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Real World vs. Media Representations of Relationships

Cassandra Thomasson

Georgia Southern University

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Real World vs. Media Representations of Relationships

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Psychology.

By
Cassandra Thomasson

Under the mentorship of Dr. Thresa Yancey

ABSTRACT

In this study, we investigated the correlations between media representation and real world views towards minority groups, specifically towards those who identify as LGBT+. To this end, participants completed questionnaires related to their personal views on real life issues, such as sexism and openness to diversity, as well as their feelings toward films featuring minority characters. Participants ($N = 119$) also watched trailers featuring, separately, LGBT+ characters, disabled characters, or characters who were neither, and rated how relatable they found the characters and how interested they were in seeing the film in its entirety. Correlations were conducted, and participants who rated themselves as holding more sexist views, and being less accepting of LGBT+ people, were less approving of the trailers featuring LGBT+ characters, while conversely those who rated themselves as being more open to ideas of diversity reported more interest in the same trailers. These results indicate that there are relationships to be explored between real life views and media preferences.

Thesis Mentor:_____

Dr. Thresa Yancey

Honors Director:_____

Dr. Steven Engel

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Department of Psychology
University Honors Program
Georgia Southern University

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Introduction

While the LGBT+ community is quite extensive, for the purposes of the current study the focus will be on lesbians, gay men, bisexual individuals, and transgender individuals. GLAAD, an organization focused on spreading awareness and acceptance of LGBT+ persons, offers definitions for the many identities belonging within this community. A gay person is an individual who is attracted to members of the same sex, and in the current study will be specified when needed as being either a gay man or a lesbian, a gay woman (GLAAD, n.d.). The definitions for bisexual and transgender are much more complex, and can vary within the community itself, but for the current study they will be as follows: A bisexual person is someone who is attracted to multiple genders ("Am I Bi?", 2013). A transgender person is someone whose "gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth" (GLAAD, n.d.). Gender identity is defined by GLAAD as a person's internal sense of gender, whether they view themselves as a man, woman, or another gender. One's assigned or biological sex is whether they were deemed male or female at birth, and is generally based on the appearance of their external genitalia (GLAAD, n.d.).

By definition, those who identify as LGBT+ are either not heterosexual or not cisgender, or both. Heterosexual refers to a person who is sexually attracted exclusively toward the opposite sex (GLAAD, n.d.). A person who is cisgender has a gender identity corresponding with assigned gender (Merriam-Webster, 2018).

Literature Review

Over the past several years, there has been an increase in both the amount of LGBT representation in media and research on the effects of this representation. This

increase has been slow, as statistics given by GLAAD can attest, and even in the 2016-2017 TV season, when social media counted case after case of LGBT+ representation, total numbers of LGBT+ characters visibly increased by only single digit amounts across television networks, and in some categories actually decreased (GLAAD, n.d.). The quality of this representation also varies. While characters are no longer restricted entirely to stereotyped villains and tragedy, these subsets still exist. Further, these stereotyped subsets sometimes dominate an outlet, as is the case with gender-nonconforming children in media, who are still portrayed overwhelmingly as tragic figures in the few instances when they do appear (Kelso, 2015).

There has long been a link between fictional portrayals and real world impact, and this is no less true with LGBT+ representation. Negative portrayals of trans women in fiction amplify existing negative attitudes toward trans women in real life (Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 2017). Solomon and Kurtz-Costes (2017) also found people who identified as heterosexual, conservative, male, and Christian were more likely to possess negative views of transgender persons compared to those who identified as non-heterosexual, liberal, female, and atheist.

Recollection of past portrayals can also have an effect on how people presently feel towards LGBT+ individuals. In general, people who recall a positive representation of LGBT+ characters later feel more positively toward real life gay people, compared to those who recall a negative representation (Bonds-Raacke, Cady, Schlegel, Harris, & Firebaugh, 2007). In addition, women overall hold a more positive view towards gay people than men (Bonds-Raacke et al., 2007).

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Media not relating directly to LGBT+ characters also affects real life views. As Perry and Snawder (2016) found, individuals who consume large quantities of religious media are more likely to oppose same-sex marriage, regardless of other factors. Within this media were both explicitly negative messages about homosexuality, as well as a continued presence of a religious group whose belief system includes opposition to homosexuality (Perry & Snawder, 2016).

