From Screen to Self: The Relationship Between Television Exposure and Self-Complexity Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth

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Little empirical research has examined the role of televised lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) characters in the identity development of LGB youth. The present study examined the relationship between mainstream and gay- and lesbian-oriented television exposure and positive and negative self-complexities using a survey of LGB adolescents ($N =$ 546). Results revealed that exposure to mainstream television was negatively correlated with positive self-complexity, and exposure to gay- and lesbian-oriented television was negatively correlated with negative self-complexity. Self-complexity was correlated with well-being. The findings revealed that viewing LGB characters in television programs specifically designed, produced, and marketed for LGB audiences may have a positive impact on the well-being of LGB youth exposed to these televised messages.

Keywords: television, identity, self-complexity, lesbian, gay, bisexual, youth

Jude and Connor are two 13-year-old boys caught up in a blossoming romance on Freeform's *The Fosters*. The characters made headlines in March 2015 when they were shown engaging in the youngest same-sex romantic kiss in television history (Ocamb, 2015). The kiss sparked both praise and criticism among pundits and audiences. Peter Paige, cocreator of *The Fosters*, responded to the attention the scene garnered by telling reporters, "We've all been watching stories about heterosexuals forever. . . . As a gay kid you are always having to translate. You are always having to pretend like you are one of the other characters. You're not seeing your life accurately reflected" (Ocamb, 2015, para. 6). Paige's statement not only emphasizes the lack of diverse lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) characters on television, but it also alludes to the potential of television messages to influence how LGB youth perceive themselves and their own worth. Scholarly research supports both of these premises as well; content analytic studies have suggested that LGB characters are underrepresented on television (Fouts & Inch, 2005; Raley & Lucas, 2006), and survey and interview studies have suggested that television's depiction of LGB characters can

influence the identity development and well-being of LGB youth (McKee, 2000; Winderman & Smith, 2016).

LGB youth are often considered a vulnerable population, as the unique developmental obstacles they face can significantly increase feelings of isolation, dejection, and depression that can lead to risky behaviors. More than 90% of LGB teens report hearing negative messages about LGB sexualities at school, on the Internet, and from their peers; 40% report living in unaccepting communities (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). The identity adversities faced by LGB individuals at such a young age plausibly account for the fact that LGB youth are more than twice as likely to attempt suicide as their heterosexual peers (Russell & Joyner, 2001). The ability to manage stress and negative life events that contribute to suicidal tendencies has been correlated with *self-complexity*, a construct defined by Linville (1985) as the number of unique self-aspects that compose a person's self-concept. Thus, the sophistication of an LGB adolescent's identity could combat engagement in risky behaviors.

Investigating the socialization agents that may play a role in the development, stability, and complexity of LGB adolescents' identities is crucial to improving the emotional health and stability of this vulnerable population. The present study examined the relationships between television exposure, self-complexity, and well-being among a sample of LGB youth (*N* = 546) in an effort to provide insight into the contribution of televised messages to the health of a vulnerable population. Self-complexity is explicated below, discussed specifically in terms of LGB identity development, and then considered as a potential mediator in the relationship between television exposure and well-being among young LGB audiences before the hypotheses of the current study are proposed.

Self-Complexity

Self-complexity is the number of unique self-aspects that compose an individual's self-concept; a self-aspect is "a self-relevant cognitive category, concept, or schema" (Linville, 1985, p. 4). People possess a variety of self-aspects related to their physical attributes, traits, roles, and social and group memberships. The self-concept is thus multidimensional and influenced by both cultural and situational factors (Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001). For example, a woman may define herself as a tall, adventurous, skilled mechanic who is a loyal friend and a proud Democrat. She would have greater self-complexity than a woman who defined herself solely as a loyal friend. Not all self-aspects are prominent at any given time, and not all self-aspects remain constant over time (Kanagawa et al., 2001). Sexuality is a salient self-aspect for youth, especially for LGB youth who have formulated sexual self-aspects that run contrary to the accepted norms of a predominantly heterosexual society (Eliason, 1996). Let's assume that the woman described above also identified as a lesbian. If she had been asked to list aspects of herself during her adolescence, she may have noted her height or her adventurous nature, but she almost certainly would have included her sexual identity in her list of self-aspects (i.e., her self-complexity).

Self-complexity has been argued to dilute the impact of negative life events. Individuals high in self-complexity have been shown to fare better in the face of negativity than those low in self-complexity because they are better able to compartmentalize stressful, negative experiences (Linville, 1987). For those high in self-complexity, the impact of negative events is constricted to a smaller portion of the self-

concept, which helps control spillover between differentiated aspects of the self (Linville, 1987). For example, if a college-age individual sees himself only as a star athlete (i.e., low self-complexity) and he performs poorly in his sporting event, he will likely have a negative affective response. Without higher self-complexity, he will have difficulty using other self-aspects to patch the temporary damage caused by his poor athletic performance. However, if the same individual has many relevant self-aspects (i.e., high self-complexity), he will be able to buffer the stress caused by his poor performance by relying on other self-aspects (e.g., "I'm still a really good student, roommate, and brother"). Scholars have found a relationship between self-complexity and self-esteem (Woolfolk, Novalany, Gara, Allen, & Polino, 1995) and between self-complexity and depression (Dixon & Baumeister, 1991; Linville, 1987; Rothermund & Meiniger, 2004). Lutz and Ross (2003) found a connection between low self-complexity and depression, loneliness, and dissociation. In a comprehensive literature review on self-complexity, Koch and Shepperd (2004) wrote that, generally, high self-complexity corresponds to more effective coping strategies with negative events compared with low self-complexity.

