

# Gay On-Screen: The Relationship Between Exposure to Gay Characters on Television and Heterosexual Audiences' Endorsement of Gay Equality

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*The current study, grounded in the parasocial contact hypothesis, employed a survey of emerging adults to investigate the relationship between exposure to gay characters on television and heterosexuals' endorsement of gay equality. A positive relationship existed between exposure to on-screen gay characters and gay equality endorsement. The relationship was stronger for racial minority participants than for White participants, and for participants who had no or few interpersonal relationships with openly gay individuals than for participants who had more than three respective relationships. Results are discussed in terms of the parasocial contact hypothesis and television as an agent of social change.*

Discrimination toward gay men and women still occurs with regularity in American society. Bullying creates hostile environments for gay youth (Cooper & Blumenfeld, 2012), heterosexism in the workplace causes low levels of job satisfaction among gay employees (Velez & Moradi, 2012), housing discrimination can prevent gay adults from acquiring suitable living spaces (Christafore & Leguizamon, 2012), and older gay adults living in retirement homes experience discrimination that instills fear and prevents health-related needs from being met (Comfort et al., 2009). Even though discrimination is a very real threat for gay individuals, there has been a dramatic increase in heterosexuals' endorsement of gay equality, a variable most often defined as a multidimensional construct consisting of supportive attitudes toward various social and legal issues facing gay men and women (Levina, Waldo, & Fitzgerald, 2000). In a cohort analysis of public opinion data, Keleher

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and Smith (2012) argued that growing support for gay equality may be explained by a generational shift; as the older, more conservative generation declines, it is being replaced with a younger, more accepting population. Endorsement of gay equality has not just increased, but has shifted significantly faster than public opinion about other minority groups over similar time periods (Schafer & Shaw, 2009). Discrimination based on sexual orientation has yet to be extinguished, but public endorsement of gay equality grows while homophobia wanes. As such, interest lies in the socio-environmental factors that could alleviate homophobia while simultaneously maintaining heterosexuals' growing endorsement of gay equality. One such factor is the depiction of gay individuals on television (Gross, 2001).

Television's depiction of gay characters may play a role in creating, reinforcing, or altering heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay individuals and the social and legal issues they face (Levina et al., 2000; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). Given that depictions of gay characters on television have evolved in recent years (Bond, 2014; GLAAD, 2013; Streitmatter, 2009), the current study's objective was to examine the relationship between exposure to gay characters on television and endorsement of gay equality using cross-sectional survey data collected from a sample of heterosexual emerging adults. Emerging adults (i.e., 18- to 25-year-olds) are of particular interest because they may be highly sensitive to media messages about gay sexualities given the salience of sex and sexuality during this developmental transition period (Arnett, 2000).

## Television's Role in Endorsement of Gay Equality

An *Entertainment Weekly* special report on the portrayal of gay characters on television concluded that young, gay characters were changing the hearts and minds of American audiences because audiences were invested in the characters, regardless of their sexual identities (Armstrong, 2014). In May of 2012, Joe Biden shocked the American public by expressing his acceptance of same-sex marriage on national television. As the sitting Vice President of the United States, Biden became the highest ranking public official to openly support same-sex marriage at the time, attributing an increase in support for gay equality to the situation comedy *Will & Grace*. Biden noted that the show's focus on the everyday lives of gay men likely did more to educate people about gay individuals than anything else in society. Empirical research reinforces the basic premise of the arguments proposed by *Entertainment Weekly* and Joe Biden, concluding that television may play a role in heterosexual audiences' perceptions of gay men and women and the issues that they face.