The effects of representation extend beyond simple personal belief as well. A 2016 study conducted by Binder and Ward investigated how listening to heterosexist music, compared to nonheterosexist music or no music, affected men's perceptions of job applicants identified as heterosexual men or gay men. Participants who listened to heterosexist music viewed the gay applicants less favorably than the participants who had not listened to music. Furthermore, the participants who listened to heterosexist music were less willing to meet one-on-one with the gay applicants compared to the heterosexual applicants (Binder & Ward, 2016).

These studies indicate that both how LGBT+ characters are directly portrayed and the overall messages regarding homosexuality in media have lasting effects on forming and reinforcing the views people hold regarding the LGBT+ community. Furthermore, these effects extend beyond personal belief and acceptance into larger scale issues, such as marriage rights and employment. From these studies, it is clear that how LGBT+ people are portrayed in media is important not just for themselves, but for larger society as well.

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Hypotheses

The current study aimed to investigate the relationships among openness toward differing worldviews, sexism, religiosity, and stigmatizing attitudes toward LGBT persons. In addition, I investigated whether perceptions toward fictional LGBT+ characters reflected views toward real life individuals. In doing so, this study provides insight into how these factors correlate, and furthermore, whether fictional representation impacts real life acceptance toward the LGBT+ community among current college students. Specifically, the study was designed to examine the following:

1.   It was expected, based on previous literature, that participants reporting higher levels of religiosity would report higher levels of stigmatizing attitudes toward LGBT+ persons.

2.   Previous research has established a relationship between holding sexist attitudes and holding negative attitudes toward LGBT+ persons. I expected to find the same pattern in the current study, where participants reporting more sexist attitudes would hold greater stigmatizing attitudes toward LGBT+ persons.

3.   Openness is also related to perceptions of LGBT+ persons. Therefore, it was expected that participants reporting less openness would hold greater stigmatizing attitudes toward LGBT+ persons.

4.   Finally, it was expected that the views participants held of fictional LGBT+ characters would relate to their attitudes toward LGBT+ persons. Therefore, I predicted a relationship between participants' views of LGBT+ characters and their tolerance toward LGBT+ people in real life.

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Method

Participants were 130 undergraduate students from Georgia Southern University. Of the initial sample, 11 participants' data were removed due to lack of completion, leaving 119 complete recorded responses used for analyses. Both men and women participated, with 21% ($n = 25$) of the respondents identifying as men and 79% ($n = 94$) identifying as women. A gender option of "other" was available to be inclusive of additional identities; however, no participants identified as a gender other than male or female. Of the 119 participants, 84.9% ($n = 101$) identified as heterosexual, 3.4% ($n = 4$) identified as homosexual – defined in the survey as being either lesbian or gay, 9.2% ($n = 11$) identified as bisexual, and 2.5% ($n = 3$) reported their sexual orientation as "other." The age of participants ranged from 18 to 50 years, with a mean age of 19.99 ($STD = 3.55$). Slightly over half of the participants (56.3%) reported their race as being white ($n = 67$), while 34.5% reported being African American ($n = 41$), 4.2% reported being Hispanic/Latino ($n = 5$), and the remaining 5% reporting a different racial identity ($n = 6$). Please see Table 1 for demographic information.

Participation was voluntary and students had the opportunity to receive class credit for completing the study. Informed consent was received from all participants prior to the start of the study. In an online format, participants provided demographic information, including the religion they followed and how active they were in their faith, completed several questionnaires, and watched a series of movie trailers featuring different population groups. After viewing each trailer, participants were asked general questions on their perceptions of the characters presented in each trailer, as well as how likely they felt they were to watch the film in its entirety.

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Demographics. Participants provided basic demographic information, such as their age, gender, sexual orientation, college major, and religion. Most of this information served as background data to determine the diversity of the results collected; however, for analysis purposes participants rated how often they "currently attend religious services," with options ranging from "once a week or more" to "I do not attend religious services."

