Fostering Support for LGBTQ Youth?
The Effects of a Gay Adolescent Media Portrayal on Young Viewers

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This study used experimental methods to examine the effects of a media portrayal of two gay 13-year-old characters on young viewers' attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues by exploring the influence of gender identity and sexual orientation on viewers' reactions. An online quasi-experiment of 469 participants, ages 13–21, revealed that gender identity and sexual orientation influenced viewers' emotional involvement with the storyline and identification with the characters, which was associated with a change in attitudes. For LGBTQ youth, the story evoked hope and fostered positive attitudes; however, it tended to produce a boomerang effect among heterosexual/cisgender youth, eliciting the emotion of disgust and leading to significantly more negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues.

Keywords: emotion, gender, identification, LGBTQ, media representations, narrative

In recent years, media representations of LGBTQ individuals (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and other gender identities and sexual orientations) have proliferated on cable television and on-demand streaming services, while making incremental increases on the legacy broadcast channels. The GLAAD 2015 *Where We Are on TV* report—an annual report assessing the expected presence of primetime scripted series regular and recurring characters on broadcast, cable, and on-demand streaming series for the upcoming season—found an expected increase, from 105 to 142 regular and recurring lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters on cable from the 2015 to 2016 seasons. Moreover, for the upcoming, 2016 season, the first season in which original streaming series are being tracked, 59 regular or recurring lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender characters are slated for the on-demand streaming platforms Amazon, Hulu, and Netflix. While the increase in the quantity of characters representing a variety of gender identities and sexual orientations is an important step toward ending the invisibility that has long characterized LGBTQ representations in the media (Gross, 2001), the

report also underscored the importance of increasing the diversity and quality of characters, saying, "writers must craft those characters with thought and care" (GLAAD, 2015, p. 3).

One show noted as breaking barriers in representation and being the most inclusive show on the Freeform network (formerly ABC Family) was the series *The Fosters*, which depicts seven lesbian, gay, and transgender characters, including rare portrayals of gay and transgender teenagers. In spring 2015, *The Fosters* marked a media milestone by depicting the youngest televised same-sex kiss, which happened between two 13-year-old male characters, Jude and Connor. The solidification of Jude and Connor's romantic relationship came only after a rocky journey in which classmates bullied Jude for wearing nail polish, Connor's homophobic father tried to separate the teens, and both boys experienced confusion and frustration in coming to understand their own identity and their feelings toward each other.

Show cocreator Peter Paige, also an activist and previously a regular cast member on Showtime's *Queer as Folk*, has been vocal about his desire to push the boundaries of LGBTQ media representation, particularly as related to same-sex physical displays of affection. *Queer as Folk* was groundbreaking in its depictions of gay men as fully sexualized and proud, in stark contrast to other portrayals of the early 2000s, which tended to gloss over the sexuality of gay characters. In fact, gay characters are still rarely shown engaging in on-screen sexual behaviors (Bond, 2014; D. A. Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2007). However, while advocacy groups tout representations of characters like Jude and Connor as important for changing perceptions of the LGBTQ community (*The Fosters* received the 2015 GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Drama Series) and the writers behind the characters are crafting them with the intention of garnering support for LGBTQ people, little evidence exists as to how people respond psychologically to such portrayals. Fans of *The Fosters* cheered on social media when Jude and Connor kissed, but what happens for other viewers when they see two male adolescents physically showing affection? Previous research provides limited insight related to this context. This study explored the reactions of young viewers to a story portraying two gay adolescents, focusing on the role of gender identity and sexual orientation in involvement with the story and subsequent attitudes.

The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis

Studies testing the contact hypothesis (the precursor to the parasocial contact hypothesis) have suggested that intergroup prejudice can be mitigated when members of different groups interact under certain conditions: Participants must feel of they are of equal status, share common goals, have sustained and nonsuperficial contact, and are not opposed by a salient authority (Allport, 1954; Williams, 1964). The prejudice reduced by such interaction may be based on a negative initial experience, a mass-mediated stereotype, or socialization (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006). The contact hypothesis states that generalizations based on incomplete information should be reduced as individuals learn more about the group of people toward which they hold negative attitudes. For sexual minorities, Herek (1987) found that college students who had experienced pleasant interactions with a either gay man or a lesbian tended to generalize from that experience and accept gay men and lesbians in general. Further, Herek and Capitanio (1996) found that contact with two or three gay or lesbian individuals was associated with more favorable attitudes than an interaction with only one individual. Moreover, a meta-analysis contact hypothesis studies by Pettigrew and Tropp (2002), which included 33 studies involving attitudes toward gay and

lesbian individuals, found a significant negative relationship, $r = -.25$, between contact and prejudice ($N = 12,074$, $p < .0001$). Similarly, recent research has found interpersonal contact with transgender individuals to reduce prejudice (Walch et al., 2012).