The sociopsychological literature examining correlations between self-complexity and various outcome variables has been rooted in Linville's (1985, 1987) model of self-complexity, which has been criticized over time because it fails to consider the content or valence of self-aspects in the role of self-complexity (Morgan & Janoff-Bulman, 1994). Scholars have addressed this critique by arguing that self-complexity can be understood as two dimensional, composed of both positive self-complexity and negative self-complexity (Woolfolk et al., 1995). Positive self-complexity is defined as all self-aspects that serve as buffers against stresses and depressive symptoms caused by negative life events. Negative self-complexity is defined as all self-aspects that can exacerbate stresses and depressive symptoms following negative life events (Morgan & Janoff-Bulman, 1994). Positive and negative self-complexities are only moderately correlated and contribute differently to an individual's well-being (Woolfolk et al., 1995). Identity research has provided more consistent support for the hypothesis that high negative self-complexity creates vulnerability to depressive symptoms than the hypothesis that high positive self-complexity acts as a buffer to depressive symptoms (Morgan & Janoff-Bulman, 1994; Showers, Abramson, & Hogan, 1998; Woolfolk et al., 1995). The positive relationship between negative self-complexity and depressive symptoms exists even with samples of children and early adolescents (Abela & Veronneau-McArdle, 2002). Because adolescence is such a formidable period for identity development (Cote, 1996), and because self-complexity is especially relevant to understanding the well-being of vulnerable populations (Steinberg, Pineles, Gardner, & Mineka, 2003), the self-complexities of LGB youth might be a particularly critical area of study. The present study is an initial exploration into LGB adolescents' self-complexities, a construct not previously investigated by social scientists interested in LGB youth resiliency and well-being. However, research examining LGB identity development can be mapped onto self-complexity to shed light on the potential value of this identity construct for understanding LGB identity development, resiliency, and well-being.

Self-Complexity and LGB Youth

Adolescence is a period of concentrated identity development (Cote, 1996). During adolescence, individuals proceed from having somewhat unsolidified self-concepts to more complex, distinguishable aspects of self (D. W. Evans, Brody, & Noam, 2001; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Adolescence is also the

developmental period when individuals explore and experiment with new and unique attributes before committing to self-concepts that guide them into adulthood. Adolescence is more arduous for youth questioning their assumed heterosexuality because they must navigate sexual identity exploration in addition to the self-aspects that heterosexual youth must explore and achieve (Savin-Williams, 1995). The stresses associated with exploring alternatives to heterosexuality in a heteronormative society can lead to perceptions of isolation, depression, and risky behaviors among LGB youth (Russell & Joyner, 2001).

The complications LGB youth face have been the primary rationale for scholars to classify LGB youth as a vulnerable population. Self-complexity may have especially notable consequences for the well-being of vulnerable populations, as evidenced by research on survivors of domestic violence. In one cross-sectional study of abused women living in a shelter, Steinberg and colleagues (2003) discovered that abused women were low in self-complexity compared with nonabused women; that is, they saw less variance in their self-aspects. Those who faced increased violence were also significantly lower in self-complexity, indicating a connection between emotional distress and self-complexity. If LGB youth are at a heighten risk for emotional distress and more developed self-complexities can combat emotional distress, then studying the socialization agents potentially influencing LGB teens' self-complexities is warranted. One such socialization agent is television.

Self-Complexity and Television

Adolescents spend nearly three hours a day watching television/DVD/videos, more time than they spend with any other media activity (Rideout, 2015). Time spent in front of screens inhibits adolescents from engaging in other activities that might expose them to new interests, roles, and ways of being (Harrison, 2006). Because mainstream television presents a rather narrow view of real-world human experience, the television landscape might provide adolescents with a more constricted range of human attributes and behaviors, limit possible self-aspects with which teens could identify, and ultimately lead to less developed self-complexities. In her scope of self model, Harrison (2006) predicts that heavy exposure to television will lead to less self-complexity among youth. The model is reliant on four assumptions: (1) Self-complexity is especially important for adolescents because of the concentrated identity development that occurs during this period, (2) the self is multifaceted, (3) television offers a particularly limited concept of reality similar to the homogeneity inherent to the cultivation hypothesis, and (4) the effect of television on adolescents' self-complexities will be stronger for those who have fewer alternative socialization agents to turn to for information than for those teens with many information resources (Harrison, 2006).