Openness to Diversity and Challenge (OTD; Barkley, 2005). This 6-item survey measured how open participants were to encountering people and beliefs differing from their own. Each statement was rated on a five-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, where a higher total score indicated a higher level of openness to diversity. A sample question is, "I enjoy talking to people who have values different from mine because it helps me understand myself and my values better." The OTD demonstrates solid internal consistency and validity (Barkley, 2005).

The Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gay Men Revised Scale (ATLG-R; Herek, 1994). Participants completed this 20-item survey which included statements about beliefs toward lesbians and gay men, both in greater society and on a personal level. Each statement was ranked on a five-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, where a higher total score indicated more negative views toward lesbians and gay men. The current study used the ALTG-R total score to assess the dependent variable of attitudes toward lesbian women and gay men. A sample question is, "Female homosexuality is bad for society because it breaks down the natural divisions between the sexes." The ALTG-R demonstrates strong reliability and validity (Herek, 1994).

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1995). This 22-item measure examined the number and type of sexist views participants held, with each

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statement ranked on a 5-point scale. Higher total scores indicate more sexist views.

LGBT+ persons are often perceived as antithetical to patriarchal, heteronormative

society. It was, therefore, expected that scores on the ASI would correlate with

perceptions of LGBT+ persons. A sample question is, "When women lose fairly, they

claim discrimination." The ASI has strong psychometric properties (Glick & Fiske,

1995).

Recollections of Characters. Prior to watching short movie clips depicting

characters of different minorities, participants provided their clearest recollections of

LGBT+ and disabled characters, if any existed, from previous movies they watched.

Participants answered the following questions about characters they recalled: What role

did the character play (protagonist, minor character, villain, etc.)? How well did you

relate to the character, answered on a 4-point scale from "Not At All" to "Extremely"?

This provides a baseline of participants' experience watching films/shows depicting

LGBT+ characters. It should be noted, participants were also prompted to recall

experiences watching characters depicted as disabled, as well as characters who were

neither LGBT+ nor disabled. For each character type (i.e., LGBT+, disabled, and non-

disabled/non-LGBT+), participants answered the same questions noted above. This was

in effort to reduce participant priming to the purpose of the study.

Video Clips. Participants viewed a total of five video clips, each roughly two and

a half minutes in length, and all selected because they provided a clear snapshot of the

characters from the groups they were meant to represent. The five movie clips and their

portrayed demographics were: *3 Generations* (alternatively titled *About Ray*), featuring a

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transgender teen boy; *Love, Simon*, featuring a gay teenage boy; *Dear John*, featuring a

cisgender, heterosexual, non-disabled couple; *I Am Sam*, featuring a father with a

learning disability; and *Carol*, featuring non-heterosexual women. Participants watched

all five clips in the above order.

   Video Questionnaire. After watching each video clip, participants answered the

following questions: Do the characters in the video reflect people you know in real life?

How well do you feel you could relate to the characters in the video? How likely would

you be to watch the entire movie? Each question was scored on a 4-point scale, from "not

at all" to "extremely," with higher scores indicating a more positive response to the films

in question. For convenience in scoring, the scores of the three clips featuring LGBT+

characters were combined for the analysis. Please see the Appendix.

<div align="center">

Results

</div>

   Total scores or subscale scores from each survey were calculated. Correlational

analyses were conducted to determine relationships among the variables. Please see Table

2 for all correlations.

   I expected stronger ties to religion to be negatively correlated with scores on the

OTD and positively correlated with scores on the ATLG-R and the Ambivalent Sexism

Inventory. Chi-square analyses were non-significant for the relationship between current

religious attendance and openness to diversity ($\chi^2 = -.008$, $p = .934$) and ambivalent

sexism ($\chi^2 = .095$, $p = .326$). There was a significant positive correlation between current

religious attendance and attitudes toward gay and lesbian people ($\chi^2 = .244$, $p = .01$).

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Stronger ties to religion were expected to negatively correlate with responses toward the film trailers featuring LGBT+ characters. Findings from chi-square analyses did not support this hypothesis ($\chi^2 = -.101$, $p = .297$).