Though the framework of the contact hypothesis originally focused on interpersonal communication, it was rearticulated to include parasocial interactions, the phenomenon by which viewers form beliefs and attitudes about people they know only through media, regardless of whether those people are real or fictional (Paluck, 2009; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). Horton and Wohl (1956) noted that the media present opportunities for interaction that are not available in the everyday lives of many people. As such, parasocial interactions are the mediated equivalent of interpersonal communication (Schiappa et al., 2006) and occur because the human brain tends to process media experiences in much the same way as it processes "direct" experiences with actual people (Kanazawa, 2002; Reeves & Nass, 1996). In fact, Farnall and Smith's (1999) study of people with disabilities revealed that parasocial contact may be more effective in reducing stereotypes than personal contact, as the media can provide a wider array of portrayals countering stereotypes. Recent research suggests that narrative portrayals can be more effective than nonnarratives in reducing stereotypes related to gender identity and sexual orientation, since they provide a deeper understanding of LGBTQ individuals and an opportunity for viewers to identify with such characters and experience an emotional response to their stories (Cohen, 2001; Green & Brock, 2000; Murphy, 2011; Murphy et al., 2015; Niederdeppe, Shapiro, & Porticella, 2011). Using a cross-sectional survey, Bond and Compton (2015) found a positive relationship between exposure to on-screen gay characters and the endorsement of gay equality. However, the methodology that they employed cannot prove causation in the manner of experimental methods.

Experimental research exploring the impact of mediated contact with gay men and levels of sexual prejudice is limited. A study by Riggle, Ellis, and Crawford (1996) found a decrease in prejudice in a college student sample after participants viewed the film *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, a sympathetic biography about gay politician Harvey Milk. Similarly, Levina, Waldo, and Fitzgerald (2000) found that heterosexual participants who were shown a video of gay individuals portrayed in a positive light were significantly more likely, after 10 to 14 days, to have more positive attitudes toward gay people than participants who saw a negative video portrayal of gay individuals. Finally, Schiappa et al. (2005) explored the effect of repeated exposure to gay characters and demonstrated that such exposure improved viewers' attitudes toward gay men.

While the contact hypothesis suggests that prejudice can be mitigated by sustained and nonsuperficial contact between differing groups that generates an affective tie between them, the hypothesis does not enumerate criteria for the duration and quality of such contact necessary for it to lead to positive change rather than a reaffirmation of existing prejudices. From a practical point of view, not all media consumers will seek out and engage with media programming prominently depicting sexual minorities (selective exposure) (Frey, 1986). Thus, more concise narratives attempting to change attitudes may be of interest to showrunners, advocacy groups, and policymakers.

Narrative Theory

The power of narrative communication, or storytelling, has been recognized and utilized for thousands of years (W. R. Fisher, 1985, 1987). Humans are innate storytellers (Schank & Abelson, 1995) who are influenced by the stories they share and hear (Green, 2004, 2006; Green & Brock, 2000). According to Green and Brock (2000), stories can affect the real-world beliefs of individuals by transporting them into a narrative world in which their attention and cognitive resources are engrossed in the story. In a narrative world, people are less likely to critically assess the messages in the narrative and counterargue, as they would in other communicative situations (Kreuter et al., 2007; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater, 2002). Viewers' beliefs may change as media portrayals expose them to new information about groups of people they may not encounter in their everyday lives. Two components of narrative persuasion are central to this study: *identification with characters* and *emotional response to the narrative*. Previous research has shown that viewers are more persuaded by media models with whom they identify (Bandura, 2002). Likewise, emotional involvement with a story has been shown to drive persuasion (Dillard & Peck, 2000; Murphy et al., 2011; Slater & Rouner, 2000). Narratives may be especially important in the lives of youth, as they seek models to emulate and frameworks within which to make sense of their experiences, many of which will be novel as they mature and branch out into new environments mentally, emotionally, and physically.

Youth Identity Development

The effects of media narratives may be pronounced among young viewers. Researchers have long explored how youth process their environment, their experiences, and the messages they encounter. In many ways, the cognitive processing of youth is similar to that of adults. A large body of research drawing from Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2009) demonstrates that individuals, both young and old, model their behavior on the observable actions of others. In a social cognitive framework, individuals are self-developing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting beings embedded in social systems that guide their behavior (Bandura, 2009). One of the key ways in which people learn is by observing the behaviors of others, making sense of them, and reproducing those behaviors (Bandura, 1986). The "others" whose behavior is observed range from actual peers to real and fictional media figures. In fact, due to the limited scope of people's everyday experiences, media representations regularly mold people's conceptions (Bandura, 1982). Because people spend a significant amount of time engaged with media, much of the social construction of reality and shaping of public consciousness occurs through media acculturation (Bandura, 2009). According to Bandura, through the media, "a single model can transmit new ways of thinking and behaving simultaneously to countless people in widely dispersed locales" (2009, p. 98).