Ortiz and Harwood (2007) found that exposure to *Will & Grace* was negatively correlated with perceived social distance between gay and straight people in a survey of heterosexual college students. In an experimental study, heterosexual participants were shown a video that portrayed gay individuals in a positive or negative manner (Levina et al., 2000). Ten to 14 days later, participants responded to

items measuring attitudes toward gay individuals and social issues. The researchers found that participants who had viewed the positive video were significantly more likely to hold positive attitudes toward gay individuals and those who viewed the negative video were significantly more likely to hold negative views. Results of the study suggested that exposure to gay characters on-screen can increase positive attitudes toward gay individuals beyond the time of exposure. Though these results are insightful, the study was limited because participants were only shown one video at one point in time. Schiappa and colleagues (2005) moved beyond a single-exposure design when they examined college students' attitudes toward gay individuals after repeated exposure to *Six Feet Under*, a television program depicting a gay male couple. Participants' attitudes toward gay men significantly increased after a 5-week media diet consisting of *Six Feet Under*, suggesting that over-time exposure to televised gay individuals can alter heterosexuals' attitudes. The authors argued that the results reinforced the assumptions of the parasocial contact hypothesis.

### Parasocial Contact Hypothesis

The parasocial contact hypothesis stems from intergroup contact theory. Intergroup contact theory assumes that stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination of a social minority can be reduced when members of the majority engage in interpersonal contact with members of the respective social minority (Allport, 1954). In essence, the theory predicts that interpersonal interactions between heterosexual and gay individuals would increase positive attitudes toward gay sexualities among the heterosexual individuals engaging in the interpersonal interactions. Studies have reinforced the primary prediction of the intergroup contact hypothesis, especially with regards to the heterosexual-gay dyad (Herek, 1986; Herek & Capitano, 1996; Herek & Glunt, 1993; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Optimal intergroup contact can be challenging, as anxiety and hostility are common feelings that hinder intergroup contact (Stephan & Stephan, 1984). Anxiety and hostility that act as barriers to intergroup contact could be removed if the majority group experiences intergroup contact vicariously rather than in-person. The vicarious intergroup contact that can occur via television has been coined the parasocial contact hypothesis (Schiappa et al., 2005). The parasocial contact hypothesis predicts that television viewers will form impressions and relationships with television characters similar to those that they form with real-life others. In turn, exposure to social minorities on television may have a similar effect in reducing stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination as real-life intergroup contact (Schiappa et al., 2005). That is, "if we can learn from televised characters representing distinct social groups, then it is possible that parasocial contact could influence attitudes about such groups in a manner consistent with the influence of direct intergroup contact" (Schiappa et al., 2005, p. 97). If the parasocial contact hypothesis predicts that exposure to gay characters on television could serve as a vehicle for heterosex-

ual audiences to identify with and learn about gay individuals, then a preliminary step to examining correlations between television exposure and attitudes toward gay sexualities would be dissecting the frequency and quality of depictions of gay sexualities on television.

## **Media's Depiction of Gay Characters**

Content analytic research has consistently concluded that gay men and women are significantly underrepresented in television programming when compared to estimated prevalence rates of gay individuals in American society (Fouts & Inch, 2005; Raley & Lucas, 2006). When gay characters are portrayed on television, they have traditionally been depicted through stereotypes, mocking, or jokes in an effort to provoke laughter from a predominantly heterosexual audience (Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Raley & Lucas, 2006). Moreover, gay characters are rarely shown engaging in on-screen sexual behaviors that would visibly represent their same-sex attractions (Bond, 2014; Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2007).

Though gay characters have traditionally been portrayed for comic relief, television is experiencing a transition similar to the shift in public attitudes toward gay individuals. GLAAD examines the frequency of gay characters on television programs before the start of every fall television season. An analysis of the 2012–2013 season found that 4.4% of regularly appearing television characters were lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender compared to just 1.1% of characters 5 years earlier (GLAAD, 2013). Gay characters are not only being depicted more frequently, but also are written into a wider variety of roles than ever before (Raley & Lucas, 2006). One recent content analysis found that talk about gay sexualities on television has not only increased over an 8 year period, but is twice as likely to be validating in nature than demeaning, and is occurring with greater frequency on television than in film, song lyrics, music videos, or magazines (Bond, 2014).

