’s Drag Race perfectly summarize this below, reflecting on the show’s impact in their own lives.

"My journey in coming to terms with, not only my sexuality but being confident and liberated by it, that is something that Drag Race helped. It helped me get through that door of excitement about being out of the closet" (Damshenas, 2018).

“I was alone. All my friends were girls. I felt like I was reborn when I found out that there were thousands of people like me. And here they were expressing themselves to the max, unapologetically and without any worry about convention” (Widdicombe, 2020).

RuPaul’s Drag Race serves as a powerful force of gay visibility in the mainstream media, but the show also serves as the heart of the gay community. Much of the euphemisms and slang used by the gay community are born out of the diverse community of drag queens on the show, with mother RuPaul blessing and using the language herself. And through this process, an almost second language is created only understood by members in and or close to the gay community (Are, 2019).

The internet serves as a dynamic “vehicle for spreading and popularizing” drag language, taking euphemisms and slang from the show and adopting them into pop culture for all of society. With this, the words and phrases grow stronger in their group membership and connection to the gay community, serving as an almost a secret language when heterosexuals for example come across the words yet think nothing of them. RuPaul’s drag race is a “cultural juggernaut”, a powerhouse of creation for the language and identifiers of the gay community.
Due to this, those inside the gay community want to use this language to show group membership and those outside the group, wanting to assimilate, want to use this language even more to show their membership. RuPaul serves as a source of education for both and that's why the language that is socially constructed overtime on the show is so impactful.

As the twelfth season of RuPaul’s Drag Race premiered earlier in March, a set of new queens were introduced to the world during the start of the first episode of the show. It is a tradition for each queen to make a big entrance with a one-liner that introduces themselves as well as reflects their brand and aesthetic. This season was no different and when a queen by the name of Crystal Methyd made her entrance, she said: "who's ready to Party and Play" (RuPaul’s Drag Race Entrances, 2020). Dressed in a clown inspired outfit, the phrase “Party and Play” likely went over the head of most members of our larger society but to members of the gay community, that phrase has significant value.

The use of the phrase “Party and Play” on a show that serves as the heart of the gay community further reinforces its connection to the group. It’s use though also invites those wanting to identify with the gay community or in the process of assimilating to further explore the phrase and integrate the use of the phrase into their own lifestyle.

Although much of the learned language and culture from RuPaul’s Drag Race is highly positive, the use of this phrase as well as the further reinforcement and introduction it provides is problematic. That’s because the phrase itself, Party and Play, is the named activity for gay men to engage in risky sex and drugs as more hourly explained earlier in this paper.

It’s not just RuPaul’s Drag Race that further perpetuates this phase. Twitter and popular media also have their hand in performing this same reinforcement and introduction, further associating Party and Play with gay identity and group membership.
Through a quick scroll on Twitter among users who identify themselves as gay men, it is hard not to notice how many tweets center around wanting to have sex and do drugs. The most popular drug choice among these gay men being poppers.

Poppers are a liquefied vapor which when inhaled produces an almost instant high and rushing hallucinating feeling, make anal sex easier and more pleasurable (Hartney, 2019). With this intense and extremely pleasurable anal experience, gay men are encouraged to use a drug like poppers over and over again. Essentially conditioning sober sex as not as enjoyable and promoting the use of drugs to replicate this euphoric experience more intensely each time.

Poppers are particularly unique to gay men as they specifically relax muscles in the anal area where oral and penetrative sex among gay men is performed. Due to this, poppers have been coined as a gay drug. And in a VICE article providing comical commentary on straight people trying poppers, the article draws the correlation between poppers and gays many times; making statements like the ones below (Moylan, 2015).

“For all you straight people out there who want to get hip to the gay sex drug of choice”.

“Poppers are inhalants that homosexuals love”.

“Poppers are great for fucking. Why else do you think gays invented the stuff”.

“But just like you don't go to a seafood restaurant for a steak, make sure you go somewhere gay to get your poppers. They always have the best kinds”.

When Twitter users tweet about their experiences with poppers and or desires to have more sex on poppers, this establishes their membership to the gay community showing that they are taking part in something directly connected to something seen as gay. This once again reinforces using drugs during sex with the gay community. And for users who might be questioning their sexuality and or coming into it, these tweets once again serve as an invitation to
engage in something associated with the gay community. If one is wanting to assimilate into the group and or be seen as gay, one might be thinking they need to use poppers in combination with sex to mark their membership to the group. This gives tweets like the ones below incredible power based on the meaning and human impact they generate (2020).