While this modeling of attitudes and behaviors applies to both youth and adults, certain developmental factors make youth more susceptible to the influences they encounter in their everyday lives (Shadel, Niaura, & Abrams, 2001), particularly media models (Shead, Walsh, Taylor, Dereavensk, & Gupta, 2011). As youth seek out role models, they often place special weight on the attitudes and behaviors they see depicted by characters in the media, and they may believe the world these individuals inhabit is an accurate representation of the world in which they themselves live (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan,

& Signiorelli, 1986). But media depictions of LGBTQ youth have been scarce. Bond (2014) found heterosexuality was overrepresented in media popular with lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents. This lack of media representation may lead youth, both LGBTQ and heterosexual/cisgender youth, to believe LGBTQ people are not an important part of society, particularly if they live in communities in which LGBTQ models are not visible (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Youth may also be particularly sensitive to media messages related to characters' sexual orientations, as sexuality is especially salient during this time of development (Arnett, 2000). As noted by Schiappa et al. (2006), negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians have been documented as pervasive among adolescents (Morrison, Parriag, & Morrison, 1999), college students (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; Kurdek, 1988), and the general adult population in the United States (Herek & Glunt, 1993). Attitudes are slowly changing, however, which calls for new research exploring the effects of media portrayals of gay individuals on viewers.

Limited empirical research explores the effects of young LGBTQ media portrayals on young viewers and the role of gender identity and sexual orientation in youth's responses to such narratives. Studies that do exist employ cross-sectional and interview methods, on which this study improves by exploring causation of attitude changes in the context of exposure to a portrayal. Of note, Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual respondents reported that media models influenced their self-realization, coming out, and identities, such that media models served as a source of pride, inspiration, and comfort. Similarly, McKee (2000) found that gay men perceived media images as the most important source of information about gay identity for them in their youth. Most were able to recall very few of such images, but those images—most from fictional programs—were remembered as having a very strong impact, particularly in regards to helping them feel happy with themselves and providing an identity to which they could aspire.

Given this background, we posited the following research questions (see Figure 1 for theoretical model):

RQ1:   Is there an effect of exposure to a gay adolescent media portrayal on youths' attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues?

RQ2:   Is there an effect of gender identity and sexual orientation on youths' attitudes in the context of viewing a media portrayal of a gay adolescent ?

RQ3:   If so, what are the psychological mechanisms, such as emotional responses or identification with characters, that underlie these effects?

Figure 1. Theoretical model.

Method

Design and Participants

A sample of 469 participants between the ages of 13 and 21 (362 heterosexual/cisgender; 107 lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, queer, or questioning [LGBTQ]) were randomly assigned within their respective gender identity/sexual orientation grouping to either the narrative or nonnarrative conditions. Participants were recruited through Qualtrics, a survey research firm, and were required to be between the ages of 13 and 21. All participants completed a youth assent and parental permission agreement online prior to participation and received compensation through Qualtrics for their time. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Southern California.

Procedure

Participants in the narrative condition were presented with a compilation of video clips depicting the development of the relationship between the characters Jude and Connor in the TV show *The Fosters*. They were instructed to watch the entire video and were not able to proceed to the questionnaire until the complete video had played. The questionnaire assessed their perceptions of the story and characters and their attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues. In contrast, participants in the nonnarrative condition

completed the same questions related to their attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues without having viewed the video.

Stimulus Materials

Our goal was to present a video compilation that captured the major milestones in the progression of Jude and Connor's relationship from a friendship to a romance. The selected scenes depicted key interactions between the characters at school, at a movie theater, and at one of their homes. The first scene showed Jude being bullied at school for wearing nail polish and Connor showing solidarity, and perhaps revealing his gay identity to Jude, by wearing nail polish to school the next day. The second clip depicted both characters going to the movies with female dates. During the film, Connor nervously linked pinky fingers with Jude. In the final scene, the characters have an altercation after Connor suggests they hang out with one of the female dates. When Jude expresses anger and confusion about Connor's intentions, Connor briefly kisses Jude. Focus groups were conducted with heterosexual/cisgender and LGBTQ youth to assess their understanding of, and engagement with, the clips. The entire video was 9 minutes, 29 seconds, in length.

