You Are What You Watch? An Examination of the Relationship Between Media Exposure and Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Marriage

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study is to investigate the social institutions and media factors that influence the development of peoples’ underlying attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights policies. It is hypothesized that high viewing of soap operas and talk show television programs will be related to greater acceptance of homosexuality and same-sex marriage, and that females, those who are less religious and more politically liberal would have more accepting attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights policies. This study included 132 undergraduate psychology students. Results regarding the first hypothesis were not significant. The remaining hypotheses were supported. Future research is needed to further investigate the relationship between the development of peoples’ attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights policies and the media.

On November 4, 2008, citizens in California supported the passing of Proposition 8, which states that same-sex couples are not able to marry under law and receive the respective benefits (i.e. tax, property, employment benefits). In response to the passing of Proposition 8, a number of civil union debates, protests and rallies occurred in advocacy for equal rights under the law for same-sex partners who wished to marry. A number of factors may be related to peoples’ attitudes about homosexuality and same-sex marriage factors that ultimately influence the ways in which people do or do not support issues such as Proposition 8. Research has shown that television programming (i.e., amount of viewing and genre), individual personality characteristics (i.e., gender, age, and ethnicity), socialization agents (i.e., peers, family, education, politics, religion, etc.), and the degree of contact with homosexual others may all have an impact on peoples’ attitudes toward homosexuality and their stance on gay rights policies, specifically same-sex marriage (Wood and Bartkowski 2004; LaSala 2007; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Calzo and Ward 2009; Schwartz 2010). While studies have examined these variables, less research has focused on the relationship between genre of television programming consumed by viewers and attitudes toward gay
rights policies, specifically same-sex marriage. The present study attempts to investigate the ways in which television consumption may be related to peoples’ attitudes about homosexuality and same-sex marriage to better understand how their beliefs may affect groups on a larger social level (e.g., same-sex couples’ ability to legally marry and obtain respective benefits associated with marriage).

LITERATURE REVIEW
A myriad of social, cultural, and political factors contribute to the development of peoples’ attitudes, beliefs and values (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Calzo and Ward 2009; Morgan and Shanahan 2010; Schwartz 2010). What people experience in their daily lives, who they interact with, and what they are taught in school or in church all may play an important role in their development of certain attitudes. The central ideas communicated through the aforementioned social mechanisms have the potential to affect other facets of their daily lives, including their attitudes about the social world. It is important to understand how and why peoples’ attitudes are formed in order to understand how these variables can be powerful enough to affect larger social and political institutions, such as the development and engagement of certain state policies, namely Proposition 8. To achieve such an understanding, it is important to examine the process of attitudes toward homosexuality.

The Cultivation and Socialization of Attitudes
People are constantly bombarded with information from the media. This information conveys generalized portrayals of ethnic, sexual, and other minority groups, through comedies, news programs, soap operas, etc. The themes of such programming are consumed by audiences that use these themes to shape their opinions and attitudes about specific groups (Calzo and Ward 2009; Morgan and Shanahan 2010). Over time, and after much consumption, television viewers internalize mediated viewpoints, and they project them onto their respective realities; the myth becomes truth in a process known as “cultivation.” Morgan and Shanahan (2010) explained the origins and implications of cultivation theory. They state that George Gerbner originally developed cultivation theory in the 1960s; he explained it as the process by which individuals form beliefs through mediated mechanisms, such as television programming and argued that the more individuals watched television, the more likely those individuals would adopt the attitudes expressed through media and “superimpose their own forms of collective consciousness … upon social relationships” (Morgan and Shanahan 2010, 338). The process of cultivation acts as a cycle. Each
component of cultivation affects the viewer, and the viewer concurrently affects what messages are delivered based on ratings of particular television programs, thus the cycle continues; Morgan and Shanahan (2010) maintain that cultivation does not involve any new learning of information, but just the reassertion and strengthening of preexisting social norms.