The scope of self model may be markedly applicable for examining self-complexity and television exposure among LGB youth. LGB youth often lack real-world LGB role models and perceive low levels of support from families, peers, schools, and communities (Savin-Williams, 1995). Media are left to inform sexually questioning youth about LGB sexualities, lifestyles, and cultures (V. D. Evans, 2007; Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Gross, 2001). LGB adolescents are heavy television viewers and actively seek out depictions of LGB characters in the television programming they watch (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000). Yet, a vast majority of televised LGB characters are not easy for

LGB youth to identify with (Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2007; McInroy & Craig, 2016; Raley & Lucas, 2006).

Mainstream television has historically eradicated LGB identities (Gross, 2001). It is only very recently that LGB characters have been regularly featured on mainstream television (Bond, 2014). Even though LGB visibility on television is increasing, depictions such as Jude and Connor discussed in the introduction to this study are rare. LGB characterizations are often times problematic, particularly considering the likely influence they have on LGB self-aspects among sexually questioning youth. Depictions of LGB characters on mainstream television are void of sexuality (Martin, 2014), stereotypical (Fisher et al., 2007), often in the form of a joke or insult (Bond, 2014), and dominated by depictions of White gay men (Fisher et al., 2007). Reports from LGB youth have supplemented content analytic research concluding that mainstream television's depiction of LGB sexualities is sanitized and homogeneous. LGB youth have noted a lack of viable televised LGB role models and a strong desire to have more diverse depictions of LGB individuals on television (V. D. Evans, 2007; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). When asked to retrospectively write about his coming out experience, one gay male participant reported in a previous study,

> I saw myself trying to relate to the few very stereotyped representations I saw on TV . . . to try and learn more about gay people and gay culture. Some of it was just confusing; too few representations which were all too stereotypical to really relate to. But it was better than nothing. (Bond, Hefner, & Drogos, 2009, p. 41)

If mainstream television's depiction of LGB characters lacks significant diversity and is rooted in stereotypes and jokes, Harrison's (2006) scope of self model would predict that heavy exposure to mainstream television might limit the various self-aspects that LGB youth would use to label themselves and result in less developed self-complexities. This is especially likely given the salience of sexual self-aspects during adolescence (Eliason, 1996). LGB teens see themselves first and foremost as LGB. When watching television, LGB teens see few LGB characters with unique traits in varying roles within differing social groups. Thus, young LGB television audiences' perceptions of themselves and their self-aspects are limited. Exposure to mainstream television would increase the salience of negative self-aspects and decrease the likelihood that LGB teens assign themselves positive self-aspects.

H1:   *Exposure to mainstream television will be negatively correlated with positive self-complexity and positively correlated with negative self-complexity.*

Although adolescents are likely viewing most of their television programming on major broadcast and cable networks, Bond (2015b) argues that a niche television market exists specifically designed, produced, and marketed for gay and lesbian audiences referred to as gay- and lesbian-oriented (GLO) television. GLO television evolved from Showtime's adaptation of the UK program *Queer as Folk*, a series depicting the lives of five gay male friends in Pittsburgh. The show was hugely successful, despite portraying frank discussions about gay culture in America and explicit same-sex sexual behaviors. Unlike mainstream television programs featuring gay and lesbian lead characters that were trying to garner large, mostly heterosexual audiences (e.g., *Ellen*, *Will & Grace*), *Queer as Folk* was developed for gay

audiences. Producers were not constrained by the same pressures to sanitize depictions of LGB characters in a fashion that would make the characters easier for heterosexual audiences to digest, a common refrain from mainstream television producers and advertisers (Bond, 2015b).

The success of *Queer as Folk* was followed by an on-demand video service called Here! that provided subscribers with GLO original series, made-for-TV movies, miniseries, and feature films. In 2005, Viacom launched Logo, the first digital cable network to air movies, series, and specials focusing on the culture and lifestyles of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Logo's programming depicts the social, cultural, and sexual experiences of LGB individuals with genuineness. Sexual talk that occurs in GLO media is most frequently about LGB relationships, sexual desires, the coming out process, and LGB equality (Bond, 2015b). GLO media are also significantly more likely to depict same-sex sexual behaviors such as physical flirting and romantic kissing than mainstream media (Bond, 2015b). The scope of self model predicts that exposure to self-relevant programming will be a particularly strong predictor of self-complexity among adolescent television viewers (Harrison, 2006). LGB teens who are heavy GLO television viewers may then have more developed self-complexities than LGB teens who are light GLO television viewers because GLO television is offering more heterogeneous depictions of LGB characters in realistic situations and scenarios.