Measures

The questionnaire measured participants' attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues, identification with Jude and Connor, emotional responses to the storyline, prior exposure to *The Fosters*, age, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

Dependent variables. *Attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues* were measured by participants' level of agreement with 16 statements, where 1 was *strongly disagree* and 5 was *strongly agree*. The items were based on Massey's (2009) measurement of attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, a valid and reliable 7-factor measure developed to assess the range of perspectives comprising an individual's attitudes, in contrast to single-factor models (Herek, 1984; Kite & Deaux, 1986), which may not fully capture the complexity of attitudes. For this study, items from the three subscales of Value Gay Progress (with "gay" updated to "LGBTQ" in the items), Denial of Continued Discrimination, and Resist Heteronormativity were selected. The items were selected for three reasons: (a) They applied to both heterosexual/cisgender and LGBTQ individuals, (b) they were at an appropriate language/comprehension level for youth participants, and (c) they were able to assess the changing, more progressive attitudes that research has shown youth in the United States to hold toward LGBTQ people and issues (Pew Research Center, 2015a). That is, social desirability concerns might deter young participants in today's social climate from agreeing with more overt items such as "Lesbians are sick," an item on the Traditional Heterosexism subscale. The subscales selected assessed more subtle aspects of attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues. The subscales not used did not meet the criteria established here. For example, the subscale Traditional Heterosexism included items such as "The growing number of lesbians indicates a decline in American morals," and Positive Beliefs included "The plight of lesbians and gay men will only improve when they are in important positions within the system," both of which reflect language and perspectives unlikely to resonate with a young sample. The subscales Aversion Toward Gay Men and

Aversion Toward Lesbians contained items not applicable to many LGBTQ participants, such as, "It would be upsetting for me to find that I was alone with a gay man."

The final scale for this study contained three subscales: Value LGBTQ Progress (e.g., "Society is enhanced by the diversity offered by LGBTQ people."), Denial of Continued Discrimination (e.g., "Discrimination against LGBTQ people is no longer an issue in the United States."), and Resist Heteronormativity (e.g., "I feel restricted by the gender label(s) people attach to me.") Of note, Massey (2009) found that, among heterosexual individuals, resisting heteronormativity despite one's heterosexual orientation was associated with more positive attitudes toward gay men and lesbians much in the same way that valuing gay progress was related to positive attitudes. For this scale, higher scores indicated more positive attitudes. Participants in the narrative condition responded to these items after viewing the video stimulus, while participants in the nonnarrative condition responded to them without having seen the video.

Mediators. *Emotional responses to the narrative* were adapted from Murphy, Frank, Moran, & Patnoe-Woodley (2011), and measured the discrete emotions of happiness, empathy, disgust, anger, sadness, hope, fear, and surprise on separate 10-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*a great deal*). Identification with Jude and Connor was measured separately using eight identification items for each character, each item measured on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 10 (a great deal) (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). These mediators were assessed only in the narrative conditions, after participants viewed the video stimulus.

Covariates. The final part of the questionnaire measured age, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, gender identity, sexual orientation, and prior exposure to *The Fosters*.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

All analyses were conducted in SPSS v.23. A factor analysis (principal component, varimax rotation) was conducted for a set of 16 items measuring attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues. As expected, the items loaded on three factors: Value LGBTQ Progress (lowest loading = .66), Denial of Continued Discrimination (lowest loading = .87), and Resist Heteronormativity (lowest loading = .84), with a total explained variance of 73.0% (a = .93). In a similar fashion, separate factor analyses were conducted for identification with Jude, (explained variance = 64.8%, lowest loading = .64, a = .84) and identification with Connor (explained variance = 68.3%, lowest loading = .62, a = .87).

As the general sample characteristics indicate (Table 1), participants were similar in age and prior exposure to *The Fosters*; however, religious affiliation differed by participants' gender identity/sexual orientation. As expected based on previous research, heterosexual/cisgender youth were more likely to report a religious affiliation. This is not surprising based on Pew Research Center (2015b) findings that indicate the general U.S. adult population (ages 18 and older) identifies as religious at a higher rate than the adult lesbian, gay, and bisexual population. Further, young people (ages 18–24) report lower levels of

religious affiliation than their adult counterparts (Pew Research Center, 2015b), with lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth's relationship to religion being particularly complicated (Horn, Kosciw, & Russell, 2009).

The race/ethnicity of our sample also varied based on gender identity/sexual orientation, with the LGBTQ sample's demographics generally reflecting that of the U.S. population (Pew Research Center, 2013). Race/ethnicity was controlled for in our subsequent analyses. Additionally, the nonidentifiable geolocations of all participants were mapped and reviewed using Google MyMaps to ensure respondents were dispersed nationally and representative of a variety of urban, suburban, and rural locations.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Main Variables by Gender Identity/Sexual Orientation.

