

# The “gay agenda:” How the myth of gay affluence impedes the progress toward equality

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## Abstract

Despite the fact that gay men and lesbian women face significant economic disparities compared to their heterosexual counterparts, people appear to believe that the opposite is true, a phenomenon which has been dubbed the “myth of gay affluence.” In the current research ( $N_{\text{tot}} = 2,162$ ), we address the consequences of this belief. Specifically, we hypothesize and find that believing that gay men and lesbian women are financially well off—either chronically (Study 1) or because of an experimental manipulation (Studies 2–3)—leads participants to deny discrimination against gay men and lesbian women, above and beyond anti-gay attitudes, and this is mediated by the belief that there is a “gay agenda” that is backed by powerful lobbyists. Thus, perpetuating this myth—either intentionally or inadvertently—could have deleterious effects on efforts for social change and the promotion of rights for sexual minorities.

## KEYWORDS

anti-gay attitudes, discrimination, gay affluence, gay agenda, gay men, lesbian women

The problem (a problem, that is, for those who wish to retain social disapprobation of homosexuality) is that, because those who engage in homosexual conduct tend to reside in disproportionate numbers in certain communities, have *high disposable income*, and of course care about homosexual rights issues much more ardently than the public at large, they possess *political power much greater than their numbers*, both locally and statewide. –Justice Scalia’s dissenting opinion in *Romer v Evans* (1996; emphasis added)

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In *Romer v Evans* (1996), the United States Supreme Court annulled a state’s constitutional amendment that prohibited laws protecting the rights of “homosexuals.” The late Justice Antonin Scalia’s written dissent with the Court’s decision offers a glimpse into how he perceived the gay community—namely, as members of an economic elite, who use their wealth to represent their group interests. He also framed the Court’s decision as “imposing upon all Americans

the resolution favored by the elite class from which Members of this institution are selected” (*Romer v Evans*, 1996). In essence, Scalia argued that the Court is a group of elites who are siding with another group of elites—the small but powerful group of gay men and lesbian women—at the expense of the public’s interest (Adler, 2009).

This proposition—that non-heterosexual individuals are not a stigmatized group in need of protection, but instead a disproportionately powerful minority group—is what has been referred to as “the gay agenda.” It is an idea that has been championed by anti-gay advocates (e.g., Osten & Sears, 2003), and is frequently raised by those who oppose more inclusive policies. For instance, former tennis champion Margaret Court described Australia’s Safe Schools anti-bullying program as the work of “the gay lobby” (“Margaret Court says ‘tennis is full of lesbians’ as row escalates”, 2017).

### 1.1 | The myth of gay affluence

The notion that sexual minorities are an economically advantaged group stems from commonly held beliefs about gay men and lesbian women—that they typically come from privileged backgrounds,

and more easily accumulate wealth because of their family structures (“double income no kids”; Badgett, 2003). This myth of gay affluence is also perpetuated by the media, where gay people are largely depicted as financially well off, well educated, White, and male (Baxter, 2010; Bowes, 1996; Ginder & Byun, 2015). For instance, marketing campaigns for high-end travel and leisure activities frequently target gay people (especially gay men), despite the fact that there is little evidence that the average gay consumer is receptive to these campaigns (Hughes, 2005). The presence of such advertisements is likely to reinforce the idea that gay people live an affluent life.

This is referred to as the “myth” of gay affluence because it is largely unfounded. Indeed, many studies suggest that sexual minorities face more economic hardships than their heterosexual counterparts (Badgett et al., 2019; Laurent & Mihoubi, 2017). But what are the consequences of this affluence stereotype? Although many scholars have mentioned the myth of gay affluence as a potential problem for the gay community (e.g., Badgett, 2003; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; McGarrity, 2014), relatively few studies have examined whether the perception that gay people are affluent has repercussions on people's attitudes or beliefs about the fight for gay rights.

Psychologists have argued that minority groups that are perceived as wealthy experience distinct forms of prejudice (Fiske et al., 1999; Glick & Fiske, 2001), which are associated with discriminatory policies and attempts to undermine group interests (Cuddy et al., 2007). Research on anti-Semitism, for instance, has implicated the stereotype of Jewish people as wealthy as fueling conspiracy theories about Jewish people—for example, beliefs that Jews have too much societal influence and control, and that they work collectively to maintain power and pursue a “secret agenda” (Bilewicz et al., 2012; Brusteim, 2003; Kofta & Sedek, 2005). It is thus conceivable that the myth of gay affluence has similar repercussions for sexual minorities. That is, it is possible that the belief that gay men and lesbian women are wealthy (as individuals) increases people's propensity to believe that they collectively use their resources to push a “gay agenda.”

Only a handful of studies have examined affluence stereotypes about gay people (e.g., Hettinger & Vandello, 2014; Wilkinson, 2019), and their results are in line with the proposition that affluence beliefs are largely, but not entirely, associated with attitudes that are problematic for gay rights. In a series of recent studies, Wilkinson (2019) developed the “Economic Myths Regarding Gays scale” (EMGS), and found that EMGS scores (i.e., endorsement of beliefs that gay people are high-end consumers, well-off financially, and able to get ahead because they do not have children) were correlated with anti-gay attitudes—including homonegativity ( $r = .33$ ), denial of discrimination ( $r = .32$ ), and (de)valuing gay progress ( $r = -.30$ )—but were also positively associated with positive beliefs about gay people ( $r = .28$ ). Another study found that the perception of gay affluence—i.e., ratings about how wealthy the average gay person is compared to the national average—was negatively associated with support

for gay rights, even after adjusting for homophobia (Hettinger & Vandello, 2014).

## 1.2 | Denial of discrimination

The fact that affluence perceptions appear to be associated with a lack of support for gay rights above and beyond attitudes toward gay people (e.g., homophobia; Hettinger & Vandello, 2014) is important, because it suggests that the affluence stereotype is associated with beliefs that serve as obstacles in the progress toward equality, even among those who are not overtly biased against sexual minorities. Beliefs that bolster and maintain inequality in ways that are not overtly hostile—typically the denial of continued discrimination toward a disadvantaged group—are referred to as “modern” forms of prejudice, and explain opposition to egalitarian policies even in the absence of explicitly negative attitudes (e.g., Neville et al., 2013; Sears & Henry, 2005; Swim et al., 1995). Modern sexists and racists typically do not espouse overtly disparaging sentiments about women or Black people, respectively, but simply contend that discrimination against these groups is no longer a problem, and thus there is in no need for legal protections. In the absence of (perceived) discrimination, legal petitions on the basis of group membership are not seen as appeals for equal rights, but instead a demand for “special rights” (Vescio et al., 2017).

In the United States, gay people face more overt prejudice compared to ethnic minorities (e.g., Luguri et al., 2012), and presumably those who endorse anti-gay attitudes also feel that discrimination against sexual minorities is “not a problem.” Although most people are likely to have well-formed explicit attitudes about sexual minorities that are not easily subject to change, the degree to which they perceive gay men and lesbian women as targets of discrimination may be more malleable. Thus, we propose that the perception of gay affluence can increase the denial of discrimination against sexual minorities (and thus affect support for gay rights), even in the absence of anti-gay attitudes. This idea is elucidated in a recent liberal magazine article—entitled “The Struggle for Gay Rights is Over”—where the author questioned whether a nondiscrimination law protecting LGBTQ people was still necessary because of data suggesting that gay people economically outperform heterosexual people (Kirchick, 2019).

## 2 | THE CURRENT RESEARCH

There is little work that has examined the myth of gay affluence, but the correlational (Hettinger & Vandello, 2014; Wilkinson, 2019) and anecdotal (Kirchick, 2019) evidence that exists suggests that the perception that gay men and lesbian women are affluent is linked to denial of discrimination against sexual minorities, independent from anti-gay attitudes. However, there is no research that we are aware of that has examined whether the perception of gay affluence might actually *lead* people to be less concerned about anti-gay

discrimination. This is an important question, because if this is the case, it suggests that a seemingly innocuous stereotype—and one that is presumably easily triggered by exposure to media and marketing campaigns (e.g., Baxter, 2010)—could have serious consequences for public support for gay rights.

In the current research, we formally test this hypothesis and expand on it by considering how affluence affects perceptions of the gay community's political power, which in turn leads people to deny the existence of continued discrimination. In three studies, we test whether the perception of gay affluence—both chronically held (Study 1) and experimentally induced (Studies 2–3)—is associated with the denial of discrimination against sexual minorities, and whether this relationship is explained by the belief that there is a well-funded political lobby representing gay interests (the “gay agenda”). Across all studies, we hypothesize that (a) perceptions of affluence will be positively related to denial of discrimination, and (b) this will hold above and beyond anti-gay attitudes, but (c) will be mediated by a belief in a well-funded “gay agenda.”