Suppose an adolescent identifies as lesbian. She is likely to consider lesbian as a primary self-aspect because of the importance of sexuality during adolescence. If she has been unable to see how other lesbians integrate their sexualities into their leisure activities, vocations, families, and social networks, connecting her sexuality to other self-aspects might be a strenuous cognitive task. In the face of prejudice, homophobia, or inequality, she may have a negative response because she lacks other self-aspects to fall back on in the face of stressors related to her sexuality. However, if she has been exposed to diverse portrayals of lesbians in varying roles on GLO television programs and has internalized how her other self-aspects relate to her sexuality, she may be able to buffer the stress by relying on other self-aspects, such as her familial roles, her personality characteristics, and the other identity groups to which she belongs. Exposure to multidimensional, complex LGB characters on-screen may impact the self-complexities of LGB adolescents managing their identities. Thus, exposure to GLO television would decrease the salience of negative self-aspects and increase the likelihood that LGB teens assign themselves positive self-aspects.

H2:   *Exposure to GLO television will be positively correlated with positive self-complexity and negatively correlated with negative self-complexity.*

Given the vulnerability of many LGB youth, investigating the relationships between self-complexities and well-being could help shed light on best practices for strengthening LGB teens' resilience and emotional health. As previously mentioned, studies have shown that more developed positive self-complexities can combat emotional distress, whereas higher negative self-complexities could make individuals more vulnerable to emotional distress (Morgan & Janoff-Bulman, 1994; Showers et al., 1998; Woolfolk et al., 1995).

H3:   *Positive self-complexity will be positively correlated with well-being.*

H4:   *Negative self-complexity will be negatively correlated with well-being.*

Method

Participants

Participants (*N* = 546) ranged in age from 13 to 19 years (*M* = 16.5 years, *SD* = 1.3) and identified as lesbian (25%), gay (47%), or bisexual (28%). Approximately half of the participants were female (52%). The sample was primarily composed of White (69%), racially mixed (16%), and Black/African American (7%) teens, with 7% reporting other races and 2% not selecting a racial identifier. Participants were recruited from high school gay–straight alliances from across the United States via e-mail messages and from online social network sites. Participants were directed to the online survey via a link that brought them to the assent/consent page for the study. Parental consent for participants under the age of 18 was waived because of concerns that obtaining parental consent could cause undue harm to participants who had not previously disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents, a commonly accepted research ethics decision in online surveys of LGB youth (see Bond, 2015a). Participants completed the questionnaire online in their own time and at their own pace. The average participant took 23 minutes to complete the online questionnaire. Participants first responded to the open-ended self-complexity measure before responding to media exposure and well-being items using forced-response Likert-type scales. Participant demographics were the final measures on the online questionnaire. Each of the measures is detailed below.

Measures

Mainstream and GLO television exposure. Television exposure was measured by asking participants to report frequency of viewing popular television programs. "Popular" was operationalized using television ratings and focus groups. The 20 most watched television programs among the general public according to Nielsen ratings were included on the questionnaire. Assuming that LGB youth only watch the same television programs as the general public, however, would be naïve. As such, television programs mentioned by LGB youth during two pilot study focus groups were also included on the questionnaire. The two focus groups were composed of six individuals who self-identified as LGB (mean age = 18.50 years, *SD* = 0.55). Focus groups were organized as semistructured interviews that ran 60 minutes. The focus groups started with the question, "What television shows can you just not miss seeing each week?" Follow-up questions were asked to better understand motivations for viewing specific television programs. The focus group participants mentioned 27 television programs that were not already included in the subsample garnered through Nielsen ratings. Three open-ended items were on the questionnaire in the primary study to capture television programs popular among the participants that were not listed on the questionnaire. Any television program that was mentioned by at least 5% of the sample was then included in the scoring (*n* = 3). To be certain that the questionnaire was exhaustive, focus group leaders asked participants whether there were any television programs that they watched that were not mentioned in either the close-ended or open-ended media exposure items on the questionnaire. No participant reported this to be the case.

Fifty television programs composed the final sample of programs used to calculate exposure scores. Before calculating exposure scores, a panel consisting of six undergraduate students trained to conduct content analysis research on GLO media categorized television programs as mainstream or GLO. The panel was required to reach consensus on each television program's categorization. Exposure scores for mainstream television programs (n = 38) and GLO television programs (n = 12) were then summed separately to create two overall exposure scores. Participants reported viewing all television shows on a scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*all the time*). Thus, mainstream scores could range from 0 to 152 (M = 77.23, SD = 34.10) and GLO scores could range from 0 to 48 (M = 10.75, SD = 8.73). The most popular mainstream television programs among LGB adolescents were *Degrassi* (M = 3.40), *Family Guy* (M = 2.24), and *American Idol* (M = 1.52). The most popular GLO television programs were *RuPaul's Drag Race* (M = 1.26), *The Big Gay Sketch Show* (M = 1.03), and *RuPaul's Drag U* (M = 0.99).