The slow but progressive inclusion of gay characters on television may, at least in part, be driven by economic forces. Becker (2006) argues that young, active, and socially liberal consumers want to develop brand loyalty with socially conscious companies. For television networks, depicting gay characters may be a convenient signal to show just how open-minded media producers and their advertisers are as they seek out this sought after demographic in an intensely competitive market.

Gay characters are not the only characters talking about gay sexualities and social issues. Though Fouts and Inch (2005) found that heterosexual characters did not engage in discussions about sexual orientation as often as gay characters, more recent research suggests that heterosexual characters are not only discussing sexual orientation, but are engaging in talk about gay sexualities more than gay characters (Bond, 2014). If television is depicting gay characters more frequently and depicting heterosexual characters engaged in talk about gay sexualities, then opportunities are ripe for audiences to view heterosexual-gay intergroup contact on-screen. Greater

exposure to televised depictions of gay characters may then alter perceptions about gay individuals as predicted by the parasocial contact hypothesis. On-screen intergroup contact will allow viewers to vicariously engage and connect with gay characters, subsequently increasing audiences' endorsement of gay equality.

## The Current Study

Cross-sectional survey methods were used to investigate the relationship between exposure to gay-inclusive television and endorsement of gay equality. A measure of motivation to seek out gay-inclusive television programs was included in the questionnaire. Researchers have measured and controlled for participants' motivation to consume media, often referred to as selective exposure, in an effort to make stronger causal claims with correlational data (Chaffee & McLeod, 1971). If exposure to gay characters on television significantly contributes to endorsement of gay equality even after controlling for participants' motivation to seek out gay-inclusive television programs, then the relationship between television exposure and gay equality endorsement likely exist for reasons other than the reverse causation explanation: individuals who more strongly endorse gay equality seek out gay-inclusive television. As such, motivation for consuming gay-inclusive television programs was controlled in the present study.

H<sub>1</sub>: A positive relationship will exist between exposure to gay characters on television and endorsement of gay equality even when controlling for motivation to seek out gay-inclusive television programs.

In line with intergroup contact theory, the frequency of real-life interactions with gay individuals is related to stronger endorsement of gay equality (Garner, 2013). Schiappa and colleagues (2005) claim parasocial contact with a social minority is even more likely to reduce prejudice among those in the majority who have limited interpersonal contact with members of the social minority. That is, the influence of mediated depictions of gay individuals should be stronger among heterosexuals who lack real-life interactions with gay individuals than those who engage in real-life interactions with gay individuals.

H<sub>2</sub>: The positive relationship between exposure to gay characters on television and endorsement of gay equality will be stronger for participants who do not have interpersonal relationships with openly gay individuals than for participants who do have interpersonal relationships with openly gay individuals.

Identification with media characters is an important variable in the parasocial contact hypothesis (Schiappa et al., 2005). Thus, an additional variable that warrants attention as a possible moderator is race. Heterosexual racial minority audiences may have more difficulty finding "common ground" with gay characters because

gay characters on television are likely to be White. Fouts & Inch (2005) found only one gay racial minority character in their analysis of 125 television characters and GLAAD (2013) recently reported that 70% of gay characters on television were White. If heterosexual racial minority audiences have difficulty seeing themselves as similar in some way to televised gay characters, they are less likely to experience meaningful vicarious intergroup contact (Schiappa et al., 2005).

H<sub>3</sub>: The positive relationship between exposure to gay characters on television and endorsement of gay equality will be stronger for White participants than for racial minority participants.

## Methods

### Sample

Participants ( $N = 342$ ) were recruited from introductory communication classes at a large Midwestern university and were offered extra credit as compensation for completing the survey. Participants were 18 to 23 years old ( $M = 19.39$ ,  $SD = .96$ ), an age range characterized by change and exploration when viewers are highly likely to attend to and learn from televised depictions of sex and sexualities (Arnett, 2000). Most participants were female (76%) and identified as White or Caucasian (64%). Thirteen percent identified as Asian American, 11% as Black or African American, 8% as Latino or Hispanic, and 4% identified as another race. Given the objective of the current study to examine heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay individuals, 7 additional participants were removed from the sample because they reported non-heterosexual identities. The sample size exceeded the minimum required to achieve a power level of .90 (Cohen, 1988) based on previous research correlating television exposure with attitudes toward gay individuals reporting effect sizes around .20 (Schiappa et al., 2005).

