

# Reducing Lesbian Internalized Stigma: Development and Efficacy of an Online Intervention

Krishna Kary, Tania Israel, Emmie Matsuno, Joshua Goodman, Andrew Young Choi, Yen-jui (Ray) Lin, Caitlin Merrill  
University of California, Santa Barbara and University of San Francisco



## Abstract

This project tested the efficacy of an online intervention developed to reduce internalized stigma (IS) in lesbians. A total of 584 participants were randomly assigned to complete either the IS intervention or the stress management control intervention. Two subscales from the short form of the Lesbian Internalized Homophobia Scale (Szymanski & Chung, 2001) were used to measure IS: Attitudes Towards Other Lesbians (ATOL) and Personal Feelings about being a Lesbian (PFL). Participants who received the IS intervention had significantly lower ATOL and PFL scores compared to the control group, indicating lower levels of IS,  $p < .001$ . Small effect sizes were found for both subscales: ATOL (Cohen's  $d$ : .131) and PFL (Cohen's  $d$ : .208). Results from this project provide support for an online intervention modality to reduce IS that has the potential to reach individuals who may not otherwise have the resources or access to do so through more traditional services.

## Introduction

- Lesbians are exposed to negative societal messages that are often sexist, misogynistic, and include stereotypes that objectify and delegitimize their identity (Geiger, Harwood, & Hummert, 2008; Kite & Deaux, 1987).
- Internalized stigma (IS), broadly defined as negative attitudes or beliefs adopted about one's sexual orientation, often develops through exposure to negative societal messages.
- IS has been associated with a variety of negative mental health outcomes for lesbians, as well as gay and bisexual individuals, which include depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidality (Silenzio, Pena, Duberstein, Cerel, & Knox, 2007; Wagner, Brondolo, & Rabkin, 1996).

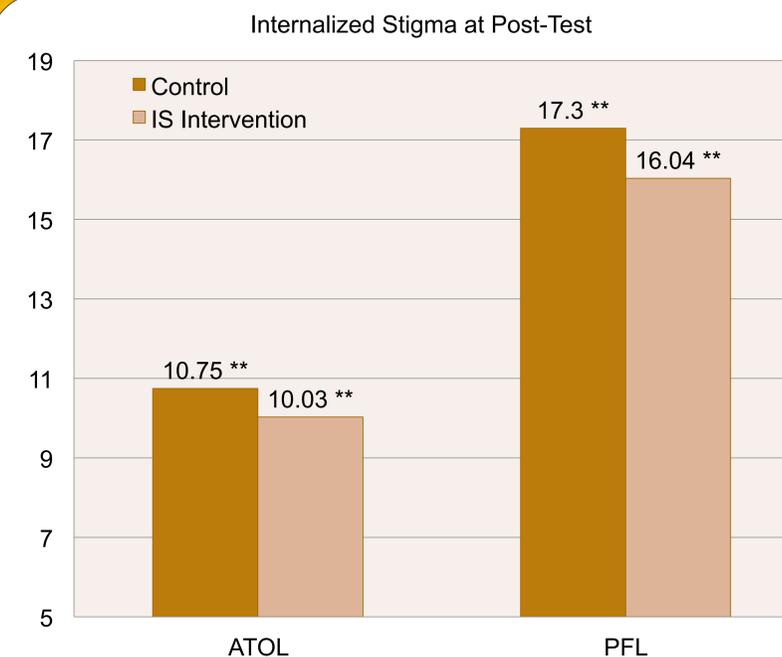


Figure 1. Mean subscale scores from the LIHS, \*\*  $p < .001$

## Method

### Participants

- Gender:** 582 adult women (98.6%), 2 other gender (0.3%)
- Sexual orientation:** 553 lesbian (93.7%), 15 gay (2.5%), 10 other sexual orientation (1.7%), 4 heterosexual (0.7%)
- Age:**  $M = 30.5$ ,  $SD = 9.6$ , range = 18 – 68
- SES:**  $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 1.7$  (1 – 9 scale using the Subjective Social Status (SSS; Goodman et al, 2001), higher values indicate greater perceived SES).
- Education:** 186 completed Bachelors degree or higher (31.5%), 282 completed Associates degree, some college or trade school (47.8%), 50 completed high school or GED (8.5%), 3 less than high school diploma (0.5%), 10 other (20%)

### Ethnicity:

	<i>n</i>	%
White/European American	442	74.9
• White only	398	67.5
African American	74	12.5
Latina/ Hispanic/ Chicana	54	9.2
Asian/ Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	26	4.4
American Indian/Alaskan Native	11	1.9
Middle Eastern	6	1.0
Other	6	1.0

### Measures

- Self esteem.** The short form of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965) is comprised of 10 items measuring the degree of the participant's self-worth and self-acceptance.
- Identity Concealment.** The Nebraska Outness Scale - Concealment (NOS-C; Meidlinger & Hope, 2014) consists of 5 items measuring active concealment of participants' sexual orientation.
- Internalized Stigma.** Participants' internalized stigma was measured using two subscales from the 44-item short form Lesbian Internalized Homophobia Scale (LIHS; Szymanski & Chung, 2001).
  - Personal Feelings about being a Lesbian (**PFL**) – lower scores indicate greater self-acceptance.
  - Attitudes Toward Other Lesbians (**ATOL**) – lower scores indicate greater lesbian group appreciation.
- Mood.** The Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson et al, 1988) consists of 20 items and measures participants' positive and negative affect.

### Procedure

- Recruitment took place in 2 phases during Summer and Fall of 2015 through Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk), an online marketing service.
- All participants completed a demographics questionnaire and the RSE, and Outness Inventory as pre-test measures.
- Participants were randomly assigned to complete the stress-management control or IS intervention, each consisting of 4 modules (see below).
- The LIHS and PANAS were administered following completion of each intervention.
- Participants were paid \$1.50 upon completion of the intervention and entered into a lottery (\$50 and \$100).

Module 1:  
De-mystify  
stereotypes about  
lesbians

Module 2: Identify  
& reject negative  
messages about  
being a lesbian

Module 3:  
Reinforce rejection  
of negative  
messages

Module 4:  
Enhance  
affirmation of  
lesbian identity

## Results

- ANCOVA results showed participants who completed the IS intervention had significantly lower ATOL and PFL IS scores than those in the control condition after controlling for self-esteem and concealment,  $p < .001$  (see Figure 1). Small effect sizes were found for the ATOL (Cohen's  $d$ : .131) and PFL (Cohen's  $d$ : .208) IS subscales.
- PANAS scores did not differ between the two conditions, indicating the IS intervention did not elicit negative affect for participants.
- Mean satisfaction across the four modules ranged from 3.53 to 3.75 (1 - 5 scale, higher scores indicate more positive ratings).
- Participants rated the mean age for which the IS intervention would be most useful to be 17 years old.
- Mean time to complete the IS intervention was 39 minutes.

## Discussion & Future Directions

- The intervention was effective in reducing IS, with small effect sizes.
- Results show support for the use of an online-based intervention to reduce IS, which may be particularly useful for reaching individuals in rural areas and those who cannot access traditional mental health resources.
- Future directions include: 1) finding avenues to make the current intervention more broadly accessible, 2) refining the intervention content for youth, and 3) exploring the utility of using the intervention in conjunction with psychotherapy.