Self-complexity. Participants were asked to list traits or attributes (i.e., self-aspects) that they perceived as descriptive of themselves. The number of conceptually unique self-aspects listed by participants was used as the operationalization of self-complexity in line with previous research (Harrison, 2006; Koch & Shepperd, 2004). A participant listing "funny," "comedic," and "humorous" might appear to have listed three self-aspects, but only listed synonyms for the same self-aspect. Therefore, each participant's attribute list was analyzed by two undergraduate students serving as independent coders to remove synonyms and assign a self-complexity score that represented the unique self-aspects within each participant's list. Coders used a thesaurus to determine whether self-aspects should be considered synonyms with others listed by the same participant. Intercoder agreement between coders for the final self-complexity scores was high (Krippendorff's ɑ = .94). After synonyms were removed from the lists, each of the aspects was coded for positive or negative valence to create positive and negative self-complexity scores. Neutral self-aspects and those that could have multiple meanings were coded as positive (Krippendorff's ɑ = .96). For example, shy may be perceived as either positive or negative depending on the participant. In the present study, these neutral aspects were coded as positive.

Self-complexity scores among LGB youth in the sample ranged from 0 (low self-complexity) to 10 (high self-complexity). The mean self-complexity score was 7.89 (SD = 2.51), suggesting that LGB adolescents generally perceive their actual selves as multidimensional and rather complex. Moreover, LGB adolescents' self-complexities mirror adolescents more generally. In a previous study using the same operationalization of self-complexity, adolescents (N = 309) reported 7.70 (SD = 2.23) unique concepts in their actual lists (Harrison, 2006). No significant difference seems to exist between the self-complexities of LGB teens and their heterosexual counterparts, $t(703)$ = −1.14, p = .12. Further dissecting self-complexity by categorizing self-aspects into positive and negative self-complexities suggests that LGB teens have significantly higher positive self-complexities (M = 6.77, SD = 2.53) than negative self-complexities (M = 1.12, SD = 1.45), $t(545)$ = 40.38, p < .001. "Caring," "intelligent," and "funny" were the three self-aspects most frequently cited by participants. Table 1 displays the 10 most frequently cited self-aspects by gender, highlighting the generally positive valence of the words LGB teens used to describe themselves.

Well-being. Previous research suggests that well-being is a multidimensional construct consisting of self-esteem and depressive mood states (Diener & Lucas, 2000). As such, well-being was

operationalized as the mean score of items from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and the dejection-related items from the Multiple Affective Adjective Checklist (Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986). Sample items from the Self-Esteem Scale include, "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself" and "I am able to do things as well as most people." Sample items from the dejection checklist include, "On a typical day, I usually feel discouraged" and "On a typical day, I usually feel ashamed" (both reverse coded). Participants responded to statements from the Self-Esteem Scale and the dejection scale on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores equated to more well-being ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.18$). Internal consistency of the items across the scales was high ($\alpha = .90$).

Table 1. Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual
Adolescents' Most Frequently Cited Self-Aspects by Gender.

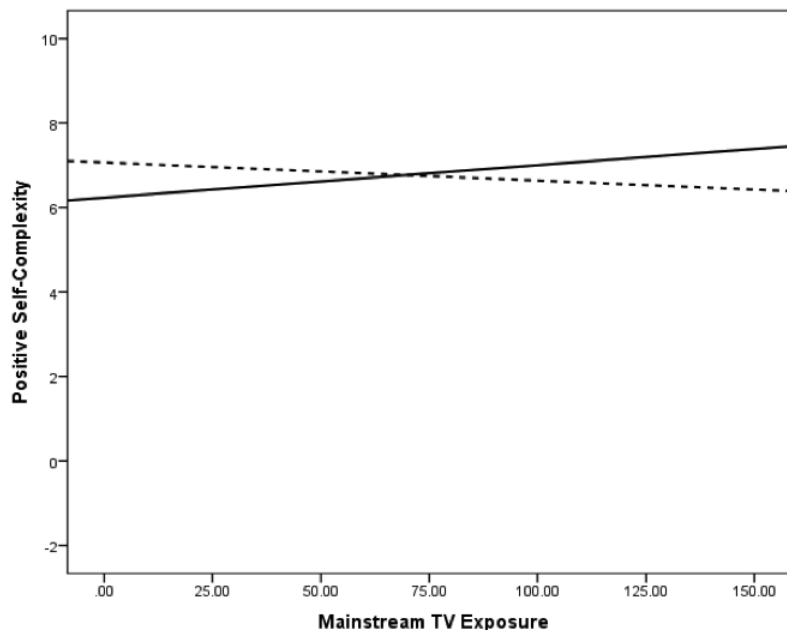| Female		Male	
Self-aspect	%	Self-aspect	%
Outgoing	45	Intelligent	23
Shy	42	Loving	18
Caring	37	Caring	17
Intelligent	36	Funny	16
Funny	34	Friendly	15
Loving	24	Artistic	14
Fun	23	Shy	13
Happy	23	Happy	11
Friendly	22	Weird	11
Artistic	21	Depressed	11

Note: $n_{females} = 284$, $n_{males} = 262$. All of the most frequently cited self-aspects were coded as positive with the exception of depressed; depressed was coded as a negative self-aspect.

Participant demographics. The sex, age, and race of participants were determined using single-item measures. Participants were asked to respond to each of these demographic questions in an open-ended format. Coders then categorized participants into nominal categories of sex (male, female) and race (White, Black/African American, racially mixed, Asian American, Hispanic, other).