### Procedures

A Web-based questionnaire was employed in the current study because research suggests that participants tend to be more open and honest in their responses on Web-based questionnaires than on paper-and-pencil questionnaires, especially when the questionnaire contains items measuring sensitive or socially taboo variables like attitudes toward sexualities (Wright, Aquilino, & Supple, 1998). Following face-to-face recruitment announcements, students were sent an email that included a link to the online survey. Once participants provided electronic consent, they navigated to the online questionnaire, which took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Following completion, participants were provided with a 10-digit code that they redeemed for extra credit in their respective classes.

## Measures

*Gay Equality Endorsement.* The Gay and Lesbian Social Issues Scale (Levina et al., 2000) was used to measure participants' overall endorsement of gay equality. The measure was used because it respects the multidimensional nature of gay equality, defining endorsement of gay equality as attitudes toward various legal and social policy issues rather than as simply acceptance of same-sex relationships, a common unidimensional operationalization in previous research (Keleher & Smith, 2012; Shafer & Shaw, 2009). The 5-item scale measures attitudes toward gay and lesbian adoption, marriage, sexual consent, military service, and association with children ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Sample items include, "The idea of same-sex marriage seems ridiculous to me" (reverse coded) and "Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to adopt children the same as heterosexual couples." Each of the five items was rated by participants on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Mean scores were calculated so that higher scores represented stronger endorsement of gay equality,  $M = 3.71$  ( $SD = .94$ ).

### *Overall TV Exposure.*

Participants reported the number of hours that they usually spend with television on a "typical school day," on Saturday, and on Sunday. The responses were then used to create a weekly score ( $[5 \times \text{typical school day}] + \text{Saturday} + \text{Sunday}$ ) to measure overall television exposure. Scores were then divided by seven to represent the average number of hours per day that participants spend with television. Scores ranged from 1 hour per day to 9 hours per day,  $M = 2.62$ , ( $SD = 1.60$ ).

### *Gay TV Exposure.*

The advocacy organization GLAAD releases an annual white paper titled, "Where are we now?" that details the depiction of gay characters on both network and cable television. On a scale of 1 (*never*) to 6 (*more than once a week*), participants reported how often they viewed the television programs that were noted in the GLAAD (2011) report as having at least one regular leading or supporting gay character ( $\alpha = .71$ ). Mean scores were calculated so that higher scores represented a higher likelihood of exposure to gay characters on television,  $M = 1.94$  ( $SD = .70$ ).

### *Motivation.*

In an effort to control for participants' motivation to seek out gay-inclusive media, participants read short descriptions of ten fictitious television programs and then reported the likelihood that they would watch the television program on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*extremely unlikely*) to 5 (*extremely likely*). For example, participants were asked if they would watch "a new television show about crime." Of the 10 fictitious television programs listed on the questionnaire, 4 were gay-specific. A motivation score was created by summing participants' responses to the

4 items directly related to the gay community ( $\alpha = .79$ ). This method of measuring motivation is consistent with previous research attempting to control for motivation in cross-sectional data analyses (Chaffee & McLeod, 1971).

#### *Demographics and Religiosity.*

Single items were used to measure age, sex, and race. In addition, participants were asked to report their own sexual orientations and to respond to the following item on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*none*) to 5 (*many*): "How many family members, friends, or colleagues do you have in your life who identify as gay or lesbian?" This item was used to test for interactions based on interpersonal relationships with gay individuals, referred to in the results as gay relations. Participants were also asked to indicate their responses to three questions measuring religiosity ( $\alpha = .86$ ): "How religious are you," "How often do you pray," and "How often do you attend religious services?" Possible responses ranged from 1 (*not at all/never*) to 5 (*very/very regularly*). Mean scores were calculated so that higher scores represented stronger religiosity,  $M = 2.67$  ( $SD = 1.07$ ).

