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Bachelor thesis:

The influence of media exposure on attitudes towards transgender people

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to determine whether media exposure can change people's attitudes towards transgender people and whether gender plays a role as a moderation variable.

To answer the research question, an online survey was carried out which measures the attitude with the Attitudes Toward Transgendered Individuals (ATTI) Scale, before and after media exposure. Two conditions (transgender narrative and non-transgender narrative) were randomly assigned to the participants. The results showed no significant attitude change from being exposed to a transgender narrative. Furthermore, gender did not have a moderation effect on the attitude of the participants.

This shows that for this study media exposure cannot necessarily change attitudes, even if theories have set up the possibility. However, the results might be influenced by the short time between moments of measurements, the single media exposure or the narrative used in the study. On this basis, it is advisable to adapt the requirements of the study and to carry out further research to find a possible attitude change through media exposure. Furthermore, other demographics should be kept in mind as a moderation effect.

Keywords: attitude, media, transgender

Introduction

Even in 2020 the LGBTQ+ community, which represents lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning people, counts as a minority and faces a lot of problems. When asking European citizens if they identify as LGBT only 5.9% answered being part of the LGBT community (Counting the LGBT population: 6% of Europeans identify as LGBT, 2019). Belonging to a minority is connected to daily issues, which people from the LGBTQ+ community face as well. For instance, harassment and discrimination in the LGBTQ+ community are common in education, employment, health care, public spaces, or the justice system. In addition, sexual and physical assault is frequent (National Transgender Discrimination Survey, 2019). LGBTQ+ minorities face discrimination and violence from others and have a high suicide rate. A survey from 2019 reports that 41% of the respondents indicate that they attempted suicide (National Transgender Discrimination Survey, 2019). Those numbers can be confirmed by the National Survey on LGBTQ Mental Health (2019) that reported that 39% of their respondents considered attempting suicide.

Transgender people face similar problems as the LGBTQ+ community. Transgender is defined as a person who does not accept their biological sex they have since birth. People can define themselves as transgender with or without changing their sexual characteristics. Opposing to transgender is the term cisgender. Someone is cisgender whose gender identity corresponds to the gender assigned to them at birth. On account of the LGBTQ+ community embracing many different individuals, this study will focus on transgender people.

The transgender community is often associated with the homosexual or lesbian community (Oswin, 2008; Nash, 2011). Many spaces that are referred as a “queer space” may really be only gay, only for women or only lesbian, which is an issue for some transgender people because those spaces might disregard transgender people because they do not conform to their biologically assigned sex (Nash, 2011). Furthermore, transgender people find it difficult to be accepted by gays and lesbians because they are not cisgender (Kring, 2006). Therefore, transgender people face an additional issue with finding space in society because of their difference with their assigned sex compared to homosexuals (Elisa Castro-Peraza et al., 2019).

Attitudes towards transgender people

Apart from the issues mentioned before, people interviewed had more negative attitudes towards transgender individuals than towards gay or lesbian people (Lewis et al., 2017). An attitude is defined as an opinion, belief or behaviour towards something or someone. Attitudes can vary on a spectrum of negative to positive, or strong to weak. The strength of an attitude can be reinforced through the own self-interest in something or someone of the person holding

an attitude, philosophical, political or religious views. The opinion of others, for example family, friends and social groups can influence one's attitude as well (Kassin et al., 2017).

In a study by Norton and Herek (2012) questioned US adults show a more negative attitude towards transgender people than toward other sexual minorities. They explain that the reason for negative attitudes towards transgender people might be because transgender people have non-traditional gender manifestations, for instance that the gender assigned at birth does not match the feelings of transgender people. Transgender people that are perceived as conforming to gender characteristics are less discriminated against than transgender that do not conform to their birth sex, for example because of physical features that do not fit the gender norm (Miller, & Grollman, 2015; Flores et al., 2018). The study also shows that gender might correlate with negative attitudes towards transgender people (Norton, & Herek, 2012).

Gender might be a factor that influences the attitude towards transgender people. After several studies men seem to have more negative attitudes towards transgender people compared to women (Hill, & Willoughby, 2005; Norton, & Herek, 2012). The conducting of the ATTI scale also reported significantly higher scores for men on transphobia than women. A possible explanation is that men are more adhering to gender norms, because they want to endorse their masculinity and heterosexuality (Norton, & Herek, 2012). Considering gender, women may therefore hold fewer negative attitudes towards transgender individuals than men.