@issagayboi tweeted “Poppers literally saved my life, like I CANNOT bottom without them” paired with [shaking hand emoji, weak face emoji]. Signaling the enhanced experience of receiving anal sex (bottoming) on poppers. The shaking hand emoji shows that bottoming and poppers go hand in hand resulting in a relaxing pleasurable feeling communicated via the weak face emoji.

@ayemrdee tweeted “That first hit of poppers after quarantine is gonna hit different” paired with [meme photo of SpongeBob in his underwear in bed at night, shaking in and out of his body with dilated large pupils and a RUSH bottle of poppers photoshopped onto his body]. Signaling the hallucinating and euphoric feeling of taking a hit of poppers, especially when poppers haven’t been inhaled for some time by the user.

@evanjacquess tweeted “I’ll be waiting” paired with [photo of an erect penis pulled out of pants and underwear with a rolled joint sitting on top of the penis, accompanied with a popular meme photo of character from Arthur with glasses pressed against the fence trying to get a look]. Signaling that if you suck the user's dick, you also get to smoke the joint. Paired with the meme photo and text of the tweet, this shows that they are eager for both of these tasks to be executed.

These tweets further push Party and Play as “property” of the gay community, giving the term accelerated power to also shift human behavior and attitudes. The most powerful pieces of
social media that perform in this same fashion often come from icons and influencers of the gay community.

**Power to Shift Human Behavior + Attitudes**

These icons might not identify as gay themselves, but they still serve as prominent voices for the community in a similar way to RuPaul. Voices that use their platform to bring gay issues to the larger society and stand as devoted allies to the community. In being seen as icons, content these artists, activists, actors push out is put on a high pedestal of importance to the gay community. This gives them great power to shift human behavior and attitudes.

As icons and influencers of the gay community, they often reference euphemisms and slang of the community, knowing the deeper socially constructed meanings of the words or phrases will resonate with their loyal supporters. This is impactful in showing the gay community that they are seen but wrapped up in this can also come subliminal encouragement around the mixture of sex and drugs.

For example, Charli XCX, an international experimental pop star with over nine million monthly listeners on Spotify and a longtime gay icon have often pushed messages about the use of poppers in her music and on social media (Spotify, 2020). One time even yelling gay rights while holding a premium bottle of RUSH poppers, all captured on video (Street, 2019). The RUSH label and brand so recognizable to the gay community, the video quickly went viral on social media, once again further connecting the popular drug to the gay identity. It is also not uncommon for her to sign fan’s popper bottles at concerts and or her fans, also known as angels, to be using poppers while listening to her music. The tweets below representing exactly this (Twitter, 2020).
@thiccwhitey tweeted “Charli XCX fans call themselves angels but I can’t recall the last
time an angel was doing poppers in a concert bathroom”.

@mudkipper7 tweeted “Me doing poppers on charlis story skcjnfg” paired with [two
photos of him inhaling poppers on a zoom call, reposted on Charli XCX’s Instagram
story].

When fans look up to an icon such as Charli and her openness with using poppers, it is
easy to shift their behaviors and attitudes around using drugs. Charli XCX isn't the only one
singing about the sweet lifestyle of mixing poppers and sex.

In her latest album, released in March of 2020, Dua Lipa sings about poppers in her song
Hallucinate. With the third-highest number of monthly listeners in the world on Spotify, large is
an understatement for Dua Lipa’s reach (Spotify, 2020). A gay icon like Charli XCX herself, the
singer also has over forty-two million followers on Instagram (Instagram, 2020). Her song
Hallucinate is “surely an unsubtle poppers-on-the-dance-floor euphoria anthem for the gays”
(Stern, 2020). Repeating the line “breathe you in ‘til I hallucinate”, she speaks of the euphoric
and hallucinogenic feeling of taking a hit of poppers. She continues singing "wrap me ‘round
your fingertips damn, I need another hit" in one of the final verses of the song (Genius, 2020).
Here speaking to the craving and controlling nature of poppers after the first time you experience
them, connected also to the new intense feeling of touch that comes with them.

Once again “an anthem for the gays” that’s also about poppers only further connects the
drug to the community and shifts people’s attitude around the drug when someone as big as Dua
Lipa is essentially promoting them. This power was also reinforced and shared with an additional
audience of people when Jacob Bixenman, an openly gay model, photographer, and filmmaker
reposted a picture of listening to Dua Lipa’s new song on his Instagram story (Instagram, 2020).
The photo was a screenshot of the song being played in the Spotify app but in the bottom left corner was a GIF of a RUSH poppers bottle. Although Bixenman has fewer followers than Dua Lipa, his still 666,000 followers and anyone who was sent the story likely viewed the poppers bottle, either questioning what it was or instantly recognizing the label.