## Results

Participants reported spending almost 3 hours per day watching television ( $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ), a finding consistent with previous research using nationally-representative samples (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Nearly 10% of the sample ( $n = 33$ ) reported that they had never watched a single television program inclusive of a gay character. Additionally, 38% of the participants ( $n = 130$ ) reported that they did not have any gay or lesbian family members, friends, or colleagues.

Hierarchical regression was used to test the direct relationship between exposure to gay characters on television (referred to as gay TV exposure in the analyses) and endorsement of gay equality, and to examine any interactions between exposure and age, race, and interpersonal relationships as proposed in the hypotheses. To combat multicollinearity, all variables were mean centered before data analysis. Covariates were entered onto the first block. After removing these possible sources of variance, the second block contained gay TV exposure as a predictor variable. The third block of the regression model consisted of two-way interactions to test for moderators.

The first hypothesis predicted that a positive relationship would exist between gay TV exposure and endorsement of gay equality. This relationship was expected to persist even after controlling for participants' motivation to seek out gay-inclusive television programs. The first block, containing the covariates as predictor variables, significantly contributed to participants' endorsement of gay equality,  $F(7, 334) = 23.41$ ,  $p < .001$ . Females were more likely than males to endorse gay equality ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and White participants were more likely than racial minority participants to endorse gay equality ( $\beta = -.16$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Participants who reported



less religiosity ( $\beta = -.27, p < .001$ ) and participants who reported having interpersonal relationships with gay individuals ( $\beta = .18, p < .001$ ) were also more likely to endorse gay equality. Overall television exposure was not correlated with endorsement of gay equality ( $\beta = -.08, p = .13$ ). Adding gay TV exposure to the regression significantly improved the model,  $F_{\text{change}}(1, 333) = 14.91, p < .001$  (see Table 1). The first hypothesis was supported; a significant relationship existed between gay TV exposure and endorsement of gay equality ( $\beta = .22, p < .001$ ) even after controlling for participants' motivation to seek out gay-inclusive television programs.

The second hypothesis predicted that the positive relationship between gay TV exposure and endorsement of gay equality would be stronger for participants who did not have interpersonal relationships with gay individuals than for participants who did have interpersonal relationships with gay individuals. The interaction term between gay TV exposure and gay relations was significant ( $\beta = -.09, p < .05$ ).

**Table 1**  
Summary of Hierarchal Regression Analysis Predicting Endorsement of Gay Equality

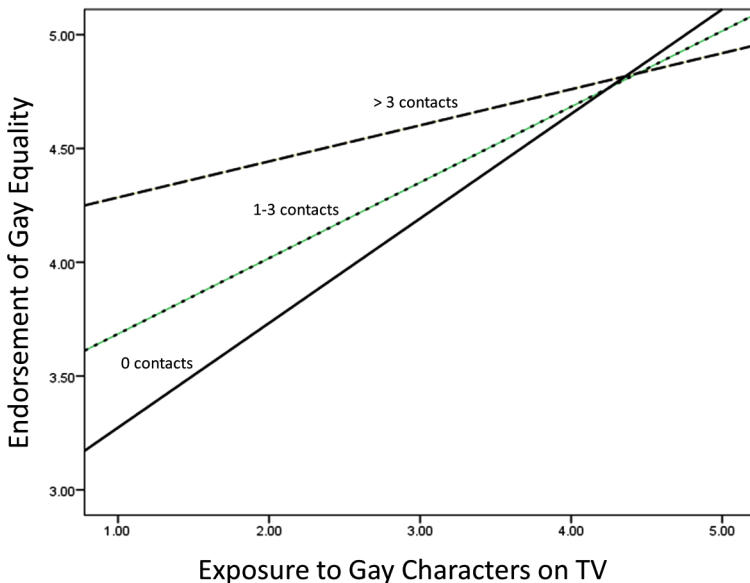
	B	SE	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Block 1				.33***
Age	.04	.04	.04	
Sex	.30	.11	.15**	
Race	-.28	.09	-.16**	
Religiosity	-.21	.04	-.27***	
Gay Relations	.23	.06	.18***	
Motivation	.22	.04	.27***	
Overall TV Exposure	-.01	.00	-.08	
Block 2				.03***
Gay TV Exposure	.24	.06	.22***	
Block 3				.02
Gay TV Exposure * Age	-.09	.05	-.07	
Gay TV Exposure * Sex	.15	.16	.05	
Gay TV Exposure * Race	.24	.11	.10*	
Gay TV Exposure * Religiosity	-.03	.05	-.02	
Gay TV Exposure * Gay Relations	-.14	.08	-.09*	
Gay TV Exposure * Motivation	-.03	.06	-.03	