	Gender Identity/Sexual Orientation		
Variable	Heterosexual/Cisgender	LGBTQ	X^2/t
Sample Size	362	107	
Age	16.95 (2.51)	17.44 (2.48)	−1.63
Race/Ethnicity			18.0*
White	43.1%	64.5%	
Latino	17.4%	7.5%	
Black	21.0%	14.0%	
Asian/Pacific Islander	12.4%	6.5%	
Other	6.1%	7.5%	
Religion			
Christian	61.5%	29.7%	
Jewish	2.2%	0.9%	
Muslim	4.4%	0.9%	
Buddhist	2.2%	3.6%	
Agnostic	5.5%	15.2%	
Atheist	7.7%	17.9%	
Unsure	15.4%	23.2%	
Other	1.1%	10.7%	
Gender Identity			
Male	52.8%	36.4%	
Female	47.2%	59.8%	
Transgender		5.60%	
Sexual Orientation			
Straight/Heterosexual	100%	0.9%	
Gay/Lesbian		29.0%	
Bisexual/Pansexual		52.3%	
Queer		1.9%	
Questioning		15.9%	
Prior Exposure to *The Fosters*			.26
None/Low	79.8%	77.6%	
Medium/High	20.2%	22.4%	

Main Analyses

To assess the influence of exposure to the narrative and gender identity/sexual orientation on attitudes toward LGBTQ people/issues, controlling for race/ethnicity and prior exposure to *The Fosters*, we conducted an ANCOVA. Exposure to the narrative had two categories (narrative and nonnarrative). Gender identity/sexual orientation included two categories (LGBTQ and heterosexual/cisgender). The main effect for exposure to the narrative was not significant, $F(1, 463) = .022$, $p = .883$. However, the main effect for gender identity/sexual orientation on attitudes was highly significant, $F(1, 463) = 78.32$, $p < .001$, such that LGBTQ participants had more positive attitudes ($M = 4.16$, $SD = .54$) and heterosexual/cisgender participants had more negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues ($M = 2.96$, $SD = .98$). The interaction effect was also significant, $F(1, 463) = 8.68$, $p = .003$, such that, among heterosexual/cisgender youth, those who viewed the video reported more negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues than those who did not view it, narrative ($M = 2.96$, $SD = .98$) and nonnarrative ($M = 3.26$, $SD = .84$), while the effect was opposite among LGBTQ youth, with the story fostering more positive attitudes, narrative ($M = 4.16$, $SD = .53$) and nonnarrative ($M = 3.86$, $SD = .68$).

To further explore the psychological processes underlying the effects of gender identity/sexual orientation, we used PROCESS, an SPSS macro using Ordinary Least Squares regression models and bootstrap estimation of 1,000 samples to test for the significance of the mediated effects (Hayes, 2013). PROCESS provides a bootstrap estimate of this indirect effect, together with a 95% confidence interval. Specifically, we used a mediation model with attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues as a dependent variable, gender identity/sexual orientation as an independent variable, identification with the characters and emotional responses to the narrative as mediators, and race/ethnicity and prior exposure as covariates.

According to the model, gender identity/sexual orientation did not have a significant direct effect on attitudes ($b = .14$, $SE = .14$, $p = .34$, 95% $CI = −.14, .41$), but it had a highly significant effect on four mediating emotions (happiness, hope, empathy, and disgust) and on identification with both characters (see Figure 2). The effect on anger was borderline significant, with no significant effect on fear, sadness, and surprise. (See Figure 3 for means for emotions.) The model indicated significant indirect effects of the mediators of disgust, hope, identification with Jude, and identification with Connor on attitudes and accounted for 62.4% of variance.
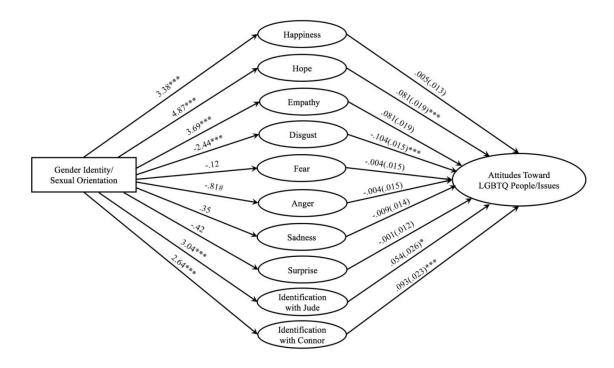
Figure 2. Beta coefficients for the effect of gender identity/sexual orientation (0 = heterosexual/cisgender, 1 = LGBTQ) on attitudes, and a mediation through emotions and identification with the main characters. #p = .058, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
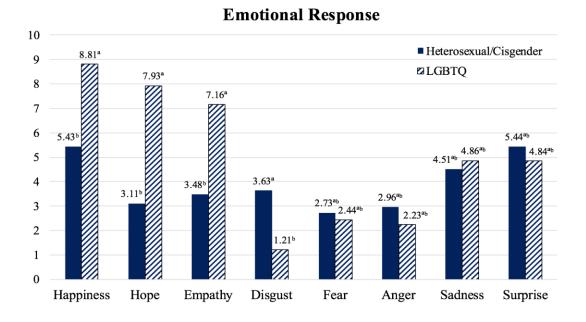
Emotional Response

