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# THE EFFECT OF LGBT FILM EXPOSURE ON POLICY PREFERENCE

Grant Baldwin  
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Capstone Paper (Quantitative)

In recent years, Hollywood has produced a greater number of films that portray humanized homosexual characters in either leading or supporting roles. Notable and successful films of this type include *Love Simon (2018)*, *Green Book (2018)*, and *Bohemian Rhapsody (2018)*. The critical and financial success of these films is most likely a result of increasing levels of social acceptance of the LGBT community in the last decade. But perhaps the exposition of a humanized homosexual character in a film could motivate an individual who originally did not support pro-LGBT legislation to amend their opinions. This research seeks to answer the question: does increased exposure to films containing a humanized homosexual character affect viewers' support for pro-LGBT policies? Specifically, it seeks to discover whether these films have any sway on policy support among those living in the predominantly religious and conservative state of Utah. I claim that increased exposure to films containing sympathetic LGBT characters will correlate with increased support for pro-LGBT policies. This paper provides a short description of the history of homosexuality in cinema as well as American society, explains basic assumptions based on prior research on the political implications of film, outlines the methods whereby its claim was tested, analyzes observational data, and deliberates the implications of its analysis.

Specific terms of importance are used in this paper as follows. Homosexuality relates to the romantic and sexual behavior and attraction between individuals of the same sex or gender. A homosexual is an individual who attaches a sense of their identity to these behaviors and attractions. The terms "gay" and "lesbian" are also used in this paper to refer to homosexual individuals. LGBT is an acronym that encompasses people who identify themselves as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. A pro-LGBT policy is defined as legislation that attempts to satisfy the demands of LGBT interest groups by providing equal rights to individuals

regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. Lastly, a humanizing film is defined as a motion picture that uses messages that do not portray homosexuality as strictly comedic or deplorable, but rather characterizes them as people with similar emotions, motivations, and ambitions as the straight characters portrayed. A humanizing message in the context of homosexuals can portray a homosexual lifestyle as favorable, as well as focus on the humanity of a specific homosexual individual.

### **Attitudes toward Homosexuals in Film and Society**

The depiction of homosexuality in film has an interesting history. Early Hollywood made a mockery of cross-dressing males and females in its silent comedies (Benshoff & Griffin 2006, 25). In response to public outcry against immoral and violent films, Hollywood instituted its Production Code in 1933, which restricted “sex perversion,” including the depiction of homosexuality (Benshoff & Griffin 2006, 30). Under the influence of the Production Code, Hollywood depicted queer-coded characters—or characters that were only subtextually implied to be queer—as predators and villains in horror films (Benshoff 1997, 12). Homosexuality continued to be either censored or viewed in a negative light in films until the counter-culture movement of the late 1960’s and 1970’s grew in popularity. Hollywood adjusted to the counter-cultural climate and began to release more films targeted at younger audiences that reflected the views of the sexual revolution (Mennel 2012, 50). Mainstream films began streamlining gay side characters—characterized as such either explicitly through direct references to their homosexuality or implicitly through subtle nods to gay behavior or stereotypes—into supporting and minor roles. In the decades following the sexual revolution, queer films have dominated the independent film scene and have even received Academy Award consideration (Benshoff & Griffin 2006, 262). From the late nineties into the twenty-first century, evolving social norms

allowed humanized homosexuality to become more prevalent in blockbuster Hollywood films. What had originated in film as a point of mockery evolved into a commonplace occurrence. Film scholar Richard Maltby said, “Hollywood is a ‘social institution,’ and therefore it is understandable that it should reflect society’s hopes, fears and beliefs” (Maltby 1995, 361). Society’s hopes, fears, and beliefs about homosexuals in particular over time can be seen very clearly throughout cinema history.

Attitudes toward homosexuality and the LGBT community have also evolved over time. In 1970, more than 70% of Americans viewed homosexual behavior as always wrong and believed that homosexuals should not be allowed to work in government positions or as court officials (Levitt & Klassen 1976, 31). Although homosexuality as a whole was looked down upon, those who had prior familiarity with a homosexual, such as a family member or coworker, had less prejudice toward homosexuals (Herek 1984). As the twentieth century came to a close, American attitudes toward homosexuality and LGBT civil liberties grew more positive. This cultural shift spawned from significant demographic shifts in America. Notably, the increased number of college graduates and the decreased amount of religious affiliation contributed to higher levels of support for the protection of civil liberties of homosexual Americans by the year 1998 (Loftus 2001, 767). Public opinion polling from 1981 to 2000 suggests that acceptance of homosexuality is negatively correlated with age (Anderson & Fetner 2008). Further, attitudes among young adults in the 21<sup>st</sup> century suggest that they are less likely to demonstrate sexual prejudice to their gay and lesbian peers (Horn 2006). These demographic and social norm shifts spawned a new push for LGBT rights, recognition, and non-discriminatory policy.

