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Inappropriate? Gay characters affect adults' perceived age appropriateness of animated cartoons

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Abstract: Children's movies and animated cartoons today increasingly include homosexual characters, which can be welcomed from an equal-rights perspective. Yet, an intensive public debate has been initiated regarding the (age) appropriateness of such depictions. So far, it is unclear how heterosexual adults react to the presence of gay characters in children's animated cartoons. Drawing from social identity theory, we conducted an experiment in Germany. Using the Powtoon animation software, we created two versions of a trailer of a fictitious animated cartoon based on two almost identical storylines – one involving a heterosexual couple and the other a lesbian couple. Participants were exposed to only one version. Results of the experiment revealed that adults gave higher age ratings to the version that featured the lesbian couple. Yet, this effect was moderated, with only center- to right-leaning persons being affected. No effects were detected for left-leaning individuals. An exploratory analysis further revealed a moderation effect for individuals who believed in protection myths (i. e., protecting children from exposure to homosexuality), resulting in them giving higher age ratings compared to people who did not believe in protection myths. Implications are discussed, and age-rating measures are proposed for examining reactions to gay characters in communication research.

Keywords: children's animated cartoons, gay characters, age-appropriateness ratings, political orientation, social identity theory

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1 Introduction

“Attitudes toward homosexuality are not inborn but are socialized” (Calzo and Ward, 2009, p. 280), and media presentations play an important role as a socialization agent in this process (Bandura, 1994; de Leeuw, Kleemans, Rozendaal, Anschütz, and Buijzen, 2015). Indeed, children and adolescents frequently name the media as their top source of sexual information (e. g., Brown, Halpern, and L’Engle, 2005), as topics such as gender identification, sexual orientation, cisgender, heterosexuality, LGBTQIA* (i. e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexual, asexual) may not be discussed much with parents and peers (Calzo and Ward, 2009; see also Mares, Chen, and Bond, 2021).

Children’s movies and cartoons today increasingly include gay characters (Vanlee and Kerrigan, 2021), for instance, *Andi Mack* on Disney Channel (Ellison, 2019). As a result, an intensive public debate has been initiated regarding the (age) appropriateness of such depictions (see Wilkinson, Berry, DuBar, and Garner, 2020). That is, supporters (e. g., left-leaning liberals) point out that integrating gay characters into children’s cartoons can serve an important socialization function, and may contribute to an increased level of tolerance towards homosexuality (Calzo and Ward, 2009; see also Altemeyer, 2002). In contrast, opponents (e. g., right-leaning conservatives) frequently state that portrayals of gay characters are generally inappropriate for children (Wilkinson et al., 2020). That is, opponents may perceive gay characters in children’s cartoons as a threat to their own as well as children’s presumed heterosexual identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). For instance, the operators of the onemillionmoms.com website recently launched a petition against the Walt Disney Company to protest against the introduction of a gay character in the *DuckTales* cartoon: “Sign stating you will no longer support Disney nor watch DuckTales as long as it veers away from family-friendly entertainment” (onemillionmoms.com, 2020). Opponents may try to prevent children from being exposed to “objectionable” contents by demanding a higher age-rating recommendation (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Consequently, higher (lower) age ratings can be understood as an implicit assessment of a more negative (more positive) view of the topic of homosexuality.

In this regard, previous research (Ohlander, Batalova, and Treas, 2005; Terzizzi, Shook, and Ventis, 2010) suggests that right-leaning conservatives may – especially – tend to oppose gay characters in children’s animated cartoons because such characters can be perceived as a threat to traditional (family) values and social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Van Bavel and Packer, 2021). Although adults have been identified as important facilitators of children’s media use – regulating media exposure (Nikken and Schols, 2015; Valkenburg, Krcmar, Peeters, and Marseille, 1999) – there is a paucity of studies in communication research that examine

how heterosexual adults react to gay characters in children's animated cartoons. However, it would be important for academics, the general public, and producers to better understand how adults react to gay characters in children's animated cartoons, and what role an individual's political orientation plays in this context.