Note. Age (1 = 18–20, 2 = 21–23), sex (1 = male, 2 = female), and race (1 = White, 2 = racial minority) were dichotomously coded. Gay relations was coded as 0 = no gay relationships, 1 = 1–3 gay relationships, 2 = more than 3 gay relationships) All coefficients are from the final model, \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Three-way interactions were also examined; no three-way interaction terms were significant so they were removed from the final model to preserve power.

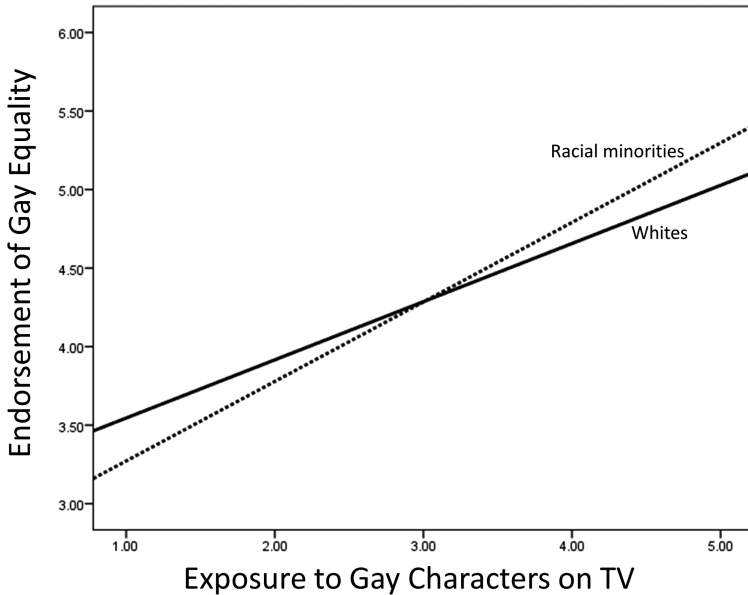
When the interaction is diagrammed, it becomes clear that the relationship between gay TV exposure and gay equality endorsement was weaker among participants who reported having more than three interpersonal relationships with gay individuals ( $\beta = .18, p = .21$ ) than participants who reported no interpersonal relationships with gay individuals ( $\beta = .35, p < .01$ ) or few interpersonal relationships with gay characters ( $\beta = .36, p < .01$ , see Figure 1). The second hypothesis was partially supported; having interpersonal relationships with gay individuals moderated the relationship between gay TV exposure and endorsement of gay equality. The strength of the association between gay TV exposure and endorsement of gay equality was practically identical among participants who had no interpersonal relationships with gay individuals and participants who had a few interpersonal relationships with gay individuals. The relationship was stronger, however, for these participants than for participants who had many interpersonal relationships with gay individuals.