Transgender people in media and advertisement

Negative attitudes towards transgender individuals can be reinforced by misrepresentation or underrepresentation. Especially through media this can be a problem for the transgender community, because the media can create negative stereotypes that influence the viewer's attitude (Capuzza, 2014; "Exclusion, misrepresentation and discrimination: Still prevalent for women in American media and politics," n.d.). However, during the last decade, more transgender representation can be found in the media. With the rising of actresses like Laverne Cox (*Orange Is the New Black*) or Hunter Schafer (*Euphoria*) that represent transgender roles in famous TV shows, transgender people gain more recognition in the media. Before that, many transgender figures in shows and movies were played by cisgender people, now more transgender roles are given to transgender actors and actresses.

The rise of the LGBTQ+ community in the media makes companies embrace the opportunity to be more inclusive (Mocarski et al., 2019). In the advertisement branch more LGBTQ+ figures can be seen in ads. For instance, big brands like Gillette or Starbucks included transgender people in their advertisement. Gillette showed a father teaching his transgender son (Samson Bonkeabantu Brown, who is transgender) how to shave. Starbucks won the Channel

4's Diversity in Advertising Award with their series of commercials #WhatsYourName shedding a light on the problems of transgender people in their daily lives. Those advertisements can create a positive light on the transgender community by telling the narratives of transgender people shortly but precisely. In addition, advertisement can be viewed by everyone and reaches a big population, thus advertisement might help establish a more positive attitude towards transgender individuals in the media.

Theories of attitude change

Various theories will be acknowledged to see if attitude change through media and advertisement is possible. The direct effect model claims that mass media can change attitudes and behaviour directly, however this hypothesis was disproved.

The contact hypothesis from Allport (1958) implies that personal contact is an effective method to reduce prejudice towards a minority. The parasocial contact hypothesis expands this by explaining that direct contact is not needed, but interaction through mass media has a similar effect as personal social interaction (Schiappa et al., 2005). Parasocial contact proves to change beliefs about minorities and reduce prejudices (Schiappa et al., 2005). However, the persona that delivers the message through mass media needs to create an intimacy and involve the audience. If the audience does not engage with the message or feels involved with the persona the evidence for the parasocial contact hypothesis will be less (Horton & Wohl, 1959). Consequently, if the interaction between the transgender person shown through media and the audience is established correctly the effects of the parasocial contact hypothesis should be measurable.

The parasocial contact hypothesis can be underlined by the results of the research of Gillig et al. (2017). They proposed that attitude can change if people are exposed to narratives of minorities through the media. Their research concluded that conservative viewers that were exposed to transgender narratives develop a positive attitude towards seeing more transgender narratives. Narratives in general create a more positive attitude, compassion, and information-seeking towards the individual (Oliver et al., 2012). Other data also reinforces the conclusion that narratives of transgender people in the media could influence the attitude of people positively towards the minority (Batson et al., 1997; Oliver et al., 2012; Gillig et al., 2017). Especially for transgender people, a minority, exposure through media can be beneficial because most of the population either does not have information about the minority or does not understand the narrative.

While being exposed to transgender narratives might change attitudes it is also important to acknowledge the processing of the narrative that participants will watch. After the

elaboration likelihood model, the change of attitudes depends on the processing of information. Information can be processed through the central or peripheral route. If information is processed through the central route the information was more elaborated by the person, which increases a stronger attitude change. However, elaboration likelihood can be decreased when the person thought the knowledge, they learned was irrelevant or the changes do not persist because the person processed the message through the peripheral route. While people's attitude may change, it is not always translated into behaviour if they lack skills or self. Hence, mere exposure to transgender individuals in the media might not necessarily change the attitude of the participants.

Furthermore, Gillig and Murphy (2016) observed a boomerang effect. After exposing cisgender youth toward LGBTQ+ narratives this boomerang effect led to more negative attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ people. Tormala and Petty (2002) could provide an explanation for the boomerang effect. In their study, they found that attitudes can be strengthened when people knowingly resist persuasion. Therefore, when people hold negative attitudes towards transgender people and see transgender people included in media that serves persuasion, they might hold a stronger negative attitude.

Research Question

To summarize, the LGBTQ+ community faces discrimination in various sectors of life. Belonging to the transgender community comes with additional issues that homosexuals do not face because they are mostly cisgender. In the population a general negative attitude can be measured towards transgender people, mostly because transgender people do not fit the norm. Those negative attitudes correlate with gender of the person holding the attitude. In recent years, the transgender community gained more media exposure. To influence the attitude of participants, advertisement can be used to display the narratives of transgender people as they can be accessed by everyone and are shown more often. This media exposure might help to influence or even change attitude towards transgender people. Other research conducted says it is possible to change attitude towards transgender people by using narratives of those minorities in media. However, this is only possible if the audience engages in the storyline presented and feel involved with the character. On the one hand, the growing representation of the LGBTQ+ community in the media can be an advantage for the community and help tackle the problems they face. On the other hand, inaccurate depictions of transgender people can reinforce stereotypes and lack of understanding (Capuzza, 2014).