Thus, drawing from social identity theory (SIT, Tajfel and Turner, 1986), we aimed at closing two key research gaps. First, based on SIT and previous research on the role of negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Haddock, Zanna, and Esses, 1993; Roberts, 2019), we tested whether exposure to a lesbian couple (as opposed to a heterosexual couple) in a children's animated cartoon resulted in adults giving the latter a higher age-appropriateness rating. We decided to study participants' reactions to the presence of a lesbian couple (rather than a gay male couple), because previous research frequently lacks a differentiation between lesbians and gay men (e. g., simply asking about "homosexuals"). Also, lesbian women tend to be underrepresented in both research and the public sphere (Bettinsoli, Suppes, and Napier, 2020; Perez, 2019).

Extending previous research (Ohlander et al., 2005; Terrizzi et al., 2010), we examined whether the age-appropriateness rating effects are more pronounced in individuals who describe themselves as politically conservative (politically right-leaning) compared to liberals (politically left-leaning). Furthermore, in an exploratory analysis we examined whether effects are stronger in people who believe in so-called protection myths (the notion that children should not be exposed to homosexuality).

As a first step for this line of research, we tested our assumptions with an online experiment in Germany. To do so, we created a trailer of a fictitious animated cartoon using the Powtoon animation software (powtoon.com). This allowed us to work on a single storyline, the only variable being the presence of a heterosexual or a lesbian couple.

Social identity and identity threats

According to SIT, groups are important to us because they give us a sense of belonging and help us strive for a positive self-concept (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Van Bavel and Packer, 2021). Put differently, when we belong to a certain group – for instance, social class, family, sports team – this (in-)group membership is important for our social identity and may be a source of pride and self-esteem. Individuals regularly belong to multiple groups and – depending on the situational context – frequently compare their in-group to out-groups using self-categorization processes based on an "us versus them" logic (Van Bavel and Packer, 2021). Also, individuals regularly evaluate their in-group more positively than out-groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1986),

and meta-analytical results indicate that individuals frequently engage in in-group favoritism (Balliet, Wu, and De Dreu, 2014).

Previous research also showed that in-group members react very sensitively to social identity threats (Schmitt, Lehmiller, and Walsh, 2007). This is especially true when individuals identify with and value an in-group (Jetten, Spears, and Postmes, 2004): They are keen to protect their community from out-group threats in order to maintain a positive self-concept (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). For instance, Schmitt and colleagues (2007) showed that heterosexual US students' perceived threats to their heterosexual identity increased when they were exposed to state laws legally recognizing same-sex partnerships using the label "marriage" compared to "civil union". Similarly, Falomir-Pichastor and Hegarty (2014) showed that heterosexual individuals responded by emphasizing the distinctiveness of their own (heterosexual) group when confronted with threats to its perceived identity. According to Schmitt et al. (2007), "individuals who perceive an out-group threat to the positive distinctiveness of a valued in-group identity will take advantage of opportunities to protect their in-group's distinctiveness" (p. 445). In connection with children's animated cartoons that contain gay characters, the demand for higher age ratings can be regarded as one such opportunity. That is, heterosexual individuals may perceive gay characters in children's animated cartoons as a threat to their, or a child's (presumed) heterosexual identity and may therefore support higher age ratings to prevent children from being exposed to such media contents. A different line of research further supports this assumption showing that adults frequently engage in protective behaviors like censorship when they feel that media content is potentially harmful (e. g., sex on television) to their own and other children (Nathanson, Eveland, Park, and Paul, 2002). Based on this theorizing, our first hypothesis (H1) reads:

H1: Exposure to a lesbian couple (as opposed to a heterosexual couple) in a children's animated cartoon will result in the latter being given higher age-appropriateness ratings.