Negative correlations were expected between openness to diversity and attitudes toward gays and lesbians and ambivalent sexism. Chi-square analyses supported these expectations. There was a significant negative correlation between scores on the OTD and the ATLG-R ($\chi^2 = -.304$, $p = .001$) and between the OTD and the ASI ($\chi^2 = -.196$, $p = .041$). Further, there was a significant positive correlation, as expected, between OTD scores and perceptions of the LGBT characters displayed in the movie trailers ($\chi^2 = .338$, $p < .001$).

Positive correlations were predicted between attitudes toward lesbians and gay men and ambivalent sexism. Chi-square analyses confirmed this hypothesis. Scores on the ATLG-R were significantly positively correlated with scores on the ASI ($\chi^2 = .716$, $p < .001$). In addition, it was expected that negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men would negatively correlate with perceptions of LGBT persons displayed in the film trailers. This was confirmed, with higher ATLG-R scores relating to lower perceptions of LGBT characters ($\chi^2 = -.363$, $p < .001$).

Finally, scores on the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory were expected to negatively correlate with responses to the film trailers featuring LGBT characters. Chi-Square analyses confirmed this hypothesis, with ASI scores negatively correlating with responses to the LGBT+ characters ($\chi^2 = -.327$, $p = .001$).

Participant responses to the film trailers featuring disabled characters and abled/non-LGBT+ were also measured against the same scores for comparison purposes.

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The trailer featuring disabled characters did not significantly correlate with strong ties to religion ($\chi^2 = -.056$, $p = .551$). There was also no significant correlation between this trailer and scores on the ATLG-R ($\chi^2 = -.082$, $p = .401$) or the ASI ($\chi^2 = -.017$, $p = .863$). However, responses to this trailer did significantly positively correlate with the OTD ($\chi^2 = .252$, $p < .001$).

For the trailer featuring abled/non-LGBT+ characters, there was no significant correlation found between responses to this trailer and religious ties ($\chi^2 = .111$, $p = .234$). There was also no significant correlation found between the responses to this trailer and scores on the OTD ($\chi^2 = -.081$, $p = .390$). Responses to this trailer did, however, significantly positively correlate to both the ATLG-R ($\chi^2 = .293$, $p < .001$) and the ASI ($\chi^2 = .263$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

We know from previous research and countless anecdotal accounts that fiction has effects on reality. The research performed here, while not presenting a full picture, can offer some insight into what relationships may exist between real life traits and the choices in media consumed, as well as the responses that can be expected when presented with differing types of media portrayals.

To understand what we are seeing, it is best to start by examining the trends that exist. Three clear demographics of people were shown in the film trailers, which divided accordingly as LGBT+, disabled, and abled/non-LGBT+. While the focus of the research is on LGBT+ portrayals and people's responses to them, looking at how the other two categories compare gives us a sense of what can be generally expected.

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We know from the data that strong religious ties did not affect participants' reactions to the LGBT+ trailers, and indeed, the only significant correlation to be found between religiosity and the trailers was that more religious participants tended to respond more positively to the abled/non-LGBT+ trailer. From this, it is reasonable to include that being religious is not, in and of itself, an indicator of how people will respond to media. This does not, however, mean religion is entirely uninvolved in these complex relationships of acceptance. On the contrary, that the results indicate having religious ties was related to real life disapproval of LGBT+ people.

The results indicate people who are less tolerant towards LGBT+ individuals in real life, as indicated by scoring high on the ATLG-R, likewise look less favorably upon films featuring LGBT+ characters. This result is straight forward and expected, as it is reasonable to expect most people would not want to watch media featuring groups of whom they do not approve. However, it also demonstrates a link between real life and fictional media, as if there was no such link, then there would have been no correlation between these scores. We can also see scores on the ATLG-R did not significantly relate to how participants responded to the film trailers featuring non-LGBT+ characters. This indicates the link that exists is between real-life anti-gay attitudes and less positive reception to LGBT+ portrayals in media, rather than a blanket distaste for films.

We now know that people who hold more sexist views, as indicated by higher scores on the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, also scored higher on the ATLG-R, showing less acceptance toward real life LGBT+ people, and likewise responded more negatively toward the film trailers featuring LGBT+ characters. In contrast, these same people responded more favorably toward the film trailer featuring an abled/non-LGBT+ couple.