The first two decades of the twenty-first century saw massive changes in legislation and policy pertaining to the equal treatment of homosexuals, culminating with the legalization of

same-sex marriage. Since then, a variety of anti-discrimination bills and resolutions for equality regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation have been debated in Congress and state legislatures. Although some states have enacted LGBT employment anti-discrimination laws, homosexuals still regularly report incidents of discrimination to their state employment agencies (Sears & Mallory 2011). Despite numerous cases of discrimination, national trends suggest much wider acceptance of pro-LGBT policies in recent years. By 2014, a majority of Americans (56 percent) and growing numbers of Republicans (41 percent) and young adults (about 75 percent) supported same-sex couples' right to marry (NORC 2014). By 2017, in the state of Utah, where this study took place, 54% favored the legalization of same-sex marriages, while 80% favored LGBT employment and housing nondiscrimination laws (Public Religion Research Institute 2017). Americans that oppose anti-discrimination policy link their opposition to their personal views of morality or privacy, rather than to a lack of desire for equality (Mucciaroni 2008).

Today, mainstream films tend to reflect more favorable attitudes toward homosexuality and pro-LGBT policies by including gay and lesbian main or supporting characters and portraying them in a sympathetic, humanizing manner. For example, *The Imitation Game* (2014) is a historical drama that tells the story of the World War II British cryptanalyst, Alan Turing, that ends with social commentary about the chemical castration Turing and thousands of other homosexuals endured by the order of the British government. *Green Book* (2018) also paints a picture of the history of discrimination against homosexuals in the mid-twentieth century, although its messages are not as glaring as *The Imitation Game*'s. Additionally, recent biopics *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018) and *Rocketman* (2019) explore the homosexuality of beloved musicians Freddie Mercury and Elton John. Homosexuality has even made its way into fantasy and science fiction. *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald* (2018) depicts the

protagonist's mentor, Albus Dumbledore, gazing into a mirror that will reveal what an individual desires most and seeing a romantic relationship with another man. Other films have attempted to slip suggestions of homosexuality into the background rather than at the forefront, such as *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), which featured a lesbian kiss between two minor characters in the back corner of the frame at the film's conclusion. These aforementioned films are only a selection of a vast number of films in recent years that have humanized their homosexual characters.

### **Theory & Hypothesis**

Alongside the influx of Hollywood's humanized homosexual characters, perhaps there has also been a shift in policy preference as a result of these films' popularity. Previous research conducted by Butler et al. (1995) concluded that a politically charged film has significant impacts on the audience's intentions to engage in various political actions such as voting and donating money to campaigns (248). Additionally, films also have the power to significantly change an audience's opinions on specific government entities (Pautz 2015). Riggle et al. (1996) conducted specific research that observed the impact of viewing a documentary about a gay politician on the audience's level of prejudice toward homosexuals. The study found that the documentary film had a "significant impact on viewers' attitudes toward gay men, and regardless of [pre-viewing] level of prejudice, the impact was in the less-prejudiced direction" (Riggle et al. 1996, 64).

These previous studies' confirmations that film has the power to shift an audience's opinion on politics as well as level of prejudice toward homosexuals influence this research's assumptions. Film scholar Douglas Kellner suggests that "images and figures constitute part of the ideological representations of sex, race, and class in film and culture" (Kellner 1991, 3).

Thus, even though a film featuring an LGBT character may have low levels of political content, the viewer can surely still unearth ideological meaning from the film's figures (Haas, Christensen, & Haas 2015, 6). When an individual finds what they are consuming entertaining, they will passively digest messages about how society functions for a minority (Garretson 2009, 74). If exposure to a film can impact an audience member's political and social opinions, it should naturally follow that increased exposure to a number of films containing references to homosexuality and homosexual characters will increase the level of impact in a viewer's opinions.

This research aims to discover how much of a sway increased exposure to these films has on the policy positions of those residing in the state of Utah, which is somewhat unique because of its dominant conservative and religious attitudes. As I mentioned earlier, I hypothesize that increased exposure to humanized homosexual characters in film would translate to greater support of pro-LGBT policies. Although conservatism is often negatively correlated with support for pro-LGBT policies, I expect to find that the more someone is exposed to films with a humanized LGBT character, the more their policy preferences would change to support pro-LGBT policy regardless of political persuasion. This assumption is supported by Riggle et al.'s (1996) findings surrounding exposure to a pro-LGBT film and subsequent levels of social prejudice toward homosexuals (64). Further, I hypothesize that exposure to films with higher levels of LGBT content will also predict stronger support for pro-LGBT policies.