Finally, in the promotion of their newest Club Quarantine Zoom concerts featuring Kim Petras and Tinashe, two gay influencers themselves, PAPER Magazine captioned their Instagram post, "GIRLS! GAYS! We will still be "going out" while staying in" (Instagram, 2020). Although this caption mentions gays, it does not mention drugs. However, one of the top comments under the post comes from one of PAPER Magazine's editorial producers, Charolette Spritz, who commented: "bring out the poppers". PAPER Magazine is an “entertainment ecosystem” that drives and creates pop culture (LinkedIn, 2020). As a company, they are also a longtime ally to the LGBTQ+ community and a platform for the stories, art, and culture of the gay community to be shared. Although their platform didn’t explicitly connect gays and poppers, their staff yields great power in making connections seen by the community.

Although these icons and influencers of the gay community may be simply playing into the concept of Party and Play that has been big for years within the gay community, they are undermining the risk and dangers of mixing drugs and sex. Just because something is part of gay culture and or is used as slang, doesn’t mean it should necessarily be promoted when one’s platform and reach is so vast, even if that promotion is subliminal. By perpetuating something as so playfully fun and associating that with the gay lifestyle, these icons have the power to socially shift the negative connotations to positive ones for those inside and assimilating into the gay community. This results in altered behaviors and attitudes around the larger activity of Party and Play.
Protection

As technology has aided this power to alter behavior and attitudes, it has also created unique spaces like Grindr that serve as protective avenues for the named activity of Party and Play to be perpetuated. Before the takeoff of technology, gay bars have served as primary community spaces for members of the gay community, Grindr also serves this same purpose in a unique technological way (Lourenco, 2018). And when gay men desire the needs of being stressed and horny to be satisfied, an app like Grindr satisfies both of those and in a way that provides even easier access as it is a digital platform (Daly, 2017).

The world’s largest social networking app for gay people, Grindr allows people from everywhere to connect and therefore allows for easier and “safer” access to drugs (Lourenco, 2018). You no longer have to know a dealer but instead, can find access to drugs through the app. It’s an added plus too when you can get sex with your drug delivery for these men. This further reinforces the connection between sex and drugs though when the two are constantly associated together.

Grindr users even use the term “Party and Play” to notify other users that they have drugs (Dothée, 2020). Most prominently users will capitalize certain letters of the phrase in their bio to alert you of the specific drugs they are selling. When downloading the Grindr app and looking at profiles, one can also see many emojis that represent drugs being sold. For example, the diamond emoji often means the user has crystal meth available.

This essentially makes Grindr the Postmates for Party and Play; “open the app, order what you want, and it's delivered to your door”. One user even described his experience on the app as the following (Staples, 2019).
“At one point in my life, Grindr made it much easier for me to get drugs. When I moved to Notting Hill it was a matter of hours before I’d connected with two dealers who I continued to use for the time I lived there, which meant I could access other like-minded individuals to go and have chemsex (Party and Play) with.”

Grindr has almost no systems in place to stop this, protecting the named activity to not only continue but also increase in its involvement. At one time, Grindr also released its line of gaymojis that users could interact with and use throughout the app (Chin, 2017). Many of the gaymojis centered around sex but not explicitly, once again referencing larger sexual euphemisms and slang within the gay community while protecting them. Their most controversial gaymojis though were a bottle of RUSH poppers as well as a large capital T. Capital T is slang for meth and poppers as discussed earlier is a popular Party and Play drug of choice among the gay community. By including both of these gaymojis, they were allowing users to communicate visually about drugs while being protecting them in not having to say the actual name during the conversation.

In addition to this, Even if you are not seeking out drugs and simply just a user on Grindr looking to meet up with another guy, dealers oftentimes reach out and ask if you want to "Party and Play" even when you having nothing in your bio indicating you want to purchase drugs (Daly, 2017). This further invites users who are gay men to take part in drug usage. This is very similar to if someone approached you at a gay public in-person event and asked if you wanted to do drugs.

It is dangerous for the world’s largest social networking app for gay people, specifically gay men, to be promoting and protecting the named activity of Party and Play. Especially when the main focus of the app already centers around the concept of getting quick sex. Grindr has
done for Party and Play what enhanced interrogation has done for torture; allowed it to continue and go almost unnoticed.