### 3 | STUDY 1

In Study 1, we randomly assigned participants to answer questions about “gay men” or “lesbian women,” and measured their perceptions of affluence, anti-gay (or anti-lesbian) attitudes, denial of discrimination against gay men (or lesbian women), and belief in a well-funded “gay agenda.” We predict that perceptions of affluence will be positively associated with denial of discrimination, over and above any associations with anti-gay attitudes, and that this would be mediated by belief in a gay agenda.

People's attitudes toward gay men versus lesbian women often differ (Bettinsoli et al., 2020), and asking people about “gay people” in general is likely interpreted as referring to gay men (Herek, 2002; Lambel, 2009). Thus, in Study 1, we randomly assigned participants to answer questions about either “gay men” or “lesbian women,” but we were agnostic about whether there would be differences between male and female targets. On one hand, men are paid more than women for equal work and expertise (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), and so it might be the case that lesbian women are perceived as less affluent than gay men (which would be an accurate perception; Badgett et al., 2019). On the other hand, lesbian women are perceived to be more similar to men than other (straight) women (Kite & Deaux, 1987), and so it could be the case that they are seen as affluent, at least insofar people imagine them to work in male-dominated (and thus, higher paying; Levanon et al., 2009) fields.

We did not expect that the *pattern* of results would differ for male versus female targets—that is, we predicted that perceptions of affluence would be associated with denial of discrimination and belief in a gay agenda for both gay men and lesbian women. At the same time, lesbian women are often “invisible” in people's minds (Guth, 1978; Lamble, 2009), and thus it is possible that links between these concepts

(i.e., gay affluence, discrimination, and political power) are absent, or at least weaker, for women (vs. men). Thus, we allowed for the possibility that these relations may differ as a function of target gender by including the relevant interactions in our models.

## 3.1 | Method

### 3.1.1 | Participants

We collected data from 606 US- and UK-based participants via the online crowdsourcing platform Prolific Academic. Sixty-three percent of the sample ( $n = 383$ ) identified as female, 34.3% ( $n = 208$ ) identified as male, and the remaining participants identified as non-binary ( $n = 11$ ), transmen ( $n = 1$ ), transwomen ( $n = 1$ ), or “other” ( $n = 2$ ). The average age was 32.81 years ( $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.98$ ). More than half (57.7%) of the sample reported having a college degree or higher. The majority of participants were “White” ( $n = 480$ ); the remaining participants reported their race/ethnicity as Asian ( $n = 45$ ), Black ( $n = 28$ ), Hispanic or LatinX ( $n = 21$ ), and “other” ( $n = 32$ ). The majority (81.7%) of the sample identified as heterosexual ( $n = 495$ ), and the remaining participants reported their sexual orientation as gay or lesbian ( $n = 18$ ), bisexual ( $n = 66$ ), uncertain or questioning ( $n = 6$ ), or “other” ( $n = 14$ ), while six participants preferred not to disclose their sexual orientation and one participant did not respond. For this study and all following studies in this article, the pattern and significance levels of our results did not change depending on whether we included or excluded non-heterosexual participants ( $n = 111$ ) in the analyses, and so we retained all participants regardless of sexual orientation. For the regression models, which included adjustments for participant gender, only participants with binary gender identification were included ( $n = 591$ ). At the end of the study, respondents were debriefed and paid \$0.78 for completing this survey, which corresponds to \$10 (USD) per hour.

To evaluate the impact of our predictors on the dependent variable (i.e., denial of discrimination), we ran a post-hoc sensitivity power analysis using the PWR package for R (Champely et al., 2018), which revealed that the minimum effect detectable for our model—with  $N = 591$ , power  $(1 - \beta)$  of 0.80, and a significance level of 0.01—is  $f^2 = 0.04$ .

### 3.1.2 | Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to answer questions about either “gay men” or “lesbian women.” Responses to all measures were coded on a 7-point scale; Table 1 lists the means (and standard deviations) and correlations for the focal variables.

### 3.1.3 | Measures

All measures appeared in a random order to participants. Our focal variables, which were embedded in a larger survey, assessed (a)

**TABLE 1** Means (and standard deviations), distribution measures, and bivariate correlations among focal variables in Study 1 (N = 606)

	1. Affluence	2. Anti-gay attitudes	3. Denial of discrimination	4. Gay agenda
Gay men, M (SD)	3.90 (0.72)	2.18 (1.38)	<b>2.87 (1.19)</b>	3.14 (1.55)
Lesbian women, M (SD)	3.81 (0.75)	2.03 (1.28)	<b>3.12 (1.36)</b>	3.04 (1.46)
Gay men—Skewness (SE)	0.25 (0.14)	1.46 (0.14)	0.51 (0.14)	0.26 (0.14)
Lesbian women—Skewness (SE)	0.19 (0.14)	1.71 (0.14)	0.43 (0.14)	0.26 (0.14)
Gay men—Kurtosis (SE)	3.49 (0.28)	1.80 (0.28)	-0.32 (0.28)	-0.52 (0.28)
Lesbian women—Kurtosis (SE)	3.20 (0.28)	2.73 (0.28)	-0.26 (0.28)	-0.50 (0.28)
1. Affluence	—	0.16**	0.30***	0.31***
2. Anti-gay attitudes	0.24***	—	0.52***	0.42***
3. Denial of discrimination	0.34***	0.46***	—	0.51***
4. Gay agenda	0.33***	0.52***	0.50***	—

Note: **Bolded** terms indicate a statistically significant difference on ratings of gay men versus lesbian women ( $p < .05$ ). Correlations for gay men are listed in the top diagonal, and for lesbian women in the bottom diagonal.

\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

perceptions of gay affluence; (b) anti-gay attitudes; (c) denial of discrimination; and (d) belief in a well-funded “gay agenda.”<sup>1</sup>

#### Affluence beliefs

We included ten items assessing how likely participants were to believe that gay men [lesbian women] are to, for instance, “be wealthy,” “have disposable income,” or “be part of a professional elite” as compared to “the average person in this country.” All the items loaded into a single factor ( $\alpha = 0.92$  for gay men;  $\alpha = 0.91$  for lesbian women). Responses to all items were coded on a 7-point scale, where 1 = *Much less likely*; 4 = *Equally likely*; and 7 = *Much more likely*.

#### Negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbian women

We included five items from the Attitudes toward Gay and Lesbian scale (ATG/L; Herek, 1988) assessing (negative) attitudes toward either gay men ( $\alpha = 0.92$ , e.g., “I think male homosexuals are disgusting”) or lesbian women ( $\alpha = 0.93$ , e.g., “Female homosexuality is a perversion”). Responses to all items were coded on a 7-point scale where higher scores reflect more negative attitudes.

<sup>1</sup>In addition to the measures reported here, the larger survey included two additional measures of anti-gay attitudes: modern homonegativity and aversion toward gay men and lesbian women. A factor analysis confirmed that the modern homonegativity items encompassed both negative attitudes and denial of discrimination, so we omitted this for conceptual clarity. Aversion and attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men (ATLG) were highly correlated ( $r = 0.78$ ), and thus we chose ATLG because it is a commonly used measure, but results are the same as the one reported in the manuscript when aversion is also included in the models.

As part of an unrelated study, the survey also included measures assessing perceptions of homosexuality as pathology and as a moral and societal threat, and endorsement of stereotypes of gay men and lesbian women.

#### Denial of discrimination

The survey included four items assessing the denial of discrimination against gay men or lesbian women (taken from Massey, 2009; e.g., “Discrimination against gay men is no longer a problem in this country,” “Society has reached the point where lesbian women and straight women have equal opportunities for advancement”;  $\alpha = 0.83$  for men;  $\alpha = 0.89$  for women). Responses to all items were coded on a 7-point scale where higher scores reflect higher discrimination denial.

#### Gay agenda beliefs

We included two items assessing belief in a well-funded and powerful “lobby” advocating for gay rights, namely: “The homosexual lobby holds a great deal of power,” and “There is a lot of money behind the homosexual agenda” ( $\alpha$ 's  $> 0.86$  in both male and female versions of the survey). These items were created by the authors based on text from anti-gay advocacy books (e.g., Osten & Sears, 2003). Responses were coded on a 7-point scale where higher scores mean higher belief in the existence of a gay agenda.

#### Demographic measures

At the end of the survey, participants provided their demographic details, including gender, age, ethnicity, education, and sexual orientation. They also rated their familiarity with gay men and lesbian women, both measured on a scale from 1 (*extremely familiar*) to 10 (*not familiar at all*). These two items were highly correlated,  $r = .76$ , so we computed a single measure of familiarity by taking the mean of these two items, reverse coded so that high numbers indicate more familiarity. Finally, we assessed participants' political orientation on a scale from 1 (*extremely liberal*) to 10 (*extremely conservative*).