Political orientation and perceived age appropriateness

Previous research has repeatedly demonstrated that political orientation is an important predictor for heterosexuals' attitudes towards homosexuals (Haddock et al., 1993; Ohlander et al., 2005; Terrizzi et al., 2010) and issues such as gay marriage. For instance, Becker and Scheufele (2011) showed that individuals who self-identified as conservative were more likely to oppose gay marriage (see also Pew Research Center, 2019). Steffens and Wagner (2004) showed a similar pattern for attitudes and issue perceptions in Germany (the context of the present study). Their

results revealed that identification with the (liberal) Greens (as opposed to the conservative CDU) significantly predicted more positive attitudes towards homosexuals. Thus, we expected that the perceived age-appropriateness effect would be especially pronounced in individuals who self-identify as conservatives compared to liberals, as we formulated in our second hypothesis (H2).

H2: Individuals who self-identify as right-leaning (conservative) will demand higher age-appropriateness ratings for children's animated cartoons that include lesbian characters, compared to left-leaning (liberal) individuals.

2 Method

Design, sample, and procedure

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online experiment in Germany (June–July 2018) with 213 participants (70.9 % female, age assessed in 5-year stages starting at 1 = 18–24, going up to 10 = over 65; 51.2 % were between the ages of 18 and 24; 92 % indicated not to have children at the time the survey was conducted). Mean attitudes towards homosexuality in Germany have been shown to be moderate to rather positive (neither extremely negative nor very positive) compared to other Western democracies, making Germany a good case for the present examination (Andersen and Fetner, 2008). Participants were recruited online, via mailing lists and via social media. Data and analysis script are available at https://osf.io/ymfd7/?view_only=ab56f1f11b524fbfa136187244891fc4.

We conducted an experiment (randomized between-subjects design), which manipulated the occurrence of either a heterosexual ($n = 106$; control condition) or a lesbian couple ($n = 107$; experimental condition) in an animated cartoon targeted at children. We created a trailer of a fictitious animated cartoon (allegedly soon to appear in a children's program and in cooperation with a children's TV channel; length: approximately 60 seconds) using the Powtoon animation software (powtoon.com). This allowed us to work on a single storyline, the only variable being the presence of a heterosexual or a lesbian couple. The trailer introduced a new series telling the story of a family of four ("The Müllers"). The eldest of the two children, daughter Kimmy, is in a relationship with Alex, who is either depicted as a girl or a boy, depending on the chosen stimulus condition. The storyline centers around a wedding invitation sparking a conversation about weddings at the dinner table (see Appendix).

Measures

First, we measured several control variables (i. e., age; whether participants had children or not, dummy-coded: 1 = being a parent; 8 %) and the moderator variable *political orientation* (scale: 1 = *left*, 101 = *right*; $M = 39.63$; $SD = 18.66$). Second, participants rated the *age appropriateness* of the animated cartoon (age at which they perceived it was appropriate to watch the cartoon, ranging from 1 to 18 years; $M = 5.97$; $SD = 2.68$). Next, we dummy-coded participants' *gender* (1 = female; 70.9 %) and *sexual orientation* (1 = non-heterosexual; 7.5 %). We further assessed individuals' *belief in protection myths* (the notion that children should not be exposed to homosexuality), for example: "Children should not be confronted with sexual content, and therefore also not with sexual orientations" (6 statements, 1 = *no agreement*; 7 = *full agreement*; $\alpha = .91$; $M = 2.56$; $SD = 1.55$). The rationale behind employing this measure was to disentangle the more specific protection myths concept from the broader concept of political orientation. Thus, in our analyses described below, we looked at the moderating role of political orientation (while controlling for protection myths) on age ratings (H2). Next, in an exploratory analysis, we examined whether protections myths (while controlling for political orientation) moderated effects on age ratings.

Randomization and manipulation checks

Randomization checks for age ($F(1, 211) = 2.53$, $p = .114$), gender ($\chi^2(1) = 0.97$, $p = .999$), political orientation ($F(1, 210) = 0.15$, $p = .702$), and whether participants had children or not ($\chi^2(1) = 3.20$, $p = .082$) were successful. Also, we conducted a manipulation check ensuring that participants correctly identified the portrayed characters and the lesbian couple in the experimental condition. The manipulation check was successful (experimental condition: $n = 70$; 65.4 % named Alex as the daughter's girlfriend; control condition: $n = 78$; 73.6 % named Alex as the daughter's boyfriend).