Figure 3. Extent to which youth experienced each emotion from viewing the narrative, 1 = Not at all, 10 = A great deal.
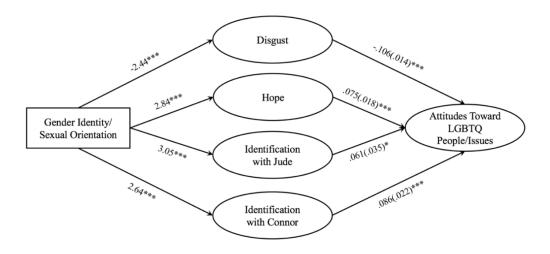

Figure 4. Beta coefficients for the effect of gender identity/sexual orientation (coded as 0 = heterosexual/cisgender, 1 = LGBTQ) on attitudes, and a mediation through emotions and identification. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Next, a model was created with only the mediators that had a significant effect on attitudes: disgust, hope, identification with Jude, and identification with Connor. (See Figure 4.) This model accounted for 61.8% of the variance in attitudes.

In this model, gender identity/sexual orientation had a highly significant effect on disgust (b = −2.44, SE = .49, p < .001, 95% CI = -3.41, −1.48), such that heterosexual/cisgender youth experienced higher levels of disgust (M = 3.63, SD = 3.12) than their LGBTQ counterparts (M = 1.21, SD = .56). Gender identity/sexual orientation also had a highly significant effect on hope (b = 4.86, SE = .41, p < .001, 95% CI = 4.05, 5.68), such that LGBTQ youth experienced higher levels of hope (M = 7.93, SD = 2.16) than their heterosexual/cisgender counterparts (M = 3.11, SD = 2.56). Last, gender identity/sexual orientation had a highly significant effect on identification with the characters, Jude (b = 3.04, SE = .40, p < .001, 95% CI = 3.87, 5.67) and Connor (b = 2.64, SE = .41, p = .000, 95% CI = 2.25, 3.84). LGBTQ youth experienced higher levels of identification with Jude (M = 8.61, SD = 1.04) than their heterosexual/cisgender counterparts (M = 5.68, SD = 2.61) and higher levels of identification with Connor (M = 7.31, SD = 1.68) than heterosexual/cisgender youth (M = 4.83, SD = 2.61).

To better understand the boomerang effect leading to negative attitudes among the heterosexual/cisgender viewers, a post hoc analysis was conducted to assess differences between the attitudes of heterosexual/cisgender males and females who viewed the narrative. Previous research has shown differences in the attitudes of young males and females toward gay people (Poteat & Anderson, 2012) and related issues, like same-sex marriage (Pew Research Center, 2015a), such that males have more negative attitudes than females. Further, research has shown that identification with a character is enhanced when viewers perceive themselves to be similar to a character, and this perceived similarity can be based on a variety of factors, including demographic characteristics like gender (Cohen, 2001).

Results of an ANCOVA, controlling for race/ethnicity and prior exposure to *The Fosters*, showed a significant main effect of gender (i.e., biological sex) on attitudes among heterosexual/cisgender youth in the narrative condition, F(1, 267) = 4.57, p = .033, such that males who viewed the narrative experienced more negative attitudes (M = 2.83, SD = .95) than females who viewed the narrative (M = 3.10, SD = 1.01). (See Figure 5.)
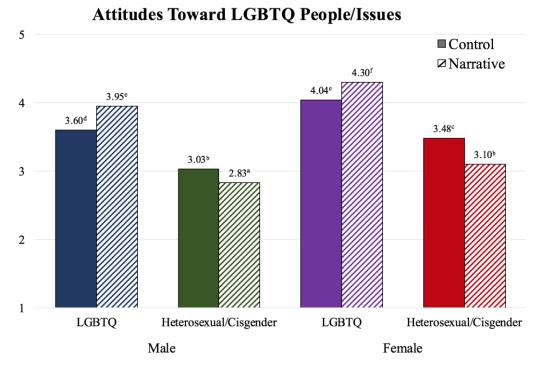
Attitudes Toward LGBTQ People/Issues

***Figure 5. Attitudes reported for LGBTQ and heterosexual/cisgender youth, by gender,
in both narrative and nonnarrative conditions, with 1 representing more
negative attitudes and 5 representing more positive attitudes.***

Additional analyses showed a highly significant main effect of gender on disgust among heterosexual/cisgender youth, $F(1, 267) = 11.72$, $p < .001$, such that males ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 3.26$) experienced more disgust than females ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 2.95$). The main effect of identification with Jude was also highly significant, $F(1, 267) = 21.22$, $p < .001$, with heterosexual/cisgender females identifying with Jude ($M = 6.44$, $SD = 2.52$) more than their male counterparts ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 2.51$). Last, identification with Connor, $F(1, 267) = 8.10$, $p = .005$, was significant, with heterosexual/cisgender females ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 2.64$) identifying more with Connor than males ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 2.63$).