Cultivation is not just a social process; it is a cognitive one as well. Although this research was not designed to examine the cognitive processes involving the development of attitudes and stereotypes, it is still important to understand the processes. This cognitive process is typically referred to as heuristics, which is a subconscious process that allows individuals to generalize information they have experienced for easy storage and quick access. However, the information stored using heuristics is often flattened and offers a shallow, stereotypical representation of the information (Morgan and Shanahan 2010). One instance of this occurrence is when viewers rely on information they have obtained by watching television to understand the real world; heavy television viewers are more likely to have an unrealistic, or mediated, and stereotypic perspective of reality (Morgan and Shanahan 2010). For example, heavy television viewers may internalize genre-specific televised themes and form cultural stereotypes. Mediated stereotypes of other groups, specifically other ethnic groups, have been examined through past research. Lee et al. (2009) refer to stereotypes of ethnic minorities as racial myths and explain how media perpetuates and reinforces these myths through the stereotypic messages it projected. Other social groups are also stereotyped and viewers’ attitudes about them are generalized. For example, Calzo and Ward (2009) found that heavy viewers of The Oprah Winfrey Show were more likely to believe society includes an unusually high number of families in need, and these viewers would be more likely to support interventionist and government policies in support of such families. One study also found that heavy viewers of soap operas and other television shows with romantic undertones would be more likely to have unrealistic ideas about marriage and romance, wish to get married at a younger age, and hold the belief that their marriages “will last forever” (Morgan and Shanahan 2010).

An elaboration of research that examined the relationship between the media and racial attitudes was posited in a study conducted by Lee et al. (2009), who assessed whether the level of television consumed had an impact on viewers’ perceptions of ethnic group characteristics, using the Big Five model of personality, which is a measure used to assess personality types (Lee et al. 2009). Results indicated that peoples’ stereotypic attitudes of various ethnic groups were significantly related to the level of television consumption (Lee et al. 2009). For instance, heavy viewers of television viewed Caucasians as generally more dependable, stable, and less angry than members of other
Viewers who watched mostly informational television rated Caucasians as being more conscientious than members of other ethnic groups (Lee et al.). Similar analyses were conducted for various other ethnic groups, with results showing that television has the capacity to influence viewers’ attitudes about certain ethnic groups (Lee 2009). In other words, the attitudes an individual develops is contingent on the specific messages broadcasted through each genre. According to these studies, heavy viewers are at the greatest risk for their worldviews being shaped by the mediated mechanisms such as television.

The Development of Attitudes Towards Homosexuality Through Media and Socialization

More recently, researchers have examined the relationship between the media and attitudes toward homosexuality (Calzo and Ward 2009) and television depictions of homosexuals often flatten the gay or lesbian role into a one-dimensional character. Homosexuals are often portrayed as either promiscuous, laughable characters who have trouble with relationships or their sex life, or they are portrayed as individuals struggling with HIV/AIDS. Many comedy shows in particular not only portray homosexuals as flat characters, but also homophobia is often exploited for comedic effect. Televised dramas, soap operas, and films in general often grant enough time for deeper character development, so homosexual characters in those genres tend to be represented as diverse and complex individuals (Calzo and Ward 2009). However, research on the implications of such deeper character development on individual attitudes is lacking, as is research on the influence of specific exposure to different genres of television on viewers’ attitudes toward homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Hence, as the previously discussed studies and these examples suggest, cultivation may have significant implications toward the development of people’s attitudes, especially with the increased level of media accessibility. Greater accessibility to media has emerged over the years (e.g., YouTube, Hulu, DVR, etc.), which may have increased people’s level of viewing, allowing for greater opportunities for exposure to mediated themes and more chances for audiences to develop unrealistic depictions about society (Morgan and Shanahan 2010).

Calzo and Ward (2009) and Lee et al. (2009) argue that people’s attitudes were not innate—not even entirely cultivated, but socialized as well. Socialization refers to the process of internalizing general attitudes held by social groups and institutions over time (Calzo and Ward 2009; Lee et al. 2009); the socialization process begins as early as childhood, and becomes increasingly more affluent during adolescence when group affiliations and friendships become more complex. During this period, homophobic
tendencies and general prejudices emerge (Poteat 2007). There may be pressures from the peer group and various other social institutions to conform and adopt the attitudes of the group in order to avoid being ostracized (Poteat 2007). The socialization process of people’s attitudes includes exposure to media, as well as contact with their family members, peers and friends, and religious, political and educational institutions (Poteat 2007; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Calzo and Ward 2009; Schwartz 2010). The preexisting beliefs held by these institutions have the ability to affect personal attitudes about specific topics, such as homosexuality and gay rights policies—for instance, Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2008), Calzo and Ward (2009), and Schwartz (2010) posit that religious, politically conservative, and less educated individuals tend to be less accepting of homosexuality and gay rights policies than those who are less religious, more politically liberal, and more educated. Societal attitudes about gender, ethnicity, and age may also influence peoples’ attitudes about homosexuals (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Calzo and Ward 2009; Schwartz 2010). Researchers also suggest that women, Caucasian and young adult individuals are more accepting of homosexuality and gay rights policies than men, Asian, Latino and African American and middle-aged individuals (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Calzo and Ward 2009; Schwartz 2010).