## **Methods**

A field survey was designed to test the effect on increased exposure to films containing a LGBT character on attitudes toward pro-LGBT policies among residents of the state of Utah. The survey was administered from March 16-20, 2020. Due to the encouraged social distancing

of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the survey respondents responded electronically through the internet. The survey was posted through Google Forms on Facebook groups such as “Salt Lake/Utah County Yard Sales, Job Listings, Business Advertisement,” “Utah Classifieds,” “Utah Community Forum,” and “Salt Lake Area News.” Members of these groups were informed they would be taking part in an undergraduate research survey, but no information regarding the content of the survey was provided prior to its administration. Because these internet groups were not entirely political in nature, it was hard to predict whether there was any likely bias in the sample collected. However, social media users tend to be younger on average than the general population, so the sample could be skewed to include a larger proportion of younger respondents than within the target population.

Respondents were asked a collection of demographic questions that could be predictive of their levels of support for pro-LGBT policies. Among these were their age, sexual orientation, whether or not they have a familial or personal relationship with any lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender individuals, and if so, how many. Additionally, they were asked to identify their level of political conservatism on a scale of 1-5 (1 being not conservative at all and 5 being very conservative). These demographic questions were chosen because they could help identify possible factors that predict an individual’s level of support for pro-LGBT policies. They were specifically selected based off conclusions drawn by prior research in which younger ages, less conservatism, and personal contact with an LGBT individual were correlated with warmer feelings about homosexuality (Anderson & Fetner 2008; Horn 2006; Valelly 2012).

To measure an individual’s exposure to films containing an LGBT character, respondents were asked how many films of this type they had viewed in the last five years. A list of twenty-two films ranging in release dates from 2015 to 2019 was provided and the respondents

indicated which films they had viewed. This was done to help respondents that may have had trouble remembering or recognizing which films they had viewed that contained LGBT representation. The selected films were all major releases that had at least some name recognition and received relative critical and financial success. The twenty-two films on the list were:

<i>Pitch Perfect 2 (2015)</i>	<i>Dope (2015)</i>
<i>Moonlight (2016)</i>	<i>Deadpool (2016)</i>
<i>Star Trek Beyond (2016)</i>	<i>It (2017)</i>
<i>Power Rangers (2017)</i>	<i>The Shape of Water (2017)</i>
<i>Lady Bird (2017)</i>	<i>Pitch Perfect 3 (2017)</i>
<i>Deadpool 2 (2018)</i>	<i>Ready Player One (2018)</i>
<i>Solo: A Star Wars Story (2018)</i>	<i>Love, Simon (2018)</i>
<i>To All the Boys I've Loved Before (2018)</i>	<i>Bohemian Rhapsody (2018)</i>
<i>Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald (2018)</i>	<i>Mary Queen of Scots (2018)</i>
<i>Green Book (2018)</i>	<i>Rocketman (2019)</i>
<i>Jojo Rabbit (2019)</i>	<i>Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker (2019)</i>

\*An additional option was given to respondents to indicate if they had seen none of the above films.

Respondents then answered questions pertaining to their opinions on five separate pro-LGBT policies. Support for a particular policy was measured on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating strong opposition and 5 indicating strong support. The questions were worded as follows:

<b>Table 1: Survey Question Wording</b>	
<b>Employment Anti-Discrimination</b>	<i>All in all, how likely would you support legislation that protects individuals in the workplace regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity?</i>
<b>Housing Anti-Discrimination</b>	<i>All in all, how likely would you support legislation that protects housing rights of individuals regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity?</i>
<b>Adoption Rights</b>	<i>How likely would you support legislation that gives same-sex parents the same child adoption rights as heterosexual couples?</i>
<b>Transgender Bathrooms</b>	<i>How likely would you support legislation that allows children to use the bathroom in public schools that suits their preferred gender identity?</i>

<b>Conversion Therapy</b>	<i>All in all, how likely would you support legislation that bans child conversion therapy?</i>
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When the demographics of the sample collected are compared to the demographics of the population as a whole, there are some obvious discrepancies. Most notably, the survey oversampled individuals that were young and identified as leaning liberal and liberal. This most likely occurred because the survey was conducted over the internet within like-minded groups. To accommodate for this oversampling, I apply post-stratification weights to the sample as follows:

<b>Table 2: Post-stratification Weights</b>			
	Population Parameters <sup>1</sup>	Sample Parameters	Applied Weight (W)
<b>Conservative/Lean Conservative</b>	54%	18.48%	2.92
<b>No Lean/Independent</b>	16%	18.18%	0.88
<b>Liberal/Lean Liberal</b>	30%	63.34%	0.47

Within the analysis, the twenty-two films were divided into three categories based on the amount of LGBT content within each film. This was done in order to differentiate the effects of films with subtle nods to homosexuality from films in which homosexuality is a prominent theme on an individual's policy preference. Films with low LGBT content were categorized as films in which homosexuality is either only implied or limited to a single, isolated moment during the film. Films were categorized with medium LGBT content if homosexuality plays a minor role in the film's plot. In these films, a main or prominent supporting character was either openly homosexual or involved in some homosexual actions, whether those actions were shown

<sup>1</sup> "Party Affiliation Among Adults in Utah." Religious Landscape Study, Pew Research Center, updated 2015, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/utah/party-affiliation/#demographic-information>.

or merely implied. High LGBT content films were those in which the plot centered around the homosexuality of either the main character or a prominent supporting character. Within these films, there was clear depiction of romance between characters of the same sex. The breakdown of the twenty-two films into the three respective categories are shown in Table 3.

<b>Low LGBT Content</b>	<b>Medium LGBT Content</b>	<b>High LGBT Content</b>
<i>Pitch Perfect 2 (2015)</i>	<i>Dope (2015)</i>	<i>Moonlight (2016)</i>
<i>Star Trek Beyond (2016)</i>	<i>Deadpool (2015)</i>	<i>Lady Bird (2017)</i>
<i>It (2017)</i>	<i>The Shape of Water (2017)</i>	<i>Love Simon (2018)</i>
<i>Power Rangers (2017)</i>	<i>Deadpool 2 (2018)</i>	<i>Bohemian Rhapsody (2018)</i>
<i>Pitch Perfect 3 (2017)</i>	<i>To All the Boys I've Loved Before (2018)</i>	<i>Rocketman (2019)</i>
<i>Ready Player One (2018)</i>	<i>Mary Queen of Scots (2018)</i>	
<i>Solo: A Star Wars Story (2018)</i>	<i>Green Book (2018)</i>	
<i>Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald (2018)</i>		
<i>Jojo Rabbit (2019)</i>		
<i>Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker (2019)</i>		

For the main analysis, I simplified support for each policy to a 3-point scale, from -1 (opposition to the policy) to 1 (support for the policy).<sup>2</sup> To test my hypothesis, I conducted an ordinal logit regression with the collected data in which an average level of support for all five pro-LGBT policies is the dependent variable. The independent variables included the number of films viewed by category as well as each respondents' age, conservatism, sexual orientation, presence of an LGBT friend or family member, and the number of LGBT friends and family members. In order to avoid problems associated with multicollinearity with the three LGBT variables, I presented separate models with these variables together and separately. Further, each

<sup>2</sup> Respondents that indicated an opposition to the given policy (1 or 2 on the 5-point scale) were coded with a support value of -1. Likewise, respondents that indicated support (4 or 5 on the 5-point scale) were coded with a support value of 1. Respondents that indicated they neither oppose nor support the given policy (3 on the 5-point scale) were coded with a support score of zero (0).

category of film is given its own models as well. An ordinal logit regression ensures that the effect of increased exposure to films with LGBT characters on policy preference can be measured while holding all other predictor variables constant. Because the other variables are held constant, I was able to examine a specific relationship between the number of films viewed and support for pro-LGBT policies.

### Analysis

	(4)	(8)	(9)	(13)
<b>Low LGBT Content</b>	-0.018 (0.077)			-0.101 (0.092)
<b>Medium LGBT Content</b>		0.295** (0.121)		0.246* (0.140)
<b>High LGBT Content</b>			0.399** (0.157)	0.332** (0.167)
<b>Age</b>	0.014 (0.016)	0.127 (0.014)	0.008 (0.014)	0.006 (0.013)
<b>Conservatism</b>	-1.110*** (0.137)	-1.045*** (0.139)	-1.049*** (0.137)	-0.994*** (0.148)
<b>LGBT</b>	1.590*** (0.553)	1.664*** (0.610)	1.440** (0.629)	1.397** (0.664)
<b>LGBT Contact (Binary Variable)</b>	0.423 (0.569)	0.381 (0.581)	0.471 (0.569)	0.397 (0.588)
<b>Number of LGBT Contacts</b>	0.088* (0.050)	0.057 (0.051)	0.066 (0.048)	(0.065) (0.053)
<b>Pseudo R-squared</b>	0.163	0.170	0.171	0.177
<b>Observations (N):</b>	329	329	329	329
<p><b>*p &lt; 0.1, **p &lt; 0.05, *** p &lt; 0.01, two-tailed</b>  <b>Robust standard errors shown in parentheses. The dependent variable is the average level of support for pro-LGBT policies.</b></p>				