**Discussion**

Something so intriguing about the named activity of Party and Play is its consistency over decades. Most of the data collected for this study has come from television shows, social media platforms, and music released only in the last few months, yet it mimics the language and nature spoke about in scholarly pieces written years ago. Party and Play has remained the same in its performance as a euphemism but new systems of power through technology have socially constructed the way the term is interacted with. Naming the activity not only allowed its protection, a tie to group membership + identity, and the power to shift human behavior and attitudes but it also allowed its fluidity. Fluidity in the spaces, platforms, and people that could pass on knowledge about the named activity. This is essential to recognize as meaning is generated and dynamically changed when people come together. With technology, that language can seamlessly be constructed constantly and at every hour of the day. This has only exacerbated the issue of high drug use and risky sex among gay men.

Reading this paper as a heterosexual, it is likely that this larger issue of mixing risky sex and drugs among gay men was unknown to you. Much of this information might also have been new to you unless you were deeply connected to the gay community as an ally or partner. An almost second language exists in the gay community and many other communities that are seen as subcultures in the United States. Each of these items speaks to the lack of research and knowledge that centers around Party and Play even though it has existed for over sixty years. Party and Play is not a straight issue and because of this, it has never been an issue in the eyes of
our larger society. It is our responsibility though to address the issue and create a compressive plan, listening to community members to meet their needs.

**Conclusion**

I believe that much of the rich culture in the United States, if not all of it, is born out of the subcultures that are continually also treated the most poorly, lacking true equal rights based on the systems and laws of our nation in place. Just as addressing Party and Play is our responsibility, addressing the needs of these groups is more than essential. This is a larger conversation, but I invite you to reflect on this as you step away from this paper. Language has been heavily influenced and shaped by systems of power in our society. And when these systems of power are controlled by white, heterosexual, cisgender men, this makes language an extremely dangerous weapon that can be deceiving and blinding.

As language constructs reality though, we have the ability to take action with an awareness of that very construction and reshape our current reality. By recognizing how language has been established in our communities and how it continues to be reinforced, we can create tools as well as use our voices to spark positive social change. This is only most effective though when entire communities are keyed into this messaging and hear it from people who they see as representatives of themselves. Below I have proposed three points of intervention in the hope to start the conversation around Party and Play in the gay community.

**Intervention**

1. **Targeted social media campaigns:** creating viral content focused on promoting safe sex in a drug-free space showing that this can still exist as a controlled and designated time to step away from the world (healthy self-care). Much of this content will be created in partnership with media platforms that have a large
presence in the LGBTQ+ community such as Paper Magazine and Gay Times.

See below for examples of a partnered campaign with Paper Magazine that aim to promote healthy sex and educate viewers about Party and Play.

II. **Connecting with influencers + icons of the gay community;** using their voice and platform to bring this issue to the larger society while speaking directly to the gay community through creative mediums. Influencers will include names such as RuPaul, Tommy Dorfman, Charli XCX, Rickey Thompson, and Shangela.

III. **Enforcing regulations and enhanced oversight on social media apps;** reducing and eliminating opportunities for members of the gay community to be easily connected with drugs on apps such as Grindr, Twitter, Instagram, etc. The creation of stricter guidelines and enforcement is essential on these apps.

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**FYI:**

you can still get ur bussy wrecked with a condom

**KNOW THE FACTS**

about fun and safe sex

in partnership with @papermagazine

[papermag.com/pnp](http://papermag.com/pnp)
THE UNDERESTIMATED POWER OF A EUPHEMISM

FUCK ALL NIGHT LONG WITH CONDOMS

KNOW THE FACTS about fun and safe sex

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papermag.com/pnp

OVERDOSE & AIDS

KNOW THE FACTS about party & play

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SIS

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Limitations

In conclusion to this intervention, it is important to note the limitations that existed within this study. First, collecting data from various mediums of popular media allowed for a very broad and open range of data collection. An almost endless amount of data from social media platforms could have been collected but was limited based on the timeframe of this study. For future studies, it should be a top priority to set detailed and targeted parameters for data collection. In addition to this, as the intervention centered around a larger community, many of the more specific issues and stressors that face subcultures even within the LGBTQ+ community could not be addressed based on the scope of this study. This study specifically focused on all gay men in the community, but it would be highly recommended for an extension of this study to focus solely on Latino gay men. Through my research, I repeatedly found that Latino gay men faced much greater and severer stressors that forced them into a survival mode of living when it came to their day to day life. This is likely attributed to the broader social structures that impact their lives and the deeply engrained machismo attitude that exists for men within their culture. This means that they are one of the highest at risk groups among gay men for high drug use and engagement in risky sex.
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