**TABLE 2** Unstandardized slopes (and standard errors) from stepwise linear regression model predicting denial of discrimination against gay men and lesbian women (Study 1,  $N = 590^a$ )

	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3		Step 4	
	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>P</i>	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>p</i>
Constant	3.33 (0.10)	<.001	3.36 (0.10)	<.001	3.40 (0.10)	<.001	3.36 (0.09)	<.001
Know gay/lesbian	-0.11 (0.02)	<.001	-0.11 (0.02)	<.001	-0.07 (0.02)	.002	-0.06 (0.02)	.005
Political conservatism	0.25 (0.02)	<.001	0.22 (0.02)	<.001	0.15 (0.02)	<.001	0.13 (0.02)	<.001
Female (vs. male) target	-0.29 (0.09)	.001	-0.23 (0.09)	<.001	-0.34 (0.08)	<.001	-0.34 (0.08)	<.001
Affluence			0.38 (0.09)	<.001	0.32 (0.08)	<.001	0.25 (0.08)	.003
Affluence x Target gender			-0.05 (0.12)	.683	-0.05 (0.12)	.651	-0.06 (0.12)	.640
Anti-gay attitudes					0.31 (0.05)	<.001	0.20 (0.06)	<.001
Attitudes x Target gender					-0.01 (0.06)	.929	0.04 (0.07)	.548
Gay agenda							0.22 (0.05)	<.001
Gay agenda x Target gender							-0.05 (0.06)	.408

Note: Models include adjustments for gender (female vs. male), age, education (college degree vs. not), and ethnicity (non-white vs. white).

<sup>a</sup> $N = 590$  because a binary measure of participant gender was included in the models.

### 3.2 | Results

Bivariate correlations between the measures for lesbian women and gay men are listed in Table 1. Gay men and lesbian women were rated equally affluent,  $t(604) = 1.39, p = .165$ . We also found that negative attitudes were roughly equal, regardless of whether the respondent was asked about gay men or lesbian women,  $t(604) = 1.42, p = .155$ . However, we did find that people are more likely to deny discrimination against lesbian women compared to gay men,  $t(604) = 2.45, p = .015$ . Belief in the gay agenda was approximately equal in both versions of the survey,  $t(604) = 0.76, p = .448$ . Anti-gay attitudes were fairly low and negatively skewed in this sample (see Table 1), but this measure was included primarily as an adjustment variable and thus the non-normality of its distribution does not affect the analyses.

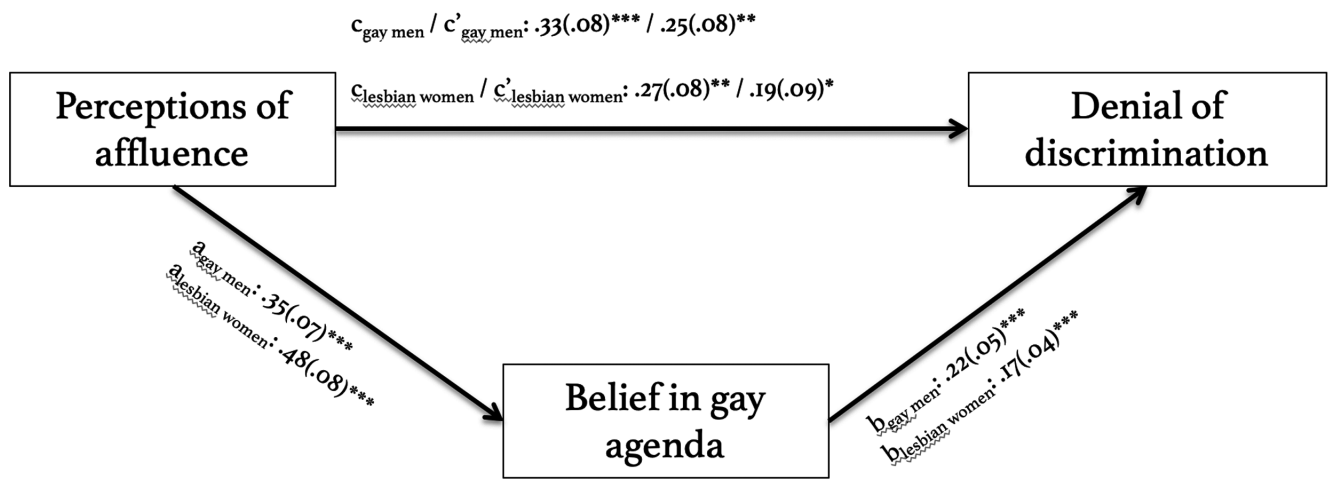
For our primary analysis, we conducted a linear regression model predicting denial discrimination in four steps (see Table 2). In the first step, we included the target gender (i.e., whether the participant was answering questions about gay men or lesbian women) and non-focal variables that could potentially be related to perceptions of discrimination, including demographic variables—specifically, age (mean-centered) and dummy codes for gender (female vs. male), education (college degree vs. not), and ethnicity (non-White vs. White); familiarity with non-heterosexual individuals; and political conservatism. Results revealed that, above and beyond the demographic variables, familiarity with lesbian women and/or gay men is negatively related to denial of discrimination and political conservatism is positively related. Further, we found that people perceive less discrimination toward lesbian women as compared to gay men.

In Step 2, we added affluence perception and its interaction with target gender. Results revealed the predicted significant negative association between perceptions of affluence and denial of discrimination; this is equally true for gay men and lesbian women, as evidenced by the non-significant interaction with target gender.

In Step 3, we entered in the model the measure of anti-gay attitudes, and its interaction with target gender. Results showed a positive and significant association between anti-gay attitudes and denial of discrimination, for both gay men and lesbian women (as evidenced by the non-significant interaction). Thus, results show that anti-gay attitudes are associated with discrimination denial, but, importantly, perceptions of affluence predict the denial of discrimination above and beyond anti-gay attitudes.

In Step 4, we included our proposed mediator—the belief in a “gay agenda”—and its interaction with target gender. As seen in Table 2, results showed a positive and significant association between belief in the existence of a gay agenda and the denial of discrimination against both gay men and lesbian women. There was no interaction with target gender, indicating that this was equally true for male and female targets. Once gay agenda belief was included in the model, the association between affluence perceptions and denial of discrimination remained significant, but its magnitude was reduced. The effect size of our model translates to  $f^2 = 0.73$ , which is much larger than the minimum detectable effect ( $f^2 = 0.04$ ) based on our sensitivity analysis.

We tested whether the gay agenda belief mediated the effect of affluence perception on denial of discrimination. A bootstrapping procedure with 1,000 bootstraps (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) confirmed that the indirect effect of affluence perceptions on denial of discrimination through belief in a gay agenda was significant for both



**Indirect effects**

*Gay men:*  $b=.08, SE=.03$ , bias corrected 95% CI [.03, .16]

*Lesbian women:*  $b=.08, SE=.03$ , bias corrected 95% CI [.04, .15]

**FIGURE 1** Mediation Model with “gay agenda” as a mediator (Study 1).  $***p < .001$

male,  $b = 0.08, SE = 0.03$ , bias-corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) [0.03, 0.16], and female targets,  $b = 0.08, SE = 0.03$ , bias-corrected 95% CI [0.04, 0.15] (see Figure 1).

**3.3 | Discussion**

Results from this first study, which used an online sample of American and British participants, support our predictions that (a) the perception of gay men and lesbian women as affluent is associated with the denial of the existence of LGBT discrimination; (b) this is true above and beyond familiarity with gay men and women, political conservatism, and anti-gay attitudes; and (c) this association is explained, at least in part, by the belief that there is a “gay agenda,” backed by powerful and rich lobbyists. Thus, results from this study replicated previous findings connecting perceptions of affluence and denial of discrimination (Hettinger & Vandello, 2014; Wilkinson, 2019), and put forward the idea that this association may be backed by a belief in a gay agenda.

The same patterns emerged for both male and female targets. Results are thus in line with the proposition that the stereotype that gay men and lesbian women are wealthy could lead to negative consequences—namely, the tendency to perceive this group as having powerful political backing, and ultimately, to deny the problem of discrimination against the LGBT community. Of course, our data are correlational, and we cannot make any claims about the causal pathways based on this study. In Studies 2 and 3, we manipulate perceptions of gay affluence, predicting that those who are led to believe that gay men and women are more affluent compared to the average person will be more likely to deny discrimination against sexual minorities, and this will be explained, at least in part, by the belief in a gay agenda. Because results from Study 1 revealed consistent

results for both lesbian women and gay men, we assess perceptions of gay men and lesbian women as a group in these next two studies.