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The nature of the survey prevents participants explicitly citing why they responded differently to different trailers; however, the questions asked in the survey do allow for some possibilities. The ASI, along with asking questions regarding general perceptions of men and women, also asked participants if they felt that women needed men to be successful, and vice versa. This idea reinforces heterosexuality as the norm. In turn, this indicates less acceptance toward non-heterosexual identities and relationships, viewing them as subpar to heterosexual ones if not entirely wrong. From here, it is easy to see why these participants may have responded more negatively toward LGBT+ concerns and characters, as the existence of such identities contradicts their beliefs.

In terms of a more positive response, participants who reported being more open to diversity were significantly more accepting of both real LGBT+ people, as indicated by lower scores on the ATLG-R, and LGBT+ characters. This is understandable, as an openness to diversity is about accepting those identities and individuals who are different from one's own. People who scored high on openness to diversity also responded more favorably toward the film trailer featuring a disabled protagonist. The reasoning for this is presumably the same as the reasoning for why the LGBT+ trailers were better received; however, there is an importance to this finding. Specifically, by responding positively to trailers featuring considerably different minority demographics, we can see some generalizability to the trait of openness to diversity. It is not related to any one category of people, but as the name implies it increases tolerance and acceptance toward all different groups of people.

The generalizability found here is important as it gives us something to work with. We know from looking at the results, and from countless past studies and anecdotal

accounts, that real life and fiction affect each other. We can see some of the ways here, in what traits do and do not influence interest in certain types of films, but we can go further than merely making a checklist of traits. By knowing what traits lead to what results, we can work on modifying these traits in people, to guide them toward more open, accepting mindsets.

This guiding process is something this study, in its current form, is unable to evaluate. While suitable for learning, this study has too small and narrow a sample group to adequately measure all the needed variables. Additional studies, with larger, more diverse sample groups would allow us to gain a better understanding of how traits vary. Additional trials in future studies would also be recommended. This current study gives a snapshot of how participants currently feel; however, by allowing for additional trials over a long period of time, we could see how participants' views change during that time period, to better determine which factors correlate in change of attitudes.

The limitations of this current study do not render it useless. On the contrary, this study gives us a starting point, a solid block of data showing what mindsets are likely to coincide and how they are likely to manifest. The current study challenges the idea that being religious is enough to make a person intolerant to differing views and lifestyles, and instead call attention to the true culprits. While the statistical results do not give insight into how the mindsets of participants may have changed, anecdotal accounts do show promise. I received emails from a couple students, who thanked me for the study offered, and one who explicitly stated that taking the survey changed their perspective of ideas they had previously held. While this anecdotal account is not enough to base results on, it does indicate there is merit to this area of study. By continuing in this area, it is

possible, and likely, more people will be guided to challenging their views, in a way that

leads to more acceptance not only towards LGBT+ characters in media, but to the real

people these characters portray.

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Table 1.

Demographic Information

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	19.99	3.55

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Women	94	79
Men	25	21
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	67	56.3
African American	41	34.5
Hispanic/Latino	5	4.2
Other	6	5
Sexual Orientation		
Homosexual	4	3.4
Bisexual	11	9.2
Other	3	2.5
Heterosexual	101	84.9

Table 2.

Correlations among Variables

	OTD	ASI	Religious Attendance	LGBT Characters	Disabled Characters	Abled/Non-LGBT Characters
ATLG-R	-.304**	.716**	.244*	-.363**	-.082	.293**
OTD	__	-.196*	-.008	.338**	.252**	-.081
ASI	__	__	.095	-.327**	-.017	.263**
Religious Attendance	__	__	__	-.101	-.056	.111

*p < .05; ** p < .01

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Appendix

Video Questionnaire

1. How well did the characters reflect real life people?

   Not at All   Mostly Not   A Good Bit   Extremely

2. How well did you relate to the characters?

   Not at All   Mostly Not   A Good Bit   Extremely

3. How likely are you to watch the full movie?

   Not at All Likely   Somewhat Likely   Fairly Likely   Extremely Likely