The parasocial contact hypothesis adds that through media prejudice against minorities can be changed, but only with involvement of the audience. The Elaboration Likelihood Model

explains that mere exposure is not always enough to change an attitude because of varying variables that might be involved during attitudinal change. In addition, the observed boomerang effect might lead to more enhanced negative views because of watching transgender narratives. The further question is whether the media can influence people's behaviour, change their attitudes, beliefs, and perception or not.

Because other studies measured negative attitudes towards transgender people, the purpose of this study is to examine the attitude of our study population towards transgender people upon media exposure. It will be studied if media exposure through advertisement can change the attitude of the study population towards transgender people. Gender will be measured in the study to identify a moderating effect. This study will contribute to the growing literature on media exposure for the transgender community.

H1: Attitude towards transgender people will be more positive after watching advertisement with transgender narrative instead of non-transgender narrative.

H2: Participants who had an already positive attitude towards transgender people will still have a positive attitude after watching advertisement with transgender narrative.

H3: The positive effect of watching an advertisement with transgender narrative will be greater for women than for men.

Methods

Design

A questionnaire survey design or correlational survey design with between-subjects was used. There was one independent variable (media exposure) with two levels (transgender narrative and non-transgender narrative). The dependent variable was the attitude towards transgender people measured before and after the media exposure with a questionnaire. A moderation variable with the sociodemographic factor of gender will be probed.

Participants

Participants were gathered via convenience sampling through personal messages on WhatsApp or distribution of the survey via Instagram. In total 165 responses were recorded, but the data needed to be adjusted and the number reduced to 101 participants. Missing data were eliminated because 62 participants did not finish the survey. In addition, one participant was under 18 and another participant was eliminated because of invalid answers in the demographics. Since the questionnaire measures total scores, no outliers were found or deleted.

The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 81 years ($M = 30.69$). 59,4% have named German as their primary nationality 12,9% as Dutch and 27,7% have another primary

nationality. Of all participants 39,6% identified as male, 60,4% as female. 82,2% of participants identified as heterosexual, 3% as homosexual, 5,9% as bisexual, 1,0% as asexual, 5,9% as pansexual and 2,0% preferred to self-describe. As far as religion was concerned, 43,6% of participants reported being Christian, 1,0% Jews, 4,0% Islamic, 1,0% Hinduistic, 4,0% Buddhistic, 41,6% non-religious and 5,0% as other. Regarding political ideology, 6,9 % identified as conservative, 45,5% as liberal, 15,8% as being in the centre, 26,7% as non-political and 5,0% as other.

Materials

A survey was created with Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) that included a consent form, six questions about the demographics of the participants, one questionnaire that needed to be answered two times, a familiarity with the transgenderism question, two different videos, five additional questions for the manipulation check and the debriefing. The survey was combined with other students which is why it included additional questionnaires. However, for this study only the measures about transgender people are important. The participants were asked to answer The Attitudes Toward Transgendered Individuals Scale (Walch et al., 2012) with 20 questions on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. The questions used are mostly in favour for transgender people, for example Q16 “I would like to have friends who are transgendered individuals”. Some questions are however against transgenderism, for instance Q2 “Transgendered individuals should not be allowed to work with children” (see Appendix A). The ATTI Scale needed to be answered before and after watching a video. Two advertisement videos from Starbucks were used, one with a transgender narrative and the other with non-transgender narrative. In the transgender narrative a trans man is continuously misgendered because officially he still has his female birth name. When he has the opportunity to state his name for his drink at Starbucks, he takes the chance to say his name he identifies with. In the other video Starbucks shows that their orders were named after what is in the cup, now they introduced a change by writing the name of the person who ordered the drink on the cup. After the video five questions were used to check for manipulation. It was asked if the participant had seen the scene before, what hair colour the main character had and how the main character would identify. In addition, participants were asked if the parents of the main character were shown and what type of media was shown. In the end of the questionnaire participants were clarified about the detailed aim of the research study, which is that the questions and videos were related to the LGBTQ+ community.