**4 | STUDY 2**

In 2014, *The Atlantic* published an article debunking the “Myth of Gay Affluence” (McDermott, 2014). We used this article as the basis for our experimental manipulation, which included a “rich” condition (reporting that gay men and women are better off than the average American) and a “poor” condition (reporting that gay men and lesbian women are worse off than the average American, which was in line with the original article).

In Study 2, we included two control conditions. In one control condition, participants did not receive any information at all, and simply answered the questions (described below). The second control condition was perfectly analogous to the “poor” condition, except that it referred to a group unrelated to sexual orientation, namely Korean-Americans. Because Korean-Americans are also believed to be financially well off, we included this condition in case there were some unintended effects of debunking an affluence stereotype more generally. The text for all three manipulations is reported in the Supplementary Materials.

Our primary hypothesis was that when participants were told that gay men and lesbian women are affluent, they would be more likely to deny discrimination against sexual minorities compared to those in the other conditions. We also predicted that the effect of perceptions of gay affluence on denial of discrimination would be explained, at least in part, by an increased belief in the existence of a powerful and rich gay lobby. Thus, we predicted that participants who were told that gay men and lesbian women are affluent (compared to those told they are not affluent, and compared to those in the control conditions)



would not necessarily be higher on anti-gay attitudes in general, but they would be more likely to deny that discrimination against sexual minorities is a problem, and this would be mediated by the belief in the existence of a powerful and rich gay lobby.

## 4.1 | Method

### 4.1.1 | Participants

We collected data from 802 US-based participants via the online crowdsourcing platform Prolific Academic. Forty-five percent of the sample ( $n = 359$ ) identified as female, 52.4% ( $n = 420$ ) identified as male, and the remaining participants identified as: non-binary ( $n = 10$ ); transmen ( $n = 8$ ); transwomen ( $n = 1$ ); or “other” ( $n = 4$ ). The average age was 31.37 years ( $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.15$ ). Approximate half (48.4%) of the sample reported having a college degree or higher. The majority of participants were “White” ( $n = 494$ ); the remaining participants reported their race/ethnicity as Asian ( $n = 144$ ), Black ( $n = 59$ ), Hispanic or LatinX ( $n = 58$ ), and “other” ( $n = 47$ ). The majority (77.2%) of the sample identified as heterosexual ( $n = 617$ ), and the remaining participants reported their sexual orientation as gay or lesbian ( $n = 49$ ), bisexual ( $n = 90$ ), uncertain or questioning ( $n = 19$ ), “other” ( $n = 18$ ); six participants preferred not to disclose their sexual orientation and three participants did not respond. The pattern and significance levels of our results did not change depending on whether we included or excluded non-heterosexual participants ( $n = 185$ ) in the analyses, and so we retained all participants regardless of sexual orientation. At the end respondents were debriefed and paid \$0.98 for completing this survey, which corresponds to approximately \$10/hour.

The result of a post-hoc sensitivity power analysis with  $N = 741$ ,  $1-\beta = 0.80$ , and significance level of 0.01 showed that the minimum effect detectable was  $f^2 = 0.03$ .

### 4.1.2 | Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. In the “gay poor” condition, participants read statements taken directly from *The Atlantic* article, which cited reports showing that gay men and lesbian women are one of the poorest demographics in the country (e.g., “A new report released by UCLA’s Williams Institute found that 29 percent of LGBT adults experienced food insecurity—a time when they did not have enough money to feed themselves or their family—in the past year. In contrast, 16 percent of Americans nationwide reported being food insecure in 2012.”). In the “gay rich” condition, participants read a doctored version of the article, suggesting that gay men and lesbian women were one of the wealthiest demographics in the country (e.g., “A new report released by UCLA’s Williams Institute found that 3 percent of LGBT adults experienced food insecurity—a time when they did not have enough money to feed

themselves or their family—in the past year. In contrast, 16 percent of Americans nationwide reported being food insecure in 2012.”). Participants in the “Korean poor” condition read the exact same article, except that the focus was Korean-Americans instead of gay men and lesbian women. Finally, those in the “control” condition did not read any passage. (See Supplementary Materials for full text.) Following the article, participants were asked to answer a manipulation check question: “compared to the general population, gay men and lesbian women [Korean-Americans] are better off [worse off] financially than the average American.”

Participants then responded to the same measures used in Study 1, namely: (a) perceptions of gay affluence (10 items;  $\alpha = 0.95$ ); (b) anti-gay attitudes (4 items;  $\alpha = 0.87$ ); (c) denial of discrimination (4 items;  $\alpha = 0.83$ ); and (d) belief in a well-funded “gay agenda” (2 items;  $\alpha = 0.85$ ).<sup>2</sup> Measures were presented in random order, and responses to all assessed measures were coded on a 7-point scale (see Table 3 for means and standard deviations).

At the end of the survey, participants provided the same demographic details as in Study 1, including familiarity with gay men and lesbian women (a single item, measured on a 1–10 scale) and political orientation (also measured on a 1–10 scale). Upon completion of the study, participants were debriefed and provided with the original article from *The Atlantic*, and received compensation for their time.

## 4.2 | Results

Sixty-one participants (18 in the “Korean poor” condition; 19 in the “gay poor” condition; and 24 in the “gay rich” condition) failed the manipulation check (i.e., did not correctly identify what the article was about) and therefore were excluded from the main analyses, resulting in a final sample of 741 participants, with 203 participants in the control condition, 179 in the “Korean poor” condition, 183 in the “gay poor” condition, and 176 in the “gay rich” condition.

We first assessed the impact of the experimental manipulation by conducting a multivariate ANOVA examining the effect of experimental condition on affluence ratings and the focal variables (see Table 3). Results revealed that the perception of gay affluence was indeed affected by experimental condition,  $F(3, 737) = 37.28, p < .001$ . Participants in the “gay rich” condition rated gay men and lesbian women as more affluent as compared to those in all other conditions (Bonferroni-corrected  $p$ -values all  $< 0.001$ ). Participants in the “gay poor” condition were significantly lower on affluence perceptions compared to those in the control condition (Bonferroni-corrected  $p < .001$ ), but not compared to those in the “Korean poor” condition (Bonferroni-corrected  $p = .071$ ). There was no difference in affluence ratings in the control versus “Korean poor” condition, Bonferroni-corrected  $p = .423$ .

<sup>2</sup>We also included an additional dependent variable, namely participants’ willingness to share Facebook posts promoting LGBTQI+ events. The mean willingness was 3.61 ( $SD = 2.00$ ) on a 1–7 scale, and there were no differences as a function of condition ( $p = .641$ ). In the comments, many participants wrote that they do not use or post on Facebook.

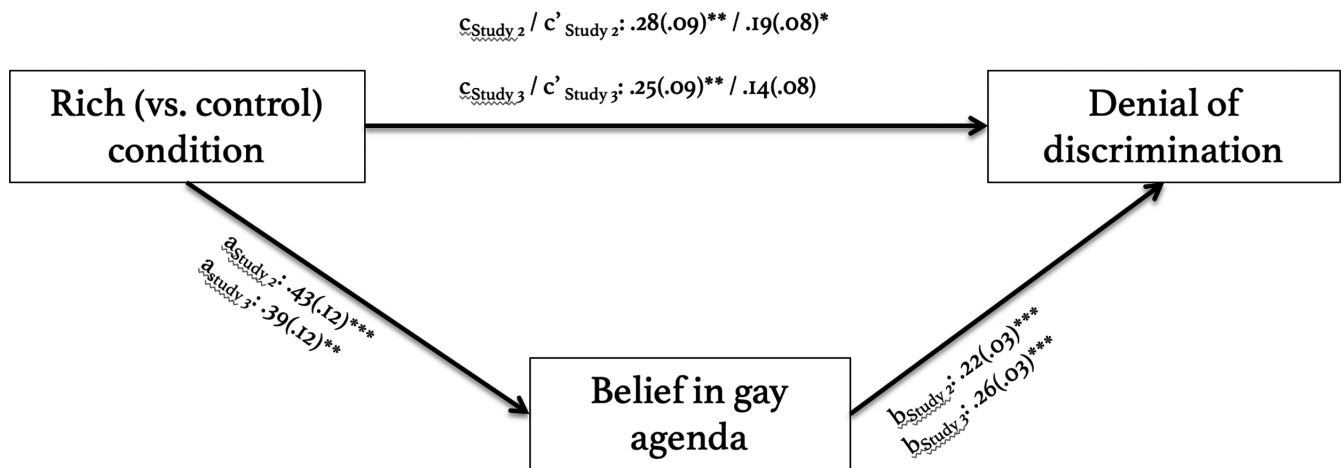
**TABLE 3** Means (and standard deviations) of focal variables, and results of multivariate ANOVA (Study 2; N = 741)