Results

Multiple hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between television exposure and self-complexity. All variables were mean-centered to avoid potential problems with multicollinearity. Both mainstream television exposure and GLO television exposure were entered as the predictor variables, with either negative self-complexity or positive self-complexity entered as the criterion variable. Interactions between the predictor variables and sex, race, and age were also entered into the hierarchical regression models.

        The first hypothesis predicted that exposure to mainstream television would be negatively correlated with positive self-complexity and positively correlated with negative self-complexity. The second hypothesis posited that GLO television would be positively correlated with positive self-complexity and negatively correlated with negative self-complexity. Analyses revealed that the regression model significantly predicted positive self-complexity, $F(11, 534) = 2.90$, $p < 001$. In this model, the only predictor variable that was correlated with positive self-complexity was mainstream television exposure ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .05$). Neither sex ($\beta = -.01$), age ($\beta = -.02$), race ($\beta = .08$), nor GLO television exposure ($\beta = .03$) was correlated with positive self-complexity. In the model predicting positive self-complexity, the interaction between mainstream television exposure and sex was also significant ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .001$). Simple slopes tests suggest that the relationship between mainstream television exposure and positive self-complexity existed for males, but not for females (see Figure 1).


Figure 1. Interaction term showing sex moderating the relationship between mainstream television exposure and positive self-complexity. The solid line represents females (n = 284); the dotted line represents males (n = 262).

        A separate regression model using the same predictor variables but employing negative self-complexity as the criterion variable was not significant, $F(11, 534) = 1.16$, $p = .31$. Neither sex ($\beta = -.06$), age ($\beta = -.02$), race ($\beta = -.03$), nor mainstream television exposure ($\beta = .01$) was correlated with negative self-complexity. The only predictor variable that was correlated with negative self-complexity was GLO television exposure ($\beta = -.10$, $p < .05$). No interaction terms were significant predictors of negative self-complexity.

Hypothesis 1 was partially supported: Exposure to mainstream television was negatively correlated with positive self-complexity, suggesting that LGB adolescents who are heavier consumers of mainstream television also have fewer positive self-aspects. Hypothesis 2 was also partially supported: Exposure to GLO television was negatively correlated with negative self-complexity, suggesting that LGB adolescents who are heavier consumers of GLO television also have fewer negative self-aspects.

The third hypothesis predicted that positive self-complexity would be positively related to well-being. The fourth hypothesis predicted that negative self-complexity would be negatively related to well-being. Path analyses were conducted using AMOS software to test the hypotheses investigating the relationship between self-complexities and well-being. The data did not differ significantly from the proposed model, $\chi^2(2) = 0.61$, $p = .74$. Model fit indices reinforced the usefulness of the proposed model: Tucker–Lewis index = 1.00, comparative fit index = 1.00, root mean square error of approximation = 0.00 (90% CI [0.00, 0.06]). The model, depicted in Figure 2, suggests support for the third and fourth hypotheses. Positive self-complexity was positively related to well-being, and negative self-complexity was negatively related to well-being. The model reinforced the relationship between mainstream television exposure and positive self-complexity and the relationship between GLO television exposure and negative self-complexity. Moreover, the model revealed a positive direct relationship between GLO television exposure and well-being.
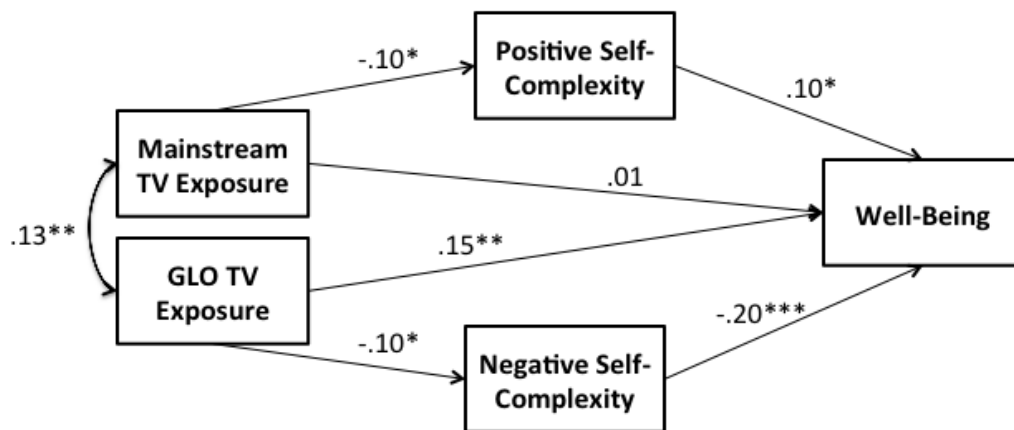
Figure 2. Path model using AMOS structural equation modeling software. GLO TV = gay- and lesbian-oriented television. χ²(2) = 0.61, p = .74. Coefficients in model are standardized.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Discussion

Previous research has examined the relationship between media exposure and identity development among LGB youth (Winderman & Smith, 2016) and the positive or negative valence of self-aspects (Morgan & Janoff-Bulman, 1994), but the present study is the first to examine the relationship between television exposure and LGB adolescents' positive and negative self-complexities. Results suggest

that LGB youth have the potential to develop equally sophisticated self-complexities as their heterosexual peers, and that those self-complexities are associated with television exposure.