The third hypothesis predicted that the positive relationship between gay TV exposure and endorsement of gay equality would be stronger for White participants

**Figure 1**  
**Graphical Representation of the Interaction Between Exposure to Gay Characters on Television and Knowing Gay Individuals on Gay Equality Endorsement. Solid Line Represents Participants Who Have No Interpersonal Relationships With Gay Individuals, Dotted Line Represents Participants Who Have 1–3 Interpersonal Relationships With Gay Individuals, And Dashed Line Represents Participants Who Have More Than 3 Interpersonal Relationships With Gay Individuals.**



**Figure 2**  
**Graphical Representation of the Interaction Between Exposure to Gay Characters on Television and Race on Gay Equality Endorsement. Dotted Line Represents Racial Minority Participants; Solid Line Represents White Participants.**



than for racial minority participants. The interaction between gay TV exposure and race was significant ( $\beta = .10, p < .05$ ). Contrary to prediction, the interaction suggests that the relationship between gay TV exposure and endorsement of gay equality was slightly stronger for racial minority participants ( $\beta = .31, p < .01$ ) than for White participants ( $\beta = .29, p < .01$ , see Figure 2). The third hypothesis was not supported; race moderated the relationship between gay TV exposure and endorsement of gay equality, but in the opposite direction as predicted.

## Discussion

The objective of the present study was to examine the relationship between exposure to gay characters on television and heterosexual viewers' endorsement of gay equality. A positive relationship existed between viewing gay characters on television and endorsement of gay equality even when controlling for variables known to influence attitudes toward gay men and women (i.e., sex, age, race, religiosity, and interpersonal relationships with gay individuals). Overall television exposure was not related to endorsement of gay equality; only exposure to programs

inclusive of gay characters was significantly correlated with endorsement of gay equality. Exposure to gay characters on television remained a significant contributor to endorsement of gay equality even when controlling for motivation to seek out gay-inclusive television, measured in an attempt to control for selective exposure. This finding weakens arguments for reverse causation between the predictor variable and the outcome variable; it is less likely that viewers who are already strong supporters of gay equality seek out gay-inclusive television programs. The inclusion of motivation in the regression model does not establish causality, but it does strengthen the claim that exposure to gay characters on television influences viewers' endorsement of gay equality.

The relationship between exposure to gay characters on television and endorsement of gay equality was stronger for participants who had no or few interpersonal relationships with gay individuals than for participants who had more than three interpersonal relationships with gay individuals. Contact with multiple gay individuals seems to stimulate shifts in attitudes among heterosexuals consistent with intergroup contact theory. Herek and Capitanio (1996) found that heterosexual participants who had at least three gay contacts reported more positive attitudes toward gay individuals than those with fewer than three gay contacts. The researchers concluded that interpersonal relationships with multiple gay individuals likely increases endorsement of gay equality because multiple contacts provide heterosexuals with a better understanding of the variability that exists among gay people while simultaneously diminishing the likelihood that only one or two gay contacts could be deemed atypical of gay people more generally. Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes (2006) found that exposure to *Will & Grace* was most strongly correlated with level of prejudice toward gay men among participants with fewer than three real-life openly gay friends. Once participants in the current study had more than three interpersonal relationships with gay individuals, the influence of televised depictions of gay characters waned similar to previous research (Schiappa et al., 2006). Interpersonal interactions with more than three openly gay family members, friends, or colleagues may provide sufficient contact with gay individuals for heterosexuals to feel strongly connected to and knowledgeable about gay people, lifestyles, and cultures. For participants who reported more than three interpersonal relationships with gay individuals, their own intergroup contact was likely responsible for their endorsement of gay equality. As stated by Schiappa and colleagues (2005) when referencing individuals with multiple real-life gay contacts, "contact has done its job already. So to speak" (p. 98). Conversely, heterosexual audiences with limited interpersonal contact with gay individuals who viewed television programs that regularly depicted gay characters were afforded the opportunity to vicariously experience heterosexual-gay intergroup contact. According to the parasocial contact hypothesis, vicarious interactions with gay characters reduced uncertainty about gay individuals among these heterosexual viewers, created feelings of connectedness to the gay characters and, in turn, increased endorsement of gay equality. The parasocial contact hypothesis was supported by the moderating role of real-life interpersonal relationships.