	Gay Rich M (SD)	Gay Poor M (SD)	Korean Poor M (SD)	Control M (SD)	F (3, 737)=	p
Affluence	4.39 (0.93) <sub>a</sub>	3.40 (0.94) <sub>b</sub>	3.64 (0.84) <sub>b,c</sub>	3.81 (0.96) <sub>c</sub>	37.28	<.001
Anti-gay attitudes	2.43 (1.52) <sub>a</sub>	2.40 (1.52) <sub>a</sub>	2.15 (1.40) <sub>a</sub>	2.24 (1.44) <sub>a</sub>	1.52	.208
Denial of discrimination	3.24 (1.35) <sub>a</sub>	2.80 (1.17) <sub>b</sub>	2.77 (1.21) <sub>b</sub>	2.90 (1.34) <sub>b</sub>	5.25	.001
Gay agenda	3.71 (1.58) <sub>a</sub>	3.03 (1.52) <sub>b</sub>	3.05 (1.58) <sub>b</sub>	3.25 (1.55) <sub>b</sub>	7.25	<.001

Note: Means that do not share subscripts are significantly different from each other (Bonferroni-corrected  $p < .05$ ).

**TABLE 4** Unstandardized slope estimates (and standard errors) from a stepwise linear regression model predicting denial of discrimination against gay men and lesbian women (Study 2, N = 741)

	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3		Step 4	
	b (SE)	p	b (SE)	p	b (SE)	p	b (SE)	p
Constant	2.84 (0.07)	<.001	2.90 (0.05)	<.001	2.92 (0.05)	<.001	2.94 (0.05)	<.001
Rich (vs. control)	0.41 (0.12)	<.001	0.32 (0.09)	<.001	0.28 (0.09)	.001	0.19 (0.08)	.024
Poor (vs. control)	-0.04 (0.11)	.709	-0.09 (0.09)	.348	-0.12 (0.09)	.175	-0.07 (0.08)	.387
Know gay/lesbian			-0.04 (0.02)	.028	-0.00 (0.02)	.780	-0.01 (0.02)	.752
Political conservatism			0.35 (0.02)	<.001	0.26 (0.02)	<.001	0.20 (0.02)	<.001
Anti-gay attitudes					0.25 (0.03)	<.001	0.19 (0.03)	<.001
Gay agenda							0.22 (0.03)	<.001



**Indirect effects**

Study 2:  $b=.10, SE=.03$ , bias corrected 95% CI [.04, .17]

Study 3:  $b=.10, SE=.04$ , bias corrected 95% CI [.03, .17]

**FIGURE 2** Mediation Model with “gay agenda” as a mediator (Study 2 and Study 3). \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

As shown in Table 3, condition impacted denial of discrimination and belief in a gay agenda, but it did not impact anti-gay attitudes, as predicted. Because none of the variables differed between the two control conditions (Bonferroni-corrected  $p$ 's all  $>.0423$ ), we combined these into a single control group for our regression analyses.

For our focal analysis, we conducted a linear regression model in four steps, predicting denial discrimination with experimental

condition (dummy codes for rich vs. control and poor vs. control) in Step 1; familiarity with non-heterosexual people and political conservatism in Step 2; anti-gay attitudes in Step 3; and belief in a gay agenda in Step 4. Results are listed in Table 4.

As seen in Table 4, denial of discrimination was higher in the “rich” (vs. control) condition, but the “poor” (vs. control) conditions did not significantly differ. In Step 2, we find that familiarity is negatively



related to discrimination denial, and political conservatism is positively related; including these two variables did reduce the impact of the rich (vs. control) condition on discrimination denial, but it remained positive and significant. Similarly, in Step 3, we find a positive and significant association between anti-gay attitudes and denial of discrimination. With the inclusion of anti-gay attitudes, the association between the rich condition and discrimination denial was again somewhat reduced but it remained positive and significant. Finally, in Step 4, we added our predicted mediator, belief in a gay agenda. Results revealed a positive and significant association between gay agenda belief and denial of discrimination; once the gay agenda belief was included in the model, the effect of the rich (vs. control) condition on denial of discrimination was further reduced, but remained significant. The effect size of our model translates to  $f^2 = 1.01$ , which is much larger than the minimum ( $f^2 = 0.03$ ) based on our post-hoc sensitivity analysis.

We tested whether the gay agenda belief mediated the effect of experimental condition (rich vs. control) on denial of discrimination, even after adjusting for familiarity, political conservatism, and anti-gay attitudes. A bootstrapping procedure with 1,000 bootstraps (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) confirmed that the indirect effect of the rich (vs. control) on denial of discrimination through belief in a gay agenda was significant,  $b = 0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ , bias-corrected 95% CI [0.04, 0.17] (See Figure 2).

### 4.3 | Discussion

This study is the first experimental evidence that we are aware of that supports the proposition that the myth of gay affluence can have detrimental consequences for non-heterosexual individuals. Specifically, results showed that participants who read a passage depicting gay men and lesbian women as more affluent than the average person were subsequently more likely to deny discrimination and believe that there is a well-funded political lobby that has a “gay agenda” (but they were not more likely to hold anti-gay attitudes in general), compared to those in the control conditions.

We did not find any effects of the “poor” condition—that is, making salient (the more accurate fact) that gay individuals are less affluent than the average person did not affect people’s beliefs about discrimination or the gay agenda, nor did it affect anti-gay attitudes, compared to the control conditions. Thus, while the gay affluence myth has negative consequences, it appears that there are no benefits to debunking that myth, at least in terms of people’s attitudes, perceptions of discrimination, and beliefs about a gay agenda.

In Study 3, we aim to replicate the results from this study. We also aimed to further test the downstream consequences of affluence perceptions, and thus included an additional potential outcome measure—i.e., tolerance of (vs. interference with) anti-gay bullying. Previous research has shown that people who were high (vs. low) on denial of discrimination against sexual minorities showed more tolerance toward the perpetrator in an anti-gay bullying scenario—specifically, they rated the situation as less severe, were less likely

to intervene, and more likely to blame the victim (Katz et al., 2019). Thus, we hypothesized that affluence—through the denial of discrimination—would be associated with more tolerance for anti-gay bullying. Because anti-gay bullying is a situation where affluence is irrelevant, this is a rather conservative test of whether affluence perceptions have downstream consequences on people’s behavioral intentions.

## 5 | STUDY 3

In this final study, we again manipulate perceptions of affluence among gay men and lesbian women, and measure people’s subsequent beliefs about discrimination against sexual minorities and the “gay agenda.” We also assessed people’s reactions to an anti-gay bullying scenario, which previous research has shown is related to the denial discrimination (Katz et al., 2019). We predicted that the perception of gay affluence would lead to increased discrimination denial and this would, in turn, lead to more tolerance for anti-gay bullying.

### 5.1 | Method

#### 5.1.1 | Participants

We collected data from 754 US-based participants via the online crowdsourcing platform Prolific Academic. Forty-five percent of the sample ( $n = 341$ ) identified as female, 50.5% ( $n = 381$ ) identified as male, and the remaining participants identified as: non-binary ( $n = 19$ ); transmen ( $n = 7$ ); transwomen ( $n = 5$ ); or “other” ( $n = 1$ ). The average age was 30.96 years ( $SD_{age} = 12.06$ ). Approximate half (51.7%) of the sample reported having a college degree or higher. The majority of participants were “White” ( $n = 475$ ); the remaining participants reported their race/ethnicity as: Asian ( $n = 112$ ); Black ( $n = 64$ ); Hispanic or Latin ( $n = 70$ ); and “other” ( $n = 32$ ). The majority (74.1%) of the sample identified as heterosexual ( $n = 557$ ), and the remaining participants reported their sexual orientation as: gay or lesbian ( $n = 45$ ); bisexual ( $n = 104$ ); uncertain or questioning ( $n = 18$ ); “other” ( $n = 19$ ); nine participants preferred not to disclose their sexual orientation and two participants did not respond. The pattern and significance levels of our results did not change depending on whether we included or excluded non-heterosexual participants ( $n = 197$ ) in the analyses, and so we retained all participants regardless of sexual orientation. At the end respondents were debriefed and paid \$0.98 for completing this survey (~\$10/hour rate).