It is also important to assess how the aforementioned socialized attitudes affect the shaping of gay rights policies, including policies on same-sex marriage. Wood and Bartkowski (2004) examined how participants’ socialized attitudes about homosexuality influenced support for gay rights. They argued that people who made dispositional attributions toward homosexuality were less in favor of gay rights than those who made situational attributions. The term “dispositional attributions” refers to the belief that individuals’ behaviors were the product of inborn tendencies (i.e., homosexuality as a biological predisposition). The term “situational attributions” refers to the beliefs that individuals’ behaviors are the product of choice (i.e., homosexuality as a lifestyle choice) (Wood and Bartkowski 2004). Results indicated that believing homosexuality was innate (or dispositional) was positively correlated with support for gay rights (Wood and Bartkowski 2004). Similarly, Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2008) hypothesized that if people believed homosexuality was a dispositional (or uncontrollable) attribute, then attitudes and support for gay rights were generally more accepting. If individuals viewed homosexuality as situational (or controllable) then attitudes and support for gay rights were generally less accepting. Politically liberal individuals were more likely than conservatives to view homosexuality as a biological factor and to support gay rights policies (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008). Highly religious individuals were more likely than those
who were less religious to view homosexuality as a personal choice and were less likely to support gay rights policies (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008). Understanding dispositional and situational characteristics may offer insight into how attitudes toward homosexuality and same-sex marriage are developed and perpetuated through social mechanisms.

Schwartz (2010) introduced the social concept of sexual prejudice, which might also help explain the relationship between media consumption and an individual’s socialized attitudes regarding homosexuality. Sexual prejudice refers to heterosexual individuals’ attitudes regarding their own gender and the anxiety felt for fear of being viewed by society as homosexual (Schwartz 2010). Since homosexuality is stigmatized by society, heterosexuals develop homophobic attitudes to protect themselves against being viewed negatively (Schwartz 2010). Typically, gay men are portrayed in the media as more feminine than heterosexual men (Ivory, Gibson, and Ivory 2007). Heterosexuals may recognize this portrayal and they may fear being viewed in a feminine way. This feeling may lead individuals to develop more negative views regarding homosexuality as a means of protecting themselves from being labeled as gay. As illustrated by Calzo and Ward (2009), people’s socialized attitudes about homosexuality are influenced by the consumption of media. Viewers are exposed to mediated stereotypes that perpetuate and strengthen homophobic beliefs, negative attitudes toward gay rights policies and sexual prejudice.

Socialized attitudes toward heterosexual marriage also influence the individual’s development of attitudes toward homosexuality and same-sex marriage (LaSala 2007). LaSala (2007) investigated people’s attitudes regarding legal benefits pertaining to marriage; legal benefits include: obtaining health coverage under the spouse’s insurance; the ability to inherit spouse’s Social Security benefits, pensions, and personal assets without excessive taxation; the ability to visit a spouse in the hospital, and the ability to make health care decisions for the spouse if s/he were to be rendered incapable. Social benefits of marriage include: the notion that married couples are seen by society as normal and healthy, conversely to those who remain single or are divorced. It is argued that those who deviate from the norm (i.e., getting married) are stigmatized, which is a mechanism to keep positive and “normal” beliefs about marriage in the majority (La Sala 2007). LaSala argues that “Marriage privileges are meant to reward and legitimize certain relationships and sexual behaviors and in doing so stigmatize and marginalize others” (2007, 182). He also argues that political and religious conservatives attempt to reinforce the importance of marriage by relating marriage to overall physical and psychological wellness of the married couple and their children. This researcher further argues that, generally speaking, political and
religious conservatives believe marriage means “taming” sexual desires and, in
general, they are opposed to non-procreative sexual activities. Until *Griswold v. Connecticut* in 1965, the state of Connecticut could prevent a married couple from using birth control. The state’s position was that “legalizing same-sex marriage would sanction non-procreative sex, and therefore, according to [religious and political] conservatives, must be opposed” (LaSala 2007, 182).

**PURPOSE**

Media and the other socialized institutions that exist in our environment can have an important relationship with the development of individuals’ attitudes toward not only ethnic groups but towards other groups as well, namely homosexuals. These socialization agents may have the capacities to shape peoples’ attitudes in ways that may effect the development and engagement of certain public policies (i.e., gay rights policies, specifically policies on same-sex marriage). It is important to understand how and why their attitudes and beliefs develop and influence decision making; the more informed people are about groups and particular subjects, the more informed their decisions may be, especially regarding decisions that impact the gay community.