Table 4 displays the results of selected models of the ordered logit regression. The models predict that when all other variables are held constant, increased exposure to films with

<sup>3</sup> Results for all thirteen models are presented in Table 5.

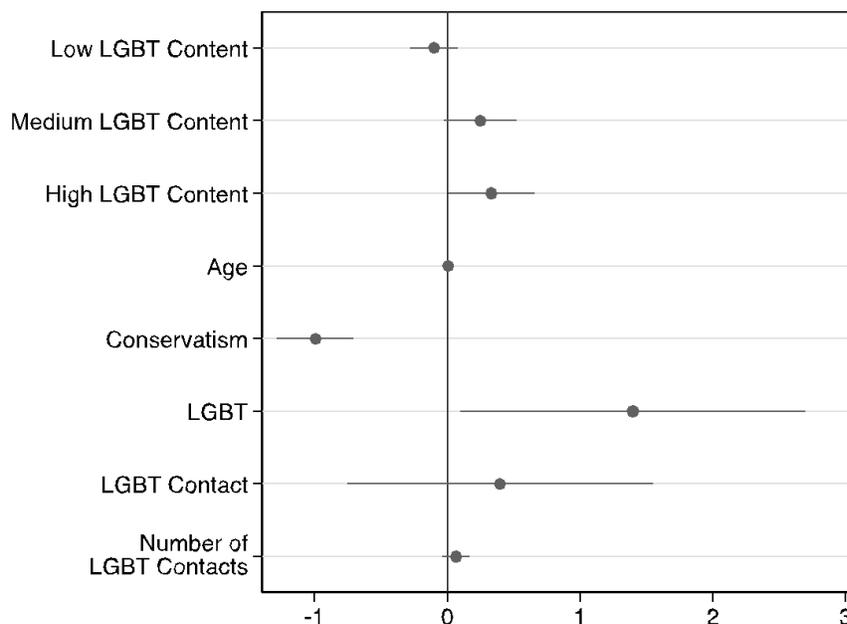
medium and high levels of LGBT content have a statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) positive relationship with respondents' levels of support for pro-LGBT policies. I've attributed this to the

**Table 5: Support for Pro-LGBT Policies. Ordered Logit Regression Results.**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
<b>Low LGBT Content</b>	0.019 (0.072)	-0.012 (0.074)	-0.048 (0.075)	-0.018 (0.077)									-0.101 (0.092)
<b>Medium LGBT Content</b>					0.355*** (0.119)	0.326*** (0.116)	0.299*** (0.123)	0.295** (0.121)					0.246* (0.140)
<b>High LGBT Content</b>									0.440*** (0.152)	0.483*** (0.150)	0.441*** (0.154)	0.399** (0.157)	0.332** (0.167)
<b>Age</b>	0.014 (0.015)	0.011 (0.015)	0.010 (0.015)	0.014 (0.016)	0.012 (0.014)	0.009 (0.140)	0.010 (0.014)	0.127 (0.014)	0.007 (0.013)	0.005 (0.013)	0.005 (0.013)	0.008 (0.014)	0.006 (0.013)
<b>Conservatism</b>	-1.156*** (0.133)	-1.16*** (0.127)	-1.138*** (0.131)	-1.110*** (0.137)	-1.064*** (0.014)	-1.085*** (0.131)	-1.082*** (0.132)	-1.045*** (0.139)	-1.084*** (0.135)	-1.092*** (0.128)	-1.084*** (0.129)	-1.049*** (0.137)	-0.994*** (0.148)
<b>LGBT</b>	1.730*** (0.534)			1.590*** (0.553)	1.737*** (0.594)			1.664*** (0.610)	1.487** (0.614)			1.440** (0.629)	1.397** (0.664)
<b>LGBT Contact (Binary Variable)</b>		0.823 (0.522)		0.423 (0.569)		0.651 (0.538)		0.381 (0.581)		0.756 (0.529)		0.471 (0.569)	0.397 (0.588)
<b>Number of LGBT Contacts</b>			0.123*** (0.047)	0.088* (0.050)			0.087* (0.047)	0.057 (0.051)			0.094 (0.045)	0.066 (0.048)	(0.065) (0.053)
<b>Pseudo R-squared</b>	0.154	0.146	0.151	0.163	0.166	0.156	0.158	0.170	0.165	0.160	0.162	0.171	0.177
<b>Observations (N):</b>	330	330	329	329	330	330	329	329	330	330	329	329	329