Procedure

After ethical approval of the study participants were sent a link to the survey. In the beginning of the survey participants had to fill in an informed consent in which they were informed about the general aim of the research and how their data will be used to contribute to it. They could either choose the option 'I consent' or 'I don't consent'. If they agreed to the consent the participants were asked to fill in their demographic information about their age, nationality, gender, sexual orientation religion and political view. If participants did not agree with the consent form, they could not partake in the survey. Afterwards, participants could fill out a questionnaire about either their attitude towards transgender, bisexual or asexual people. The distribution of these questionnaires was randomized but, evenly presented, to avoid carryover effects. The questionnaires about the attitudes toward bisexuals and asexuals do not contribute to the study, thus for this study only the answers about attitudes towards transgender people were included. Following, participants had to answer if there were familiar with the sexuality they were questioned about prior. Then, they could proceed with watching a short video. Participants were evenly randomized to either watch a Starbucks advertisement with a transgender person or a general Starbucks advertisement. After watching the video, participants had to answer five additional questions about some details of the videos to have a manipulation check. Participants then had to fill out the prior questionnaire about their attitude towards transgender people again. After filling out all of the questions participants were transferred to the debriefing page. If participants were interested in the results, they could leave their e-mail address to receive the results after the study is completed. Subsequently the survey is finished, and participants were thanked for participating in the study. In general, only after the participant had answered all items, they could proceed with the next step.

Data Analysis

For the participants in the final analysis, frequency tables were made for age, nationality, gender, sexuality, religion, and political view. Furthermore, total scores were calculated for before watching either transgender or non-transgender narrative, after watching either transgender or non-transgender narrative as well as total scores for all participants before watching the video and after the video. A total score higher than 60 is interpreted as a positive attitude towards transgender individuals.

An analysis of descriptives was carried out to compare the means for both transgender narrative and non-transgender narrative. The comparison of means was done to investigate the first hypothesis if attitude towards transgender people will be more positive after watching an advertisement with transgender narrative instead of non-transgender narrative.

For the second hypothesis a paired-samples t-test was carried out, to check whether existing positive attitudes remain positive.

The PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) was used to investigate hypothesis 3. The effect of gender on the relationship between media exposure and attitude (moderating effect) was analysed for hypothesis 3. The independent variable was the media exposure, calculated as a dummy variable for either transgender or non-transgender narrative, and the dependent variable was the attitude change calculated by the deviation between the total score before watching the video and the total score after watching the video.

Results

The first hypothesis is rejected because the comparison of the means of watching the transgender narrative post-measure ($p = .91$) and watching the non-transgender narrative post-measure ($p = .51$) showed no significant difference (see Table 1).

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation for pre- and post-measure for both conditions

	Pre-measure	Post-measure
Transgender	$M = 88.53$	$M = 89.72$;
narrative	$SD = 12.41$	$SD = 12.49$
Non-transgender	$M = 87.93$	$M = 87.96$;
narrative	$SD = 11.91$	$SD = 12.44$

The second hypothesis is confirmed, because the t-test shows significant effect between pre- and post-measures of watching transgender narratives ($p = .03$).

In the analysis performed to look into hypothesis 3 the R-squared shows that the model does not fit, and the variance is not explained by the model ($R-sq = 0.03$). When looking at the model and the interaction effect with gender as a moderating variable $p = .46$ is found, which implies that the moderation effect is not statistically significant. Based on these results the last hypothesis that watching an advertisement with transgender narrative will have a greater positive effect for women than for men is rejected.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine the attitude of the study population towards transgender people upon media exposure. Based on theories narratives of minorities in the media can produce more compassion and more positive attitudes towards that minority (Oliver et al., 2012; Gillig et al., 2017). Therefore, theoretically media exposure should lead to attitude change. However, this study could not confirm the results of other studies, because the results

did not support the first hypothesis that attitude towards transgender people will be more positive after watching an advertisement with transgender narrative instead of non-transgender narrative. The second hypothesis, participants who had an already positive attitude towards transgender people will still have a positive attitude after watching an advertisement with transgender narrative could be confirmed. Therefore, a boomerang effect as mentioned in the study of Gillig and Murphy (2016) could not be found in this study. A greater positive effect of watching an advertisement with transgender narrative for women than for men could not be found. Hence, the last hypothesis could not be confirmed.

The results of the study could not prove that attitude change is possible. A reason for this could be that it must be measured and standardized how much media exposure is required to change attitudes. The study used only one advertisement clip as a single exposure to the media. After Berger and Mitchell (1989) advertising repetition can result in attitudes as confident as formed from direct behavioural experiences. Based on this, single exposure of advertisement might not be enough to change attitudes and explain the rejection of the first hypothesis. Another explanation could be that the time between pre and post measurement of the ATTI scale was short so that the effect of media exposure on attitude was not yet measurable or needed further elaboration as mentioned in the elaboration likelihood model. Since the study could not determine an attitude change, it is possible that the result can be explained by the lack of involvement with the narrative, because Horton and Wohl (1959) have indicated involvement with the character of the narrative as a reason for possible attitude change.