To explore the role of gender and sexual orientation on identification, an ANCOVA was conducted for identification with Jude and another for identification with Connor. Given the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations reported by participants, for the purpose of these analyses, gender was explored as a binary variable (male, female), and participants were grouped by sexual orientation that reflected either (a) attraction to the opposite sex (heterosexual), (b) attraction to the same sex (gay/lesbian), (c) potential attraction to both sexes (bisexual/pansexual/queer), (d) and uncertainty about attraction (questioning). Analyses showed a highly significant main effect of sexual orientation on identification with Jude, $F(1, 314) = 13.35$, $p < .001$, and with Connor, $F(1, 314) = 8.55$, $p < .001$, with means displayed in Figure 6.
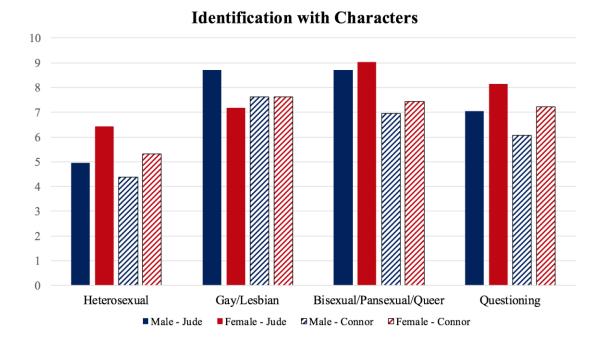
Identification with Characters

Figure 6. Identification with Jude and identification with Connor reported by grouped sexual orientation and gender.

Discussion

This study, the first to use experimental methods to assess the reactions of adolescents and emerging adults to a narrative addressing issues of gay sexuality, demonstrates the significant influence of gender identity and sexual orientation on viewers' experiences. In an exploration of the parasocial contact hypothesis, the study shows that media contact with out-group members does not always generate positive attitude change. Further, the results underscore the power of narratives to influence attitudes, however revealing that certain characteristics of audience members can lead to a divergence in both identification with characters and emotional response to a narrative.

Aligning with the presumption of the parasocial contact hypothesis that "optimal conditions" must be met for media contact with members of a viewer's out-group to improve perceptions of that group, this study revealed the challenges of using such depictions to improve the attitudes of heterosexual/cisgender youth toward LGBTQ people. It showed that portrayals of gay characters that involve gender nonconforming behaviors and physical displays of affection can cause discomfort among heterosexual/cisgender youth, evoking a disgust response that worsens attitudes toward the out-group of LGBTQ individuals.

This study also extends research into narrative persuasion by exploring the psychological mechanisms influencing young viewers' responses to a televised storyline addressing sexuality and identity. It reveals the impact of identity and orientation on experiences with a narrative, such that viewers whose identity and/or orientation align with that of the characters (at least in terms of being outside the "norms" of heterosexuality and binary gender), positive attitudes toward self and community are generated. In contrast, when viewers' characteristics here do not align with those of the characters, negative emotions can be evoked, resulting in negative attitudes. Emotional responses to the narrative diverged dramatically, indicating that portrayals of same-sex relationships may be beneficial to the psychological health and well-being of LGBTQ youth, while triggering negative emotional responses, leading to negative evaluations of LGBTQ people and issues, among heterosexual/cisgender youth. In this respect, the study affirms findings by So and Nabi (2013) that significant social distance between the audience and the character or situation can nullify persuasion in the context of a narrative.

The findings suggest that LGBTQ youth saw themselves reflected in the portrayal of two young gay characters coming to understand their identity, and these participants strongly experienced the positive emotion of hope, an elevated sense of mental energy, and pathways for goals (Snyder, 1995). This emotional response subsequently bolstered their attitudes toward their in-group. This aligns with previous research showing that people take pride in their in-group affiliation when members of the in-group have positive experiences (Kirk, Swain, & Gaskin, 2015). That the emotion of hope played a key role in bolstering attitudes among this group has implications for programs intended to improve the health and well-being of LGBTQ youth, as positive emotions have been shown to be important predictors of social, physical, psychological, and even financial well-being (Frederickson, Coffey, Pek, Cohn, & Finkel, 2008; Lyubomirsky, Diener, & King, 2005; Pressman & Cohen, 2005; Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006). The use of hope appeals in such contexts has received little scholarly attention, however, Prestin (2013) found that underdog media portrayals evoked hope in viewers, subsequently bolstering their motivation to pursue their own goals. Further, the emotional experience of hope in the study was durable, remaining elevated above baseline levels for three days after exposure to the narrative.