The result of a post-hoc sensitivity power analysis with  $N = 710$ ,  $1-\beta = 0.80$ , and significance level of 0.01 showed that the minimum effect detectable was  $f^2 = 0.03$ . A post-hoc sensitivity analyses for the anti-gay bullying measure with  $N = 706$ ,  $1-\beta = 0.80$ , and significance level of 0.01 showed that the minimum effect detectable was  $f^2 = 0.02$ .

The procedure was identical to Study 2, with two exceptions. First, because the “Korean poor” condition did not differ from the no-passage control condition in Study 2, we did not include it, and thus Study 3 has three conditions (“rich,” “poor,” and control). Following the article, participants in the “rich” and “poor” condition were asked to answer a manipulation check question, i.e., “compared to the general population, gay men and lesbian women are better off [worse off] financially than the average American.”

Following the manipulation, participants responded to the same measures included in Studies 1 and 2, namely: (a) perceptions of gay affluence ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ); (b) anti-gay attitudes ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ); (c) denial of discrimination ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ); and (d) belief in a well-funded “gay agenda” ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ). Measures were presented in a random order to participants, and responses were coded on 7-point scales (see Table 5).

The second difference between Study 2 and 3 is that in Study 3, we also included a behavioral intention measure aimed at testing whether affluence perceptions would have an effect on participants’ perception of severity and willingness to intervene and help a victim in an anti-gay bullying scenario. We took a scenario used in previous research (Katz et al., 2019), depicting an incident at a gym where one man accuses another man of looking at him in a sexual way, and slightly modified it to make it more severe than the original one (i.e., the heterosexual guy also gives a shove to the gay target; see Supplementary Materials for full text). Following the scenario, we assessed participants’ reactions to the incident, including its severity (1 item); their feelings of personal responsibility to intervene (4 items); and perpetrator blame and punishment (2 items). These seven items all loaded onto a single factor, so we computed the mean as our measure of tolerance for anti-gay bullying ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

Participants then gave the same demographic details as in Study 2, including familiarity with gay men and/or lesbian women and political conservatism. They were then debriefed, provided with the original article from *The Atlantic*, and received the compensation for their time.

Forty-one participants failed the manipulation check, and they were therefore excluded from the main analyses, resulting in a final sample of 710 participants (255 participants in the control condition, 231 in the gay non-affluence condition, 224 in the gay affluence condition).

As in Study 2, we first assessed the impact of the experimental manipulation on affluence ratings and the focal variables by running a multivariate ANOVA (see Table 5). We find that condition did indeed impact affluence ratings,  $F(2, 707) = 57.41, p < .001$ . Participants perceived gay men and lesbian women as more affluent in the gay rich condition ( $M = 4.32, SD = 0.98$ ) as compared to those in the control condition ( $M = 3.87, SD = 0.93, p < .001$ ). Further, those in the control condition perceived gay men and lesbian women as more affluent compared to those in the gay poor condition ( $M = 3.38, SD = 0.89, p < .001$ ).

As seen in Table 5, we find that the manipulation did not significantly impact anti-gay attitudes, as we found in Study 2. However, in contrast to predictions and to Study 2 results, we also found that there was no significant effect of the affluence manipulation on denial of discrimination, although the means were in the predicted direction: participants in the “rich” condition were slightly higher than those in the control condition ( $p = .154$ ) and those in the “poor” condition ( $p = .093$ ). We did find, however, that the manipulation affected belief in the gay agenda in the predicted way, such that those in the “rich” condition were more likely to believe in the gay agenda compare to those in the control ( $p = .014$ ) and “poor” ( $p = .006$ ) conditions, whereas the control and “poor” conditions did not differ from each other ( $p = .699$ ).

Although we did not obtain the expected main effect of the manipulation on denial of discrimination, we did find a significant effect of the manipulation on the mediator (the a-path), and a significant association between the mediator and our dependent measure (the b-path), and thus the non-significant total effect (of affluence manipulation on denial; i.e., the c-path) does not preclude the possibility of mediation (Rucker et al., 2011). Thus, we conducted the same stepwise linear regression model as in Study 2, predicting denial of discrimination with experimental conditions (rich vs. control and poor vs. control) in Step 1; familiarity with gay people and political conservatism in Step 2; anti-gay attitudes in Step 3; and the belief in a gay agenda in Step 4. Results are listed in Table 6.

	Gay Rich M (SD)	Control M (SD)	Gay Poor M (SD)	F (2, 707)=	p
Affluence	4.32 (0.98) <sub>a</sub>	3.87 (0.93) <sub>b</sub>	3.38 (0.89) <sub>c</sub>	57.41	<.001
Anti-gay attitudes	2.00 (1.28) <sub>a</sub>	2.10 (1.32) <sub>a</sub>	2.21 (1.50) <sub>a</sub>	1.38	.252
Denial of discrimination	2.91 (1.30) <sub>a</sub>	2.74 (1.36) <sub>a</sub>	2.70 (1.30) <sub>a</sub>	1.63	.198
Gay agenda	3.50 (1.65) <sub>a</sub>	3.13 (1.64) <sub>b</sub>	3.07 (1.69) <sub>b</sub>	4.54	.011
Tolerance of anti-gay bullying	2.40 (1.26)	2.32 (1.26)	2.40 (1.24)	0.38	.687

**TABLE 5** Means (and standard deviations) of focal variables, and results of multivariate ANOVA (Study 3;  $N = 710$ )

Note: Means that do not share subscripts are significantly different from each other (Bonferroni-corrected  $p < .05$ )

**TABLE 6** Unstandardized slope estimates (and standard errors) from a stepwise linear regression model predicting denial of discrimination against gay men and lesbian women (Study 3,  $N = 710$ )

	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3		Step 4	
	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>p</i>
Constant	2.74 (0.08)	<.001	2.89 (0.07)	<.001	2.86 (0.06)	<.001	2.86 (0.06)	<.001
Rich (vs. control)	0.17 (0.12)	.154	0.23 (0.10)	.015	0.24 (0.09)	.008	0.12 (0.09)	.154
Poor (vs. control)	-0.04 (0.12)	.764	-0.02 (0.09)	.800	-0.06 (0.09)	.539	-0.03 (0.09)	.693
Know gay/lesbian			-0.07 (0.02)	<.001	-0.05 (0.02)	.010	-0.04 (0.02)	.034
Political conservatism			0.34 (0.02)	<.001	0.25 (0.02)	<.001	0.18 (0.02)	<.001
Anti-gay attitudes					0.26 (0.04)	<.001	0.18 (0.03)	<.001
Gay agenda							0.26 (0.03)	<.001

As seen in Table 6, once familiarity and political conservatism were included in the model (Step 2), the effect of the rich (vs. control) condition on denial of discrimination was significant.<sup>3</sup> In Step 3, results showed a positive and significant association between anti-gay attitudes and denial of discrimination, mirroring the results from Study 2, and the effect of the rich (vs. control) condition on denial of discrimination remained significant. In Step 4, results revealed a positive and significant association between belief in a gay agenda and denial of discrimination; further, the effect of the rich (vs. control) condition was reduced. The effect size of our model translates to  $f^2 = 1.01$ , which is much larger than the minimum ( $f^2 = 0.03$ ) based on our sensitivity analysis.

Using a bootstrapping procedure with 1,000 bootstraps, we find that the indirect effect of the rich (vs. control) condition on denial of discrimination through the belief in a gay agenda was significant,  $b = 0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ , bias-corrected 95% CI [0.03, 0.17] (see Figure 2).

### 5.2.1 | Tolerance for anti-gay bullying

We found no effect of experimental conditions on tolerance for anti-gay bullying (see Table 5). However, we do replicate the results of the original research (i.e., Katz et al., 2019), insofar as results revealed that participants who scored higher on denial of discrimination were also more likely to show tolerance in the anti-gay bullying scenario,  $r(708) = 0.37$ ,  $p < .001$ . We also found a positive association between affluence perceptions and anti-gay bullying tolerance,  $r(708) = 0.19$ ,  $p < .001$ . Thus, we used the measure (rather than the manipulation) of affluence to test the hypothesized model, namely, that affluence perceptions would be positively associated with tolerance for bullying, above and

beyond anti-gay attitudes, and this would be mediated by denial of discrimination.

We conducted a linear regression model, predicting tolerance of anti-gay bullying with the affluence measure in Step 1 ( $b = 0.24$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ); in Step 2, we added anti-gay attitudes ( $b = 0.33$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and found that affluence remained a significant predictor after this was included in the model ( $b = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = .003$ ). In the third step, we found that denial of discrimination significantly predicted anti-gay bullying tolerance,  $b = 0.20$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < .001$ , and once this was included in the model, there was no longer a significant association with affluence perceptions,  $b = 0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p = .504$ , but anti-gay attitudes remained significant,  $b = 0.24$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < .001$ . This translates to  $f^2 = 0.22$ , an effect size larger than the minimum ( $f^2 = 0.02$ ) based on our sensitivity analysis.