The purpose of this study is to further investigate the relationship between mediated and socialized institutions’ effect on the development of individuals’ attitudes toward homosexuality and to assess whether there is a significant correlation between that effect and the development of gay rights policies, such as same-sex marriage. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to analyze the relationship between heavy television viewing, specifically television genres, and attitudes toward same-sex marriage. It is hypothesized that individuals who are heavy viewers of soap operas and talk shows will have greater acceptance of homosexuality and gay rights policies. This assumption is based on past research that has indicated consumption of certain genres of television may have the capacity to influence attitude development in specific ways that are unique to the messages conveyed through that particular genre of television (Calzo and Ward 2009). In particular, it is assumed the themes of love, marriage, altruism, and volunteerism portrayed in soap operas and talk shows would have a mainstreaming effect on its viewers, meaning ideas portrayed through media will have similar effects on its viewers, regardless of cultural differences (Calzo and Ward 2009). As a result of this specific genre consumption, viewers may adopt the beliefs portrayed through that medium. It is also hypothesized that females, those who are not very religious or are politically liberal will have more accepting attitudes towards homosexuality and gay rights policies.
**H1:** There will be a positive correlation between media consumption of soap operas and talk shows and accepting attitudes toward same-sex marriage.

**H2:** Females will be more accepting of homosexuality and gay rights policies than males.

**H3:** Participants who are not very religious will be more accepting of homosexuality and gay rights policies than participants who are religious.

**H4:** Participants who are politically liberal will be more accepting of homosexuality and gay rights policies than participants who are politically conservative.

**METHOD**
Participants included 132 undergraduate students enrolled in Introductory Psychology courses at a northern California university. Their ages ranged from 18 to 42 (mean = 21.3, $SD = 3.5$), and included 49 males (37.1%) and 83 females (62.9%). Approximately 41.7% of participants self-identified as White/Caucasian, 17.4% as Latino/Hispanic, 7.6% as Black/African American, 16.7% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.8% as Native American Indian, 9.8% as Multi-ethnic/Multi-racial, and 6.1% as Other. Most participants (32.6%) were juniors in college.

**Materials**
Informed consent, debriefing forms and survey packets consisting of various measures designed to assess participants’ attitudes toward homosexuality, gay rights support, level of contact with homosexuals, level of media consumption, religiosity, political ideology, and other personal demographics were utilized for data collection.

**Measures**
A 20-item Heterosexual Attitudes Toward Homosexuality Scale (Larsen 1998) measuring how strongly participants agreed or disagreed with various gay stereotypic and homophobic statements was used to assess attitudes towards homosexuality (Wood and Bartkowski 2004). A six-item scale was used to assess level of gay rights support (Wood and Bartkowski 2004) by asking how strongly participants agreed or disagreed with various statements regarding gay rights. An eight-item scale assessed participants’ level of contact with gays (Wood and Bartkowski 2004) by asking in what, if any, various social settings did participants interact with gays. This measure is used in order to assess participants’ level of acceptance toward gay people. To assess level of media intake (Calzo and Ward 2009), participants indicated how many hours
per week they watched television and what genre of television they watched the most (i.e., dramas, comedies or sit-coms, soap operas, reality television, talk shows, or news programs). Participants were asked to complete a general demographics page, asking: age, gender, level of college education, ethnicity, religiosity, and political ideology. Participants were not asked if they were homosexual. Religiosity was measured on a five-item scale by assessing the frequency participants attended religious services in a year (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008). Political ideology was measured on a three-item scale that asked if participants were conservative, moderate, or liberal.

Procedure
On the day of the study, this researcher read the consent form to the participants, and each participant was asked to sign the consent form before surveys were administered. Once all the consent forms were signed and gathered, this researcher handed out survey packets and allotted 30 minutes for the participants to complete the forms. After participants finished the survey, respective packets were collected; consent forms were kept separate from the surveys to ensure participant anonymity, and debriefing forms were administered.

Results
Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between age, gender, level of education, religiosity, political ideology, general level of media consumption, average genre of media consumed, and general attitudes toward homosexuality and gay policies, including specific attitudes toward same-sex marriage. The majority of participants (32.6%) watched an average of 6 to 10 hours a week of television, and the television genres viewed consisted primarily of comedies or sitcoms (23.5%).