The responses of heterosexual/cisgender youth, in contrast, indicated a boomerang effect among this population. Here, the narrative tended to trigger a disgust response, which subsequently evoked more negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people/issues. As shown in Figure 5, disgust was highest among the male heterosexual/cisgender youth. It is interesting that although the negative emotion of anger also tended to be experienced by the heterosexual/cisgender group (borderline statistical significance), it did not have a significant influence on attitudes. Disgust may be a more complex—and potentially more influential—emotional response. Yoder, Widen, and Russell (2015) found that disgust may, in fact, refer to more than one emotion, with *physical disgust* and *moral disgust* representing two distinct emotional states. It is possible that the story of Jude and Connor, which involved a stigmatized relationship, evoked both types of disgust among youth who viewed their actions as offensive or even immoral. Future research measuring both potential dimensions of disgust could improve understanding of the disgust response seen here.

The implications of this study are broader than the effects of one storyline. The responses of heterosexual/cisgender youth may illustrate the continuing presence of stereotypes and homophobia, here

among youth ages 13 to 21. Previous research has demonstrated the existence of implicit bias (i.e., unconscious, unfavorable attitudes and/or stereotypes) against homosexual people by heterosexual people (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). Though young people in the United States are more likely to support LGBTQ rights and related issues than older generations (Pew Research Center, 2015a), subconsciously they may still be affected by social norms that have traditionally stigmatized LGBTQ people. This study did not explore youths' reactions to specific components of the portrayal of Jude and Connor; however, historically media depictions of gay characters have been steeped in stereotypes (Gross, 2001), and it is possible that Jude and Connor embodied stereotypes that evoked a negative reaction from heterosexual/cisgender viewers. With a limited but growing number of such media portrayals, the story of Jude and Connor from *The Fosters* may have represented the first time some participants were exposed to a media depiction (or perhaps any encounter) of a same-sex physical display of affection between such young individuals.

Limitations and Future Directions. This study has some limitations. First, the video compilation depicted two white gay male adolescents. This represents only one type of portrayal among a broader array of media representations, which in recent years have begun to include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters of a variety of races, genders, and ages. Thus, the study cannot demonstrate the potential effects of broader changes to the media landscape. Moreover, selective exposure (Frey, 1986) would suggest that individuals who hold negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people would be unlikely to seek out programming prominently featuring LGBTQ characters, such as *The Fosters*. As such, these results cannot be interpreted as representing that of regular viewers of the show. Likewise, participants were not specifically tested on whether they had attended to the video in its entirety. It is possible that, though the video needed to play completely before the next question was posed, the attention of participants varied. Last, reactance among participants was not measured (Brehm, 1966). While it is unlikely that the heterosexual/cisgender youth reported experiencing disgust due to reactance in response to a perceived persuasive (as levels of negative emotions varied within the condition), this should be assessed in future similar studies.

The results and implications of this study suggest fruitful directions for continued research. Future exploration in this area should continue to assess the role of gender identity and sexual orientation in perceptions of LGBTQ representations and subsequent attitudes. While previous literature on narrative persuasion has pointed to the importance of perceived similarity in identification, little research has highlighted the role of gender identity and sexual orientation in viewers' identification with characters. It would be beneficial to explore the reactions of viewers to LGBTQ characters representing a variety of identities and orientations. Also, this narrative involved physical displays of affection, most notably a kiss, which may have triggered the disgust response. Future studies should assess the role of same-sex physical displays of affection in evoking disgust among viewers. Further, this study looked exclusively at the reactions of youth. Studies assessing the reactions of adults could illuminate generational differences in responses to stories exploring sexuality and identity and featuring LGBTQ characters. Finally, the attitudes in this study were measured at one point in time (in the narrative condition, immediately after exposure to the video). Future studies assessing both the long-term effects of viewing similar narratives and viewer responses to complete storylines (in contrast to a video compilation of clips) would provide clearer insight into the duration and impact of such effects. It is possible that the summarized nature of

the story in this study intensified the negative reactions of heterosexual/cisgender youth, as they may not have had sufficient time to fully engage with the story and build a relationship with the characters prior to seeing the novel (as far as media portrayals) same-sex kiss.

In conclusion, this study provides insight into the psychological processes underlying the processing of a media portrayal depicting characters that were part of an in-group for some participants (LGBTQ), while part of the out-group for other participants (heterosexual/cisgender), adding to the scant experimental literature assessing the parasocial contact hypothesis. Further, the study was conducted with a sample population in which issues related to identity should be particularly important (adolescents and emerging adults) and contributes to building a body of research exploring the causal effects of media portrayals on LGBTQ youth. It is also one of few studies to empirically explore the role of discrete positive emotions in media processes and effects. Prestin (2013) noted a gap in regard to understanding the genres, narratives, and content features that generate discrete positive emotions as well as the cognitive and behavioral consequence of these responses. This study provides an elucidating initial look at content evoking both positive and negative discrete emotions.

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