Mainstream television exposure was negatively correlated with positive self-complexity, particularly for males. Positive self-complexity is composed of the constructive, affirming aspects in an individual's self-concept. The negative relationship between mainstream television exposure and positive self-complexity may be explained by the absence of diverse depictions of LGB people on television. Mainstream television producers desire praise from socially progressive audiences for depicting LGB characters, but they simultaneously want to avoid any potential controversy that realistic depictions of LGB characters might spark. The result is a television universe littered with characters who are LGB by proclamation, but who do not speak or behave in any way that might remind heterosexual audiences that LGB people are complex, sexual beings (Bond, 2014). LGB characters reduced to sanitized versions of their sexualities lack complexity. That is, a gay character depicted on mainstream television is likely to voice his sexuality, but viewers are not likely to see him being sexual or to learn about other aspects of his identity, his likes, his fears, and so forth. The negative correlation between mainstream television exposure and positive self-complexity may be stronger for males because LGB characters on television are more likely to be male than female (GLAAD, 2015).

The fixation on characters' sexualities makes identifying as LGB seem exceedingly unique while also devaluing other aspects of the characters' identities. Exposure to the narrowly defined LGB characters offered by mainstream television may limit LGB adolescents' ability to consider various positive aspects when constructing their self-concepts. This is especially true for gay and bisexual males because, as noted, most LGB characters on television are male (GLAAD, 2015). Gay and bisexual males may initially identify with LGB characters on television, but soon realize that the LGB characters are one-note. Subsequently, gay and bisexual males may have difficulty transferring any positive self-aspects of the televised character to their definitions of what it means to be gay or bisexual. It is also possible that mainstream television's capacity to aid LGB adolescents' in increasing their positive self-concept is hindered by the secondary or supporting nature of many LGB characters. When LGB characters are most often shown as supporting or recurring rather than as lead characters, it may subliminally imply that these characters are somehow not worthy of center stage. Therefore, this may limit their potential to serve as mediated role models for LGB adolescents.

Mainstream television's ornamental depictions of LGB characters were negatively related to the positive self-complexities of LGB youth in the sample, but were unrelated to negative self-complexities. Perhaps mainstream television's stereotypical, sanitized depiction of LGB sexualities mirrors LGB representation in other aspects of LGB teens' lived experiences. If LGB teens are desensitized to seeing LGB individuals in jokes, insults, or mocking situations, then television's depictions may be yet another representation of what they already experience from family, peers, schools, and communities (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). It would reason, then, that mainstream television exposure does not contribute to the negative self-complexities of LGB youth above and beyond the contributions of other socialization agents.

Alternatively, exposure to GLO television was negatively correlated with LGB teens' negative self-complexities without contributing to their positive self-complexities. In a content analysis of GLO media, Bond (2015b) found that LGB sexualities, LGB relationships, the coming out process, and LGB equality were common threads in dialogue between characters. The same study found that LGB characters engaged in romantic kissing and physical flirting more so in GLO media than in mainstream media, ultimately concluding that "GLO media depict LGB sexualities in a diverse, realistic fashion that ventures into the various components of sexual identity ranging from sexual behaviors to relationship talk to issues surrounding equality" (Bond, 2015b, p. 54). These depictions may provide LGB youth with representations strong enough to reduce internalized homophobic beliefs about what it means to be LGB that would be operationalized as negative self-attributes. Although representations of LGB characters on GLO television are more realistic, they still lack diversity in terms of race, class, occupation, and personality characteristics (Bond, 2015b). GLO depictions may then be assisting enough to eradicate negative self-aspects, but not salient enough to provide novel positive self-aspects for LGB youth to consider as part of their self-concepts.

The results of the present study may explain previous research suggesting that identity may mediate the relationship between GLO media exposure and well-being. Bond (2015a) found a negative correlation between GLO media exposure and the magnitude of self-discrepancies between LGB teens' actual and ideal self-concepts. Less discrepancy between actual and ideal self-concepts was also related to stronger well-being. It is possible that exposure to GLO media affords LGB youth the opportunity to disassociate negative self-aspects that have been instilled through years of heteronormative sexual socialization because the LGB characters in GLO media are central to the story and are not depicted in a demeaning fashion. This disassociation removes these negative self-aspects from their self-concepts, thereby lessening the discrepancies between LGB teens' actual and ideal selves and increasing their well-being.