A fundamental assumption of the parasocial contact hypothesis is that the intergroup interactions must be positive and rewarding for the majority group member if parasocial contact is to increase positive attitudes toward the social minority (Schippa et al., 2005). This is noteworthy given findings from content analysis research that suggest gay characters on mainstream entertainment television are evolving from the targets of jokes and mocking situations (Fejes & Petrich, 1993) to more validating depictions showing gay characters in a variety of roles (Bond, 2014; Raley & Lucas, 2006). Heterosexual-gay intergroup interactions do not have to depict a stereotypical gay character as the premise of a joke in order for the interaction to be deemed positive and rewarding by heterosexual audiences. Instead, the results of the present study coupled with content analysis findings suggest that normalized gay characters interacting with heterosexual characters in validating situations may also be perceived as positive and rewarding by heterosexual audiences. These findings suggest that television producers could create messages that may have the power to validate gay viewers without threatening heterosexual audiences. Future research should continue to investigate the interwoven relationships between interpersonal relationships, media exposure to gay characters, and endorsement of gay equality to determine the audiences most vulnerable to television's messages and the threshold for television's influence on heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay sexualities.

Race also moderated the relationship between exposure to gay characters on television and endorsement of gay equality. Contrary to the third hypothesis, however, the relationship between exposure to gay characters on television and endorsement of gay equality was stronger for racial minority participants than for White participants. Research suggests that racial minority individuals tend to have generally negative views of gay individuals and are less open to interpersonal contact with gay individuals (Lewis, 2003; Waldo, 1998). If racial minority individuals are generally less open to interpersonal contact with gay individuals, then they are likely to experience anxiety and hostility when put into interpersonal situations that require intergroup contact with gay individuals, weakening the effects of said interpersonal contact (Stephan & Stephan, 1984). Television, however, serves as a safe space for experimenting with parasocial contact with gay individuals. Racial minority individuals, who are less likely to have experienced interpersonal contact with gay individuals in real life (Lewis, 2003; Waldo, 1998), may be more influenced by the vicarious experience of viewing heterosexual-gay intergroup contact on-screen than White viewers who perceive more social acceptance in engaging in real-life intergroup contact with gay individuals.

An alternative explanation focuses on the race of the televised characters rather than the race of the viewers. Black heterosexual individuals generally conceptualize gay individuals as White (Herek & Capitanio, 1995) and television typically depicts gay characters as White (GLAAD, 2013). Rothbart and John (1985) note that intergroup contact can only influence attitudes if the minority group member is viewed as typical of the social minority. If television parallels preconceived notions about the racial composition of the gay community among Black audiences, then Black audiences may be more likely to believe that televised gay characters are

representative of gay people generally. Black viewers may subsequently be more likely to apply televised heterosexual-gay intergroup contact to their attitudes toward gay individuals than White viewers.

Though the present study suggests that television may act as a social change agent regarding attitudes toward social minorities, it is not without limitations. The nature of the sample limits the generalizability of the results. The sample was predominantly female, making sex differences difficult to analyze. Additionally, the sampling procedure was cross-sectional in nature, prohibiting causal claims about the direction of the relationship between television exposure to gay characters and endorsement of gay equality. Future research should employ longitudinal panel survey designs tracking participants' exposure over time to make valid claims about causality that would add insight into the role of television messages in public opinion about gay sexualities. The present study also measured gay equality by collapsing attitudes toward gay and lesbian individuals into one measure. Bisexual and transgender individuals were absent from the measures entirely. A more nuanced understanding of heterosexuals' attitudes and endorsement of gay equality could be cultivated from future research that parses out gay and lesbian sexualities and includes variables measuring attitudes toward bisexual and transgender individuals.

Even with the noted limitations, the current study found a positive relationship between exposure to gay characters on television and endorsement of gay equality, especially for participants with no or few interpersonal relationships with gay individuals and for racial minority participants. The results from this study provide useful insight into the sexual orientation paradox that seems to exist in American society, where discrimination against gay individuals is still rampant, but acceptance and support of gay equality is increasing dramatically. Depictions of gay individuals in the media could play a vital role in diminishing discrimination against gay individuals and continuing to strengthen societal acceptance and support of gay equality.

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