3 Results

First, we examined the main effect of the condition on participants' age ratings (experimental group: $M = 6.43$; $SD = 2.81$; control group: $M = 5.50$; $SD = 2.81$). Results indicated a significantly higher age rating for participants in the experimental group, $F(1, 211) = 6.60$, $p = .011$. Second, we conducted a linear regression analysis. We mean-centered the moderator variable political orientation and created an interaction term with the dummy-coded experimental condition (1 = experimental

condition). The analysis revealed a positive effect of the experimental condition on participants' age ratings ($\beta = 0.19$; $p = .004$), whereby exposure to the animated cartoon showing the lesbian couple resulted in significantly higher age ratings (comparison: heterosexual couple). This supports H1, indicating that participants gave a significantly higher age-rating recommendation when the cartoon included a lesbian couple.

Also, a significant interaction effect emerged of political orientation and the experimental condition ($\beta = 0.19$; $p = .049$). While left-leaning individuals were not affected (threshold of 32 or lower using the Johnson-Neyman method; scale from 1 = *left* to 101 = *right*, which concerns 34.4 % of the sample), centrists and right-leaning individuals gave significantly higher age-appropriateness ratings after exposure to the lesbian couple condition (Figure 1). This lends support to H2. Furthermore, protection myths positively predicted age-appropriateness ratings ($\beta = 0.31$; $p < .001$). When excluding protection myths from the model, the interaction effect of political orientation and experimental condition disappears and is only trending towards significance ($p = .082$). However, the main effect of the condition remains. No other control variable (see Table 1) yielded any significant effect (total $R^2 = 10.3\%$).

Exploratory analysis

We further examined the moderating role of protection myths, while controlling for political orientation (please see online materials). The main effect of the lesbian couple condition (vs. the heterosexual couple condition) again positively and signif-

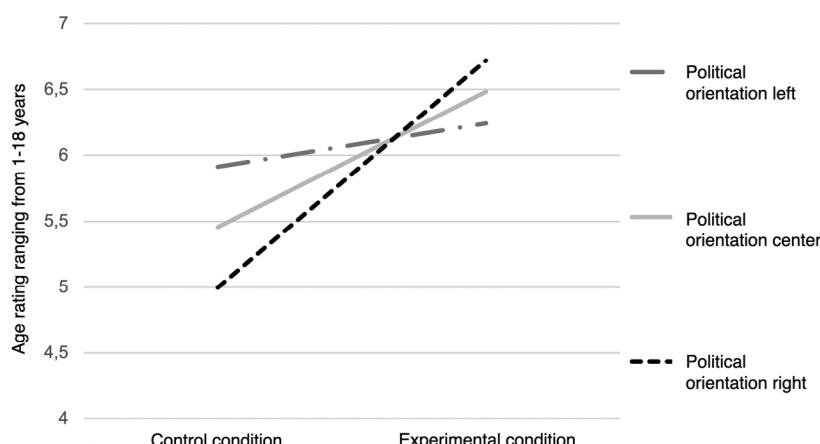


Figure 1: Interaction effect of condition and political orientation on age-rating recommendations.

icantly predicted participants' age ratings ($\beta = 0.20$; $p < .05$). Also, a significant interaction effect emerged of protection myths and the experimental condition ($\beta = 0.19$; $p = .042$). That is, even a slight agreement with these statements significantly increased age ratings (threshold of 2 or higher on a scale from 1 = *no agreement* to 7 = *high agreement*, which concerns 49.8 % of the sample), compared to those who did not agree with protection myths at all. Neither political orientation ($\beta = -0.03$; $p = \text{non-significant}$), nor any other control variable showed any significant effect.

Table 1: Linear regressions predicting age rating.

	Age rating
	β (SE)
Age	-0.05 (0.21)
Female	-0.00 (0.41)
Homosexual	0.03 (0.64)
Being a parent	-0.05 (0.82)
Belief in protection myths	0.30*** (0.13)
Experimental condition	0.19** (0.36)
Political orientation	-0.17 (0.01)
Experimental condition * Political orientation	0.19* (0.02)
Observations	211
R^2	0.10

Note: Political orientation is centered around its mean.