\*p < 0.1, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01, two-tailed

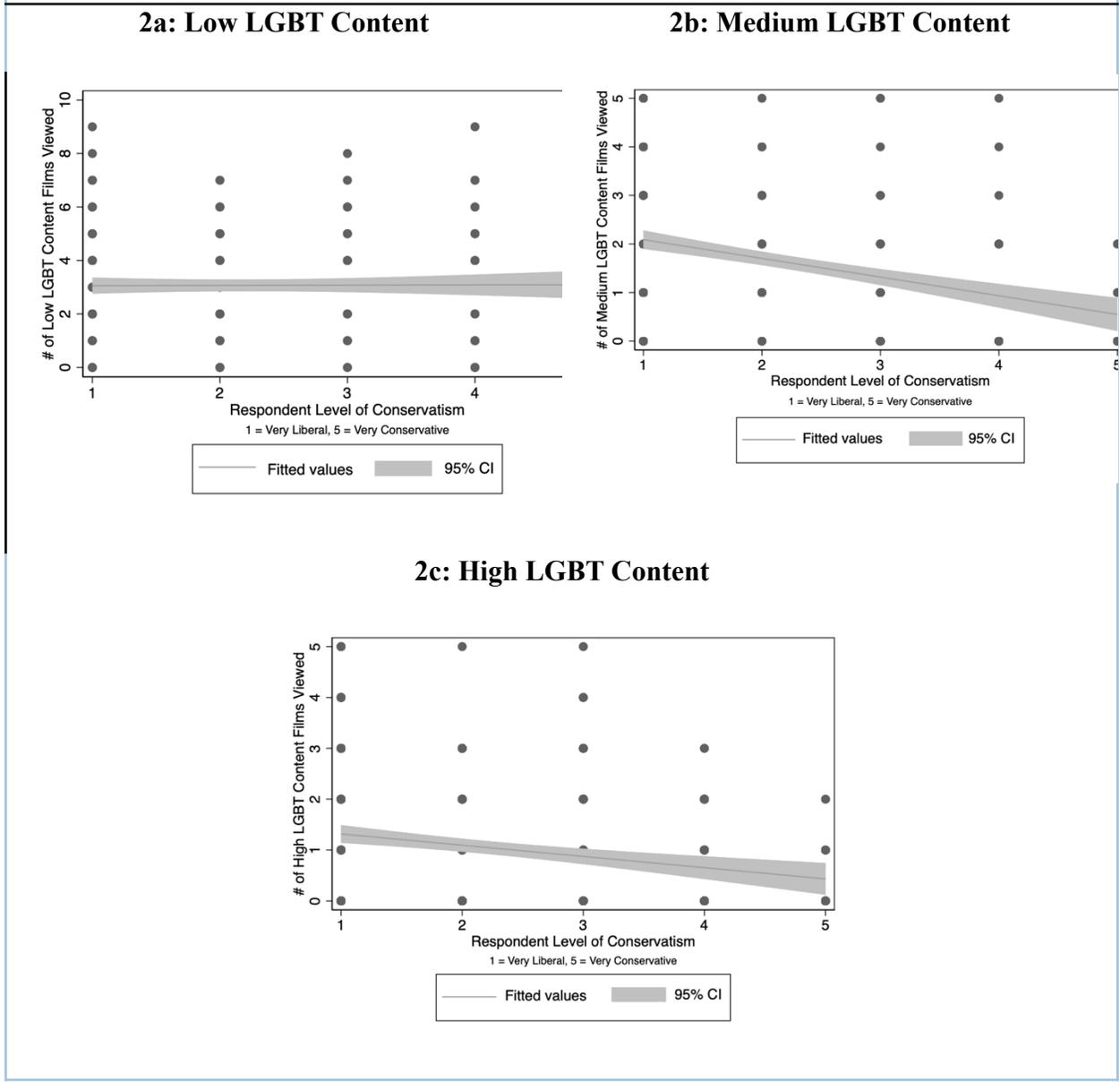
Robust standard errors shown in parentheses. The dependent variable is the average level of support for pro-LGBT policies.