Despite the rejected hypotheses the results of the study imply that the study population had a general positive attitude towards transgender people. This is in contrast with measurements of other studies mentioned, for instance the study of Norton and Herek (2012) that showed negative attitudes in adults towards transgender people than toward other sexual minorities. The results could imply that people already have a positive attitude towards minority groups including transgender people. Nowadays, more transgender representation can be found in the media, thus it might be possible that media exposure already has had a positive influence on attitudes towards transgender people prior to conducting the study.

Strengths and limitations

The advantages of the study are that the different tests were randomized. Furthermore, since the LGBTQ+ community is a minority not many studies investigate their issues and especially for transgender people. Thus, the study offers in-depth research on the LGBTQ+ and transgender community. The study also collected data from 100 participants in a short time and has a scattered age range for an online study.

However, the study has several limitations. The drop-out rate was high, this was probably due to the length and repetitiveness of the study. Nonetheless, because of the randomization of the three different tests the dropout rate was limited. The biggest limitation and probably the reason for the unconfirmed hypothesis is that a single media exposure was used. Even though studies indicate media exposure can change attitudes (Batson et al., 1997; Gillig et al., 2017; Oliver et al., 2012), participants only watched a short advertisement clip which might be not enough for an attitudinal change. The elaboration likelihood model could explain the findings, because for information to change attitudes the information needs to be relevant for the person and processed through the central route. Just mere exposure to media is not enough for an attitude change. Another possibility is that participants thought the video with the transgender narrative was not engaging and therefore did not feel involved with the persona. After the parasocial contact hypothesis to change attitudes through media exposure the narrative must be engaging, is this not given is the parasocial contact hypothesis not ensured. In addition, the research was conducted through convenience sampling, which does not represent the general population. Therefore, it is possible when using random sampling the results could deviate from the results of this study.

Recommendations

Although the study offers an insight on attitudes on transgender people, further studies should adjust the study design. It is suggested to show the transgender narrative more frequently instead of a single exposure. This should be done to check if the frequency correlates with the attitudinal change. For instance, further studies could show multiple and different transgender narratives after one another or could do a long-term study. The sampling does also not represent the general population; therefore, it is advised against convenient sampling and for simple random sampling. It might be advisable to check for other moderating effects within the demographics of the participants in another study. This study only focused on gender therefore other studies could investigate the influence of, for instance, sexuality, political view, religion, or age on the attitudes towards transgender people.

Conclusion

Concluding only one of the three hypotheses was confirmed. The main effect that attitudes towards transgender people will be more positive after media exposure could not be confirmed. As well as the interaction effect that a positive effect on attitudes would be greater for women could not be confirmed by the study. However, an overall positive attitude toward transgender people was not influenced by neither the transgender narrative nor non-transgender narrative. The results can be explained by the short time between moments of measurements or

the single media exposure. In addition, the narrative might not be as engaging as initially thought.

To avoid the errors of this study in the next research it is advised to do multiple exposure to the transgender narrative, shorten the survey, and to use random sampling. Additionally, it should be checked for other moderating variables then gender.

Even if the study did not find negative attitudes or an influence of media exposure to change negative attitudes towards transgender people, we must keep in mind that transgender people are still a minority and face many issues in their daily life. It might not necessarily be negative attitudes from people, but there is still harassment and discrimination in education, employment, health care, public spaces, or the justice system that needs to be addressed and changed.

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Appendix A

Table A1

Items of ATTI scale

-
1. It would be beneficial to society to recognize transgenderism as normal
 2. Transgendered individuals should not be allowed to work with children
 3. Transgenderism is immoral
 4. All transgendered bars should be closed down
 5. Transgendered individuals are a viable part of our society
 6. Transgenderism is a sin
 7. Transgenderism endangers the institution of the family
 8. Transgendered individuals should be accepted completely into our society
 9. Transgendered individuals should be barred from the teaching profession
 10. There should be no restrictions on transgenderism
 11. I avoid transgendered individuals whenever possible
 12. I would feel comfortable working closely with transgendered individual
 13. I would enjoy attending social functions at which transgendered individuals were present
 14. I would feel comfortable if I learned that my neighbour was a transgendered individual
 15. Transgendered individuals should not be allowed to cross dress in public
 16. I would like to have friends who are transgendered individuals
 17. I would feel comfortable if I learned that my best friend was a transgendered individual
 18. I would feel uncomfortable if a close family member became romantically involved with a transgendered individual
 19. Transgendered individuals are really just closed gays
 20. Romantic partners of transgendered individuals should seek psychological treatment
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