The sensationalized nature of many GLO television shows is worth noting. Youth questioning their sexualities may not plausibly identify with the drag queens on *RuPaul's Drag Race* or the overdone comedic styling of *The Big Gay Sketch Show*. The camp factor that is characteristic of many GLO television programs may offer little in terms of cultivating positive self-complexities. The very idea that LGB people are worthy of their own programming, however, might serve to lessen LGB teens' negative self-complexities. This conception aligns with the scope of self model's assumption that overall viewing and patterns of content, not specific stories, influence viewers' self-complexities (Harrison, 2006). Exposure to television programming that regularly features LGB characters could conceivably lessen negative self-complexity even if exposure fails to increase positive self-complexity.

The results of the present study also suggest an association between GLO television exposure, self-complexities, and well-being. Exposure to GLO television may lessen negative self-complexity as described above and, ultimately, increase well-being. Research suggests that high negative self-complexity is a more influential determinant of depression than low positive self-complexity (Abela & Veronneau-McArdle, 2002; Woolfolk et al., 1995). Indeed, in the present study, the negative relationship between negative self-complexity and well-being was stronger than the positive relationship between positive self-complexity and well-being. Given that LGB youth are at a heightened risk for negative

emotional states and risky behaviors (Russell & Joyner, 2001), reducing negative self-complexity could alleviate emotional distress among this vulnerable population. That GLO television exists at all and is widely available to LGB youth might explain the direct relationship between GLO television exposure and well-being. It is possible that simply being exposed to representations of people mirroring the self increase feelings of esteem, which would lead to higher well-being. This relationship is worthy of future investigation, as the well-being of vulnerable populations is central to their resiliency.

Harrison (2006) did not differentiate positive self-complexity from negative self-complexity in her original formulation of the scope of self model, but results of the present study suggest that future research should use the scope of self model as a means of understanding media exposure's relationship to both positive and negative self-complexities. Moreover, although the scope of self model was not constructed to examine the self-complexities of LGB youth, the present study suggests that it may have utility for investigating vulnerable populations. Scholars could use the model to better understand how television exposure influences the identity development of other vulnerable populations, such as individuals with physical disabilities, transgender individuals, or those living with mental illness.

The present study suggests significant relationships between self-complexity and television exposure, but the effect sizes uncovered were small. Small effect sizes are common in media effects research, social science research more generally, and even in much medical research (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Although small, the effects are not trivial. Statistical effects that are small in size could still be vitally important in understanding the stressors involved in sexual identity development and in creating interventions to assist sexually questioning youth during the trials of adolescence. The small effect sizes could also be attributed to several study limitations.

The operationalization of self-complexity, although paralleling other identity and media research (Harrison, 2006), was not consistent with the majority of the research on self-complexity. This measurement limitation could have influenced the results. Moreover, we determined the valence of the self-aspects. A participant, however, could have considered his or her shy nature a negative self-aspect even though it was coded as positive in the present study. Future research should attempt to replicate this study using Linville's (1985, 1987) method of measuring self-complexity and ask participants themselves to determine the valence of their self-aspects. The cross-sectional nature is a second limitation of the present study. Casual arguments cannot be made with the data presented here. As such, future research should attempt to study the complex relationships between media exposure, identity, and well-being among LGB youth through longitudinal or experimental means. In addition, it would be useful to measure LGB youths' engagement and relationship with LGB characters on television and to examine how these variables impact self-complexity. For instance, research that includes an investigation of homophily with, or parasocial relationships with, LGB characters might allow researchers to better understand the mechanisms through which television consumption impacts self-complexity. It may also be interesting to note whether certain types of historical LGB depictions (e.g., "the evil gay") operate differently when compared with more contemporary and/or positive LGB tropes, such as "the gay revolutionary."

An additional limitation rests in the sole focus on television. Adolescents live in a converged, media-saturated world. Parsing out television programming from music, film, and social media is

becoming difficult. Although teens spend more time with television than other media (Rideout, 2015), examining the role of other mediated depictions of LGB characters in the self-complexity development of this population would provide a more comprehensive understanding of media as a sexual socialization agent. Future research should particularly concern itself with social media and Internet use in conjunction with television viewing, as media multitasking has become the primary way that youth engage with the television viewing experience.

The current study drew from youth involved in gay–straight alliances; these adolescents may already have more developed self-concepts. Future work should examine the impact of media on self-complexity using a more diverse sample of LGB adolescents, although there are obvious limitations when attempting to recruit minors and those who are just initiating their own sexual realization. Given these limitations, coupled with the fact that self-complexity development does not necessarily end during adolescence, researchers may be wise to replicate the current study using emerging adult or adult populations. There are also parallels between the development of one's self-concept and the coming out process. Namely, both of these processes seem to be continual and gradual. Future research may seek to investigate the relationships between self-complexity and disclosure of sexual identity.

Although Jude and Connor of ABC Family's *The Fosters* engaged in the youngest same-sex romantic kiss in the history of television, the kiss made headlines specifically because it was not standard fare. It was different. It was unique. It was, in fact, unheard of, and not without criticism from conservatives. The results of the present study suggest that depictions of LGB characters in a variety of roles with disparate personalities and characteristics may provide LGB youth with a diverse set of role models that can be used to increase positive self-complexities, decrease negative self-complexities, alter well-being, and, ultimately, cultivate healthier youth.

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