**Figure 1: Regression Coefficients**

Note: Coefficients displayed above are from Model 13. Dependent Variable is the Average Level of Support for Pro-LGBT Policies

nature of LGBT representation within the films categorized as medium and high. In these film categories, the films' LGBT representation is either central to the plot or emphasizes the social and/or political difficulties of navigating society as a homosexual. While the films do not explicitly push an agenda about a specific pro-LGBT policy, they each feature a main or prominent supporting character that must endure the societal challenges associated with being a sexual minority. Viewing lovable, humanized characters being harassed, bullied, and discriminated against could push one to support anti-discrimination policies. Perhaps the films that portrayed the difficulty of a homosexual character's youth or childhood gave sympathy to their viewers toward LGBT children and children confused about their sexual preferences, and in turn the viewers show greater support for preferred gender bathroom use and banning conversion therapy. Likewise, portrayals of homosexuals in romantic relationships could foster support for homosexual couples' ability to begin families and adopt children.

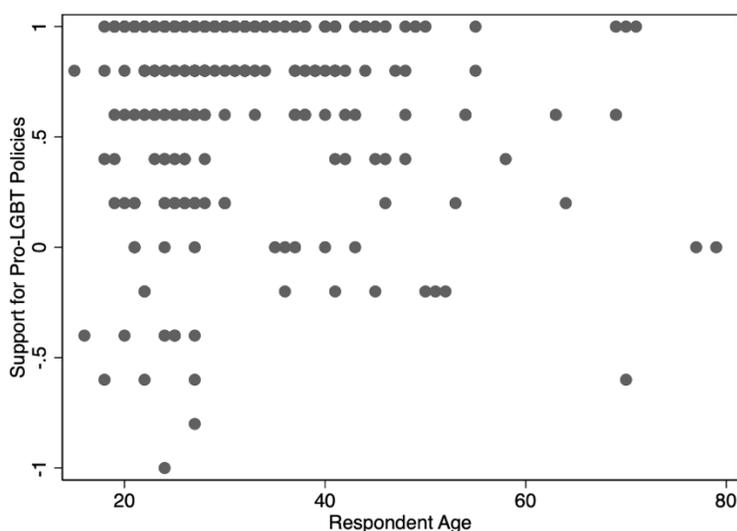
Figure 2: Films Viewed and Conservatism Scatter Plots



Interestingly, increased exposure to films with low levels of LGBT representation predicts opposition to pro-LGBT policies—although this relationship is not statistically significant. I attribute this finding to two possibilities. First, the references to homosexuality in the low categorized films are so isolated or obscure that the films do little to leave a significant message or impact on the audience about homosexuality. It is hard to imagine a same-sex kiss in

the background or subtle nod to a minor character’s homosexuality substantially impacting one’s political preferences. It could be the case that because these films are not explicitly about homosexuality, they appeal to conservative viewers as well. Figure 2 displays trends in film exposure by respondent level of conservatism. Within this sample, very conservative respondents viewed more films with low LGBT content than medium or high LGBT content films. These conservative viewers’ pre-disposed political attachments overpowered any brief mentions or depictions of homosexuality. Second, unexpected isolated and subtle nods to homosexuality in blockbuster movie franchises have also led to negative reactions from certain groups of viewers about the films themselves and LGBT representation broadly (O’Connor 2019; Futrelle 2019).

**Figure 3: Support for Pro-LGBT Policy by Age Scatter Plot**



In each of the thirteen models, age has a positive—albeit statistically insignificant—predictive power on support for pro-LGBT policies. This finding is curious considering previous literature that finds a negative relationship between age and attitudes about homosexuality (Anderson & Fetner 2008; Horn 2006). Figure 3 presents the average level of support for pro-LGBT policy by each respondent’s age. The scatter plot indicates that the sample

contains a sizable number of younger individuals that are opposed to pro-LGBT policies. At the same time, there are a few outliers among older respondents that strongly support pro-LGBT policies. Whether this can be attributed to error or bias in the collection of the sample or to errors made by individual respondents while indicating their level of support for the policy, these outliers help explain why the regression predicts a small, insignificant positive relationship between age and policy support.

The variables with the strongest predictive power on an individual's level of support for pro-LGBT policies are an individual's identification as LGBT and an individual's level of conservatism. Unsurprisingly, the models predict that individuals who identify as LGBT are more likely to support pro-LGBT policy. Throughout each model where this variable is present, LGBT identification is the strongest positive predictor of policy support. On the contrary, an individual's level of conservatism is the strongest predictor of opposition to pro-LGBT policy. This finding goes against my original hypothesis, which predicted increased exposure to these films would outweigh any pre-existing political attitudes. It seems that while increased exposure to humanized homosexual characters is related to higher levels of support for pro-LGBT policies, increased exposure alone is not enough to overpower any previously held political beliefs.