We analyzed whether denial of discrimination mediated the effect of affluence on tolerance for anti-gay bullying. A bootstrapping procedure (with 1,000 bootstraps) confirmed that the indirect effect of affluence perceptions on tolerance for anti-gay bullying through denial of discrimination was significant,  $b = 0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ , bias-corrected 95% CI [0.15, 0.34]; this was still true when anti-gay attitudes was included as a covariate,  $b = 0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ , bias-corrected 95% CI [0.05, 0.15].

## 5.3 | Discussion

Results from this last study largely mirror the findings from Study 2 and support our predictions, insofar as we found that participants who were told that gay people are more affluent were more likely to deny discrimination compared to those in the control condition, once we adjusted for familiarity with gay people and political conservatism. Further, our results are in line with the proposed mediation, such that increasing affluence perceptions lead people be more likely to believe in the existence of a “gay agenda,” and this, in turn, is associated with denial of discrimination.

We also examined whether affluence perceptions would have downstream consequences by measuring participants’ reactions to

<sup>3</sup>There was no significant relationship between condition and familiarity or political orientation ( $p$ 's > 0.717), and so it is not the case that these measures were impacted by the manipulation or that there was a systematic imbalance in their distribution across conditions. It appears that the inclusion of these variables simply reduced enough noise such that the effect of condition on discrimination denial (which was trending in the predicted direction in Step 1) crossed the threshold for statistical significance.

an anti-gay bullying scenario. We did not find that our affluence manipulation affected this, but we did find correlational support, such that (1) denial of discrimination is positively and significantly associated with anti-gay bullying tolerance (replicating past work; Katz et al., 2019), and (2) people who rated gay people as more affluent are more likely to show tolerance in an anti-gay bullying incident. This latter effect held even after adjusting for anti-gay attitudes, and was mediated by denial of discrimination.

In sum, the findings from this study are in line with predictions. Studies 2 and 3 together reveal consistent support for the same mediation model (see Figure 2). Nevertheless, we were disappointed that we failed to obtain a reliable main effect of condition (rich vs. control) on our primary outcome variable, denial of discrimination, without including adjustment variables in the model. In order to increase our confidence in the results reported here, we conducted an internal meta-analysis examining the impact of condition across Studies 2 and 3.

## 6 | INTERNAL META-ANALYSIS

We conducted two internal meta-analyses of the two studies that manipulated gay affluence (Studies 2 and 3)—one comparing the “rich” versus “poor” condition, and one comparing the “rich” versus control condition—to estimate the overall effect of experimental condition on denial of discrimination using the statistical package *metafor* (Viechtbauer, 2010).

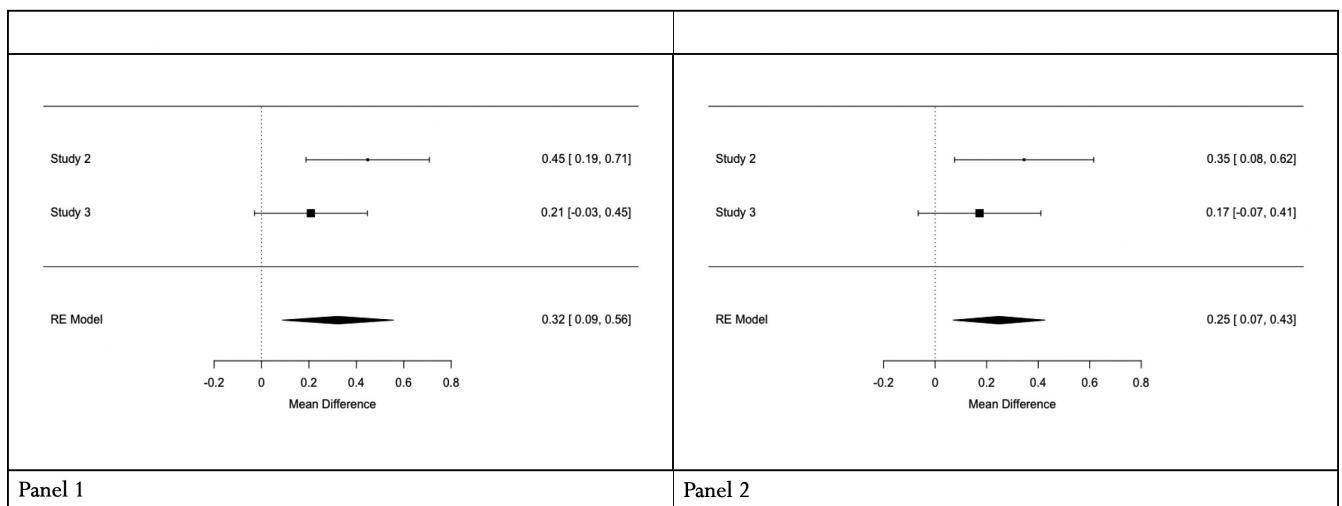
The first meta-analysis revealed participants were more likely to deny discrimination in the gay rich (vs. gay poor) condition,  $M_{\text{difference}} = 0.32$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ; 95% CI = [0.09, 0.56],  $p = .007$  (see Panel 1, Figure 3). The second meta-analysis showed that participants were significantly more likely to deny discrimination against LGBT people in the gay rich (vs. control) condition,  $M_{\text{difference}} = 0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ; 95% CI = [0.07, 0.43],  $p < .006$  (see Panel 2, Figure 3).

Thus, the cumulative evidence supports the prediction that gay rich (vs. gay poor or control) condition leads to higher denial of discrimination against gay and lesbian community.

## 7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Results from three studies support the predictions that perceptions of gay affluence can lead participants to believe that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is no longer a problem, and this in part because they make people more likely to believe that there is a gay political agenda that is backed by powerful lobbyists. In Study 1, we tested this correlationally (but varied whether participants were rating gay men vs. lesbian women), and found that, for both gay men and lesbian women, perceptions of affluence were positively associated with denial of discrimination, even after adjusting for anti-gay (or anti-lesbian) attitudes, and this association was significantly (but not completely) reduced by belief in the “gay agenda.” In Studies 2 and 3, we experimentally manipulated affluence, and found that those who were told gay men and lesbian women were affluent (as compared to those told that gay people were not affluent or those told nothing about gay people's economic situation) did not increase in anti-gay attitudes, but were more likely to believe in a gay agenda, and in turn, more likely to deny that discrimination against sexual minorities is a problem. In both studies, the indirect effect of the affluence manipulation on denial of discrimination through belief in the gay agenda was significant. However, these were partial mediations, insofar as there was also a significant direct effect of affluence on discrimination denial, suggesting that perceiving gay people as more affluent leads to more discrimination denial, even in the absence of gay agenda beliefs.

In Study 3, we also presented participants with a scenario that depicted a man being bullied by another man for being perceived as gay and measured their reactions to it. Although we



**FIGURE 3** Forest plot (Meta-analyses) of experimental condition effect on denial of discrimination. Panel 1 refers to Gay rich condition versus Poor condition. Panel 2 refers to Gay rich condition versus Control condition

did not find the predicted effect that those in the high (vs. low or no) affluence condition would be more tolerant of anti-gay bullying, our correlational analyses were in line with this, such that perceived affluence scores were positively associated with tolerance for anti-gay bullying, even after adjusting for anti-gay attitudes. We further found that denial of discrimination significantly mediated the association between affluence perceptions and tolerance for bullying.

Only a handful of other studies have empirically examined the myth of gay affluence (i.e., Hettinger & Vandello, 2014; Wilkinson, 2019), and the current work is the first research that we are aware of which has experimentally manipulated these beliefs and examined their downstream consequences. Many scholars have expressed concern about the potential negative consequences of the myth of gay affluence for the gay community (e.g., Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; McGarrity, 2014), and the current research offers empirical evidence that validates this concern. As shown also by previous corroborating correlational research (Hettinger & Vandello, 2014), our experimental data suggest that the perception that gay men and lesbian women are more affluent than the average person could impact people's support for the gay rights movement, insofar as it lessens the degree to which people believe sexual minorities are a target for discrimination. Therefore, perpetuating this myth—either intentionally or inadvertently—could have deleterious effects on efforts for social change and the promotion of rights for sexual minorities. For instance, representations of gay people in advertisements and the media are predominantly affluent (well-educated, White, and male; Baxter, 2010; Bowes, 1996; Ginder & Byun, 2015). Even though studies have shown that exposure to gay characters in popular culture has led to increased acceptance of the gay community (Bond & Compton, 2015; Bonds-Raacke et al., 2007), these characters could also be having a negative impact, insofar as they may be reinforcing the myth of gay affluence, and perhaps leading people to think that discrimination against sexual minorities is no longer a problem.