The data did not support the primary hypothesis (H1) that people who watch a high amount of genre specific media, namely television soap operas and talk shows, would have more accepting views of homosexuality and gay rights policies, specifically same-sex marriage. The data supported the secondary hypotheses (H2, H3, H4). The data indicated that level of religiosity was significantly correlated with general attitudes towards homosexuality, $r = -0.40$, $p < .01$; gay rights policies, $r = -0.32$, $p < .01$; and specific attitudes toward same-sex marriage, $r = -0.37$, $p < .01$ (H3). Multiple between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) sets were conducted to further assess the relationships between gender, ethnicity, political ideology, general media consumption, specific television genre consumption, general attitudes toward homosexuality and gay policies, and level of contact with gays. The main effect of gender on level of contact with gays, $F(1, 130) = 5.38$, $p < .05$, was significant (H2). The
main effects of political ideology on general attitudes towards homosexuality, $F(3,128) = 2.08, p < .05$, and level of acceptance of gay rights policies, $F(3,128) = .68, p < .05$, were significant \((H4)\). Post hoc Lead Significant Difference (LSD) tests indicated significant differences between the politically conservative and liberal, and politically moderate and liberal people’s attitudes regarding homosexuality, $M = -.59$ and $M = 0.8$, and gay rights policies, $M = -.48$ and $M = -.47$.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the relationship, if any, between people's level of media consumption, especially that of certain television genres, and attitudes toward gay rights policies, specifically toward same-sex marriage. The results yielded no significance for the primary hypothesis \((H1)\), but supported the secondary hypotheses \((H2, H3, H4)\).

The simple regression analyses yielded several significant factors; however, none of which were directly related to the relationship between media consumption and attitudes toward gay rights. The other significant results appeared to reflect past research findings, with regards to various socialization agents and general media consumption influencing one another and individuals' attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights, including same-sex marriage \((Poteat 2007; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Calzo and Ward 2009; Morgan and Shanahan 2010; Schwartz 2010)\). For instance, there appeared to be a significant negative correlation between level of religiosity and attitudes toward same-sex marriage. Specifically, the more religiously conservative an individual was, the less approving of homosexuality and same-sex marriage he or she was. There was also a significant positive correlation between political ideology and attitudes toward same-sex marriage: the more politically liberal an individual was, the more approving of homosexuality and same-sex marriage he or she was. There was also a significant relationship between gender and level of contact with gays; the data revealed that women tended to have greater contact with gays, which may indirectly suggest greater acceptability of homosexuality and gay rights policies than men.

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

These findings should be viewed with caution given several limitations in this study. One limitation involves the sample not reflecting a wide enough range of culturally diverse individuals. It may be advantageous for further research to examine the television consumption patterns of adolescents, middle-aged and senior individuals, of those with less or more education than that of a college undergraduate and of those from different geographical
locations. This may allow researchers to collect data from a greater range of culturally diverse people and age groups. Another limitation to the study may be that participants were not as revealing about their true feelings regarding this socially sensitive topic. Participants may have given socially acceptable responses, regardless of the fact that anonymity was assured. An example of a mechanism that may be utilized through future research includes that of The Implicit Association Test, which allows for the assessment of individuals’ biases by measuring time lapse for responses. This method may allow for a more accurate analysis of individuals’ true attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights policies.

Although no significant results were presented in this study regarding the relationship between level of genre-specific media exposure and level of acceptance toward homosexuality and same-sex marriage, further research with modified designs must be conducted to fully understand such relationships. This topic must further be explored to also more fully understand the social, emotional and cognitive implications of such mediated portrayals on individual members of the affected social groups and their mental wellbeing, particularly on the impact of identity development.

**CONCLUSION**

Wolf and Kielwasser (1991) refer to a statement made by George Gerbner that identifies all humans as social animals who exist in a world comprised of mediated institutional constructions called culture:

> …culture is that symbolic organization which socializes us and cultivates our fantasies about a world we do not experience directly. It is a system of stories and other artifacts, increasingly mass-produced, that mediates between existence and our consciousness of existence, and thereby helps shape both’… In this respect, Gerbner is right: our culture is indeed mass-mediated. And, by extension, so are we.” (1991).

Exposure to the media and the messages mediated content conveys about certain social groups may be unavoidable, as may be the influence of media on the development of attitudes, considering we live in a world that heavily relies on television as a source of information. Keeping this in mind, recognizing and understanding how and why attitudes develop is important to our understanding of television’s effects on individuals’ attitudes toward not only homosexuality and same-sex marriage, but other cultural groups as well. If we recognize this assumption, we may be able to differentiate our own attitudes and beliefs from those of the media, which may help us make more informed and education decisions about other cultural groups in the future.
REFERENCES