### **Limitations, Implications, and Conclusion**

This observation concludes that when all other variables are held constant, increased exposure to films with a humanized LGBT character—with medium to high amounts of LGBT content—is correlated with higher levels of average support for five pro-LGBT policies. While increased exposure to these films did have a significant impact on the level of support for the policies, an individual's level of conservatism and sexual orientation are much more predictive factors. An individual's identification as LGBT is the strongest predictor for policy support in

every model. Further, it seems that although increased exposure to films with humanized LGBT characters may have some effect on the support for particular pro-LGBT policies, these effects are not large enough to outweigh the existing effects associated with one's political identification.

It is important to recognize that this observation focuses purely on the films' impact on viewers' support of pro-LGBT policies rather than their sympathy toward LGBT people as a whole. It is possible that the exposure to these films had a significant effect on the viewers' levels of sympathy toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals. While one's political opinions about pro-LGBT policies may have remained nearly unchanged, their desire to be more kind toward LGBT people or attitude regarding LGBT people as a whole could have changed instead. This observation concentrates on the effects of these films on politics and legislation, but further research pertaining to sociological attitudes could contribute to the ongoing LGBT media representation conversation.

An element that may weaken this observation's conclusion is its inability to address possible self-selection bias of the respondents' film viewing history. There is a reasonable chance that the respondents that reported higher levels of support for pro-LGBT policies held those policy preferences before they had viewed any of the listed films. Additionally, those that have unfavorable views of pro-LGBT policies or LGBT people as a whole may have decided to abstain from seeing the films in the first place because they are not in alignment with their political view. An experimental approach such as the one performed by Riggle et al. (1996) would be a more effective method to determine the effects of a particular film on policy support without any selection bias. Instead, this observation is only able to claim a correlation between

exposure to humanized homosexual characters in film and policy support rather than assert that this exposure causes a change in policy preferences.

This observation's findings may have interesting implications for politically motivated filmmakers and LGBT advocacy and interest groups. The scattered demographics of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered individuals in America leaves these sexual minorities politically with "structural powerlessness" (Sherrill 1996). This powerlessness implies that in order for these sexual minorities to thrive politically, they must receive the support of heterosexuals (Valelly 2012). The question then remains for these sexual minority advocates: what influences individuals' levels of support for pro-LGBT policies? Politically motivated filmmakers who support pro-LGBT policies may feel inclined to produce more films that contain humanized LGBT characters and expect rising levels of support to coincide with increased exposure. LGBT advocacy groups could use this information to foster support for films of this type. On a similar note, traditional family advocacy groups and anti-LGBT interest groups may use these findings to organize campaigns to deter individuals from consuming films of this nature.

To conclude, motion pictures have a greater effect on their viewers' policy preferences than the viewers themselves often realize. When it comes to pro-LGBT policy, increased exposure to films with a humanized LGBT character significantly increases an individual's willingness to support legislation advocated by LGBT and sexual equality interest groups. It is worth noting, however, that political persuasion and sexual orientation will often have stronger effects on pro-LGBT policy support than increased exposure to films of this type. Although the relationship may be small in comparison, increased exposure to humanized LGBT characters does correlate with an individual's level of support for pro-LGBT policies. To repeat the film

scholar Richard Maltby, “Hollywood is a ‘social institution’ and therefore it is understandable that it should reflect society’s hopes, fears and beliefs” (Maltby 1995, 361). If current Hollywood trends are any indication of America’s current hopes, fears, and beliefs, then it can be expected that support for pro-LGBT policies will increase alongside an increase in LGBT film representation.

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## FILM APPENDIX

- Abrams, J. J., dir. 2019. *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*. Lucasfilm Ltd.
- Berlanti, Greg, dir. 2018. *Love, Simon*. Fox 2000 Pictures.
- Farrelly, Peter, dir. 2018. *Green Book*. DreamWorks Pictures.
- Fletcher, Dexter, dir. 2019. *Rocketman*. Paramount Pictures.
- Singer, Bryan, dir. 2018. *Bohemian Rhapsody*. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.
- Tyldum, Morten, dir. 2014. *The Imitation Game*. Black Bear Pictures.
- Waititi, Taika, dir. 2019. *Jojo Rabbit*. Fox Searchlight Pictures.
- Yates, David, dir. 2018. *Fantastic Beats: The Crimes of Grindelwald*. Warner Bros. Pictures.