Results from our studies also showed that telling people that gay people were “poor”—i.e., less well off than the average person—did not make them more willing to acknowledge discrimination, nor did it make them less likely to believe in a well-funded “gay agenda.” This is not bad news, insofar as it implies that gay people do not have to be perceived as “down and out” in order to garner support for equal treatment. It does suggest, however, that attempts to debunk the myth of gay affluence by highlighting poverty within the gay community may not have any sway on people's attitudes and beliefs.

The reality of the economic lives of gay men and lesbian women is often difficult to assess. One often-cited finding is that lesbian women earned about 9% more than their straight counterparts (Klawitter, 2015), but these estimates vary widely across studies, with some studies showing that lesbian (vs. straight) women earn up to 43% more, and others finding that they earn up to 25% less (Badgett et al., 2009; Klawitter, 2015). Meta-analyses have found that gay men earn about 11% less than straight men (Klawitter, 2015). One

recent paper claimed that this sexuality wage gap among men had reversed, showing that self-identified gay men earned approximately 10% more annually than their heterosexual counterparts (Carpenter & Eppink, 2017). However, this study only compared salaries of those who were employed, and recent reports find gay (vs. straight) men are more likely to be unemployed (Laurent & Mihoubi, 2017), presumably, at least in part, because they face hiring discrimination (Tilcsik, 2011).

A recent report by the Williams Institute (Badgett et al., 2019) found that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals collectively have a poverty rate of 21.6%, which is higher than the rate for cisgender straight people (15.7%). They found no income differences between lesbian (17.9%) and straight (17.8%) cisgender women, but both groups have higher poverty rates than gay (12.1%) and straight (13.4%) cisgender men (Badgett et al., 2019). Taken together, the data do not suggest that gay men and lesbian women are a particularly affluent group.

In line with this reality, the participants in our studies did not think that gay people were especially affluent—i.e., the means of affluence ratings were all around the scale midpoint, which is consistent with previous work (Hettinger & Vandello, 2014; Wilkinson, 2019). Presumably, accusations of gay affluence could be used strategically—such as to discredit the gay rights movement, as Justice Scalia did—and could also become more (or less) salient in response to perceptions of threat (Wilkinson, 2019). In the current research, we examined and found evidence supporting a specific causal pathway—namely, that perceptions of affluence lead people to deny discrimination—but this does not exclude the possibility that the other direction could be true, as well. That is, it is plausible that people who are motivated to maintain an unequal status quo might be more likely to perceive gay people as affluent (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Jost & Banaji, 1994), at least to the extent that it lessens the perception of anti-gay discrimination and thus reduces support for gay rights. This could create a vicious cycle, such that some people might be more likely to remember affluent (vs. non-affluent) gay people, which would then reinforce their belief that discrimination against gay men and lesbian women is not a problem.

This process may not be limited to heterosexual people. Previous work examining the denial of discrimination *among* sexual minorities has demonstrated that gay men and lesbian women who deny (vs. acknowledge) that their group is a target for discrimination are happier and healthier, and this is explained by perceptions that the system is fair (Suppes et al., 2019; see also Napier et al., 2020; Napier et al., 2020). Thus, it is conceivable that gay men and lesbian women who are motivated to perceive the system as fair and unbiased against their group may also be more likely to perpetuate the idea that their group is a relatively affluent one. Indeed, we found no differences in the pattern of our results whether non-heterosexual respondents were included or excluded. This is at least consistent with the notion that these processes could be present regardless of people's sexual orientation, but more formal comparisons (using larger samples of non-heterosexual respondents) would be needed to make this claim.

## 7.1 | Limitations and future directions

Although our research presents several strengths, there are some limitations to consider. First, the experimental studies are limited to an American cultural context; Study 1 involved participants from the USA and UK, and thus is also limited to an Anglo/Western context. It remains to be seen whether the same findings also hold in different cultures. It would be interesting to test whether our model works the same in non-Western countries. Insofar as non-heterosexuality is considered a “Western” phenomenon in many contexts (e.g., Dalacoura, 2014; Pandey, 2018), it is possible that the belief in the myth of gay affluence is much stronger in certain places, at least to the extent that being gay is associated with Western values perceived as indulgent (e.g., individualism, capitalism, etc.).

A second limitation is that our studies relied on online samples, which are typically more liberal than the general population and subjected to social desirability (Clifford et al., 2015). Thus, the extent to which individuals endorse the myth of gay affluence might be lower in our samples compared to the general population. At the same time, we do find that perceptions of affluence lead to denial of discrimination, even among this relatively liberal group of participants, making this a fairly conservative test of our hypothesis.

Finally, in our studies, we assessed people's beliefs about “gay men” and “lesbian women”—labels that probably primed images of cisgender individuals. Thus, the results of this research are unlikely to generalize to the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. It would be an interesting endeavor to better understand whether stereotypes of gay people—including affluence stereotypes—are especially applied to cisgender gay men and lesbian women. Non-binary individuals and transgender men and women are especially at risk of poverty (Badgett et al., 2019). It is possible that stereotypes about “gay affluence” stem from, and perpetuate, the invisibility of gender minorities.

Another question for future research is whether these results are specific to sexual minorities, or if the perception of affluence among *any* minority group might lead people to believe that that group is backed by powerful lobbyists. In Study 2, we included a condition that framed Korean-Americans (a relatively affluent group) as non-affluent, but we did not include an affluent Korean-American condition. Because Korean-Americans are not thought of as a particularly political group, we think it is unlikely that making salient their affluence would increase belief in a Korean-American political agenda (although it is possible it could reduce perceptions of discrimination). We suspect that affluence alone is not sufficient to make a group appear to have powerful political backing, and that there would need to be some type of threat (perhaps especially symbolic threat) associated with the group.

## 7.2 | Concluding remarks

The contention that discrimination against a disadvantaged group is no longer a problem is a defining feature of modern forms of prejudice, and is a strong predictor of opposition to policies aimed

to equalize group statuses (e.g., Sears & Henry, 2005). Modern prejudices are particularly robust because they allow people to maintain a self-image as someone who values fairness and equality, while also bolstering and maintaining existing hierarchies (Knowles et al., 2014; Myrdal, 1944). The denial of discrimination against sexual minorities has the potential to severely hamper progress insofar as it manages to undermine the fight for equal rights by reframing it as a demand for “special rights” (Vescio et al., 2017). Our studies demonstrate that simply portraying gay people as affluent, even in the absence of anti-gay attitudes, can evoke this dangerous belief. This suggests that the gay rights movement could face challenges not just from those who hold explicitly homonegative attitudes, but also from those who espouse seemingly positive attitudes toward gay people, but think that discrimination is “over.”

Of course, discrimination against gay men and lesbian women, including cisgender individuals in the United States, is far from over (cf. Kirchick, 2019). A recent report (Meyer, 2019) found that 41% of American cisgender lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) respondents (vs. 14% of cisgender straight respondents) have experienced episodes of bullying before age 18. LGB individuals with relatively low socioeconomic status are especially at risk of experiencing discrimination and marginalization, insofar as they tend to reside in more hostile environments, face stricter standards for gender conformity, and be more isolated from the greater gay community (McGarrity, 2014). Experiences of discrimination take a measurable mental and physical toll on the well-being of non-heterosexual individuals, and can explain, at least in part, the relatively high levels of psychological distress, psychiatric disorders, substance abuse, and deliberate self-harm and suicide in the gay community (Burgess et al., 2007; Haas et al., 2011; Hatzenbuehler, 2014; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010; Meyer, 2003).

Gay people face substantial risks due to discrimination, regardless of their economic standing. Indeed, gay individuals with lower socioeconomic status are especially vulnerable to discrimination (McGarrity, 2014). These statistics highlight the continued need for activism, education, equal rights promotion, and protection. The current work demonstrates that seemingly innocuous images of gay people as affluent could lead people to disregard these needs, and thus allow inequality to perpetuate. Justice Scalia's dissent is a concrete example of how one could use the myth of gay affluence to cast doubt on whether sexual minorities are a target for prejudice, and even as a reason to deny gay men and women protection from discrimination.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome

### ETHICAL APPROVAL

Authors confirm that the manuscript adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the APA code of Conduct as well as authors' national



ethics guidelines. The entire research has been conducted ethically, results are reported honestly, the submitted work is original and not (self-)plagiarized, and authorship reflects individuals' contributions.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data files can be accessed through this link: <https://osf.io/u2z4b/>

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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