Significance codes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

4 Discussion

Including characters of the LGBTQIA* community in children's animated cartoons is seen as an opportunity to foster tolerance and higher acceptance rates of this community (see Calzo and Ward, 2009). Indeed, previous research indicates that (mediated) contact with homosexuals is one key factor for improving heterosexuals' attitudes towards homosexuality (Altemeyer, 2002; Calzo and Ward, 2009).

However, it has so far been unclear how people react to the presence of gay characters in children's animated cartoons. In line with SIT (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and previous research on the effects of homosexuality as an identity threat (Schmitt et al., 2007), our findings show that the presence of lesbian characters in a children's animated cartoon prompted heterosexual adults to give significantly

higher age-appropriateness rating recommendations. Corroborating and extending previous results (Ohlander et al., 2005; Terrizzi et al., 2010), this effect was more pronounced in centrist and right-leaning individuals but not in left-leaning individuals. Interestingly, baseline age ratings in the control group differed from those of conservatives by about one year (Figure 1). One explanation for this finding may be that (post-materialistic) liberals might generally be more critical when it comes to children's media use and screen times, so that they may favor a higher age threshold regarding children's media consumption. Future research should examine this assumption in depth.

However, the reported interaction effect – of political orientation and the experimental condition – is close to the threshold of significance and should thus be interpreted with caution. An exploratory analysis further revealed that age-rating effects (while controlling for political orientation) are higher for individuals who even slightly believe in protection myths (compared to persons who do not believe in such myths at all).

Taken together, these results suggest that centrists and conservatives (compared to left-leaning individuals) are tendentially more reticent about the portrayal of gay characters in children's animated cartoons. Yet, the more specific protection myths concept proved to be an even more important variable in this context. We found that protection myths are moderately and positively related to the broader concept of political orientation, more specifically to political conservatism ($r = .371$; $p < .001$). Our findings from the exploratory analysis suggest that protection myths can be regarded as a key dispositional factor when it comes to age ratings of animated cartoons for children. Future research should thus further examine this concept.

Overall, the main finding of this study is that the trailer version that featured gay characters prompted participants to give significantly higher age-rating recommendations, which confirms previous findings on heterosexuals' negative attitudes towards homosexuality and homosexuals (Haddock et al., 1993; see Calzo and Ward, 2009).

Implications

Our findings have at least three important implications. First, they suggest that non-liberal adults who believe in protection myths may tend to undermine the efforts of media companies to include gay characters in children's animated cartoons. That is, adults who perceive content featuring gay characters as age-inappropriate tend to filter out such "objectionable" contents (Nikken and Schols, 2015; Valkenburg et al., 1999), which compromises efforts to socialize acceptance

of sexual pluralism in society (Altemeyer, 2002; Calzo and Ward, 2009). Previous research showed that adults frequently engage in protective behaviors like censorship when they feel that media content is inadequate for (their) children (Nathanson et al., 2002). Future research should further test this assumption.

Second, increasingly integrating queer characters into media programs – which can generally be welcomed from an equal-rights perspective – may result in polarization effects when parts of society choose to not expose themselves and their children to such contents. That is, while regular exposure to LGBTQIA* or other intersectional identities in children's media programs may foster tolerance and acceptance (Calzo and Ward, 2009), non-exposure to such characters may not. This may further increase political polarization in the long run (see Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021) regarding such debated issues as same-sex marriage, for instance (Becker and Scheufele, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2019), both among the public and political groups. Future research should examine these potential effects in depth, including ways to prevent them.

Third, from a methodological standpoint, our results suggest that rating recommendations based on perceived age-appropriateness may be a promising, albeit indirect, way to gauge attitudes towards homosexuals. Using explicit measures when assessing attitudes towards homosexuality is often challenging due to problems related to social desirability bias (Jellison, McConnell, and Gabriel, 2004). The perceived age-appropriateness measure may serve as a valuable alternative way of gauging heterosexual individuals' perceptions of homosexuality. Yet, future research should further test if this age-rating measure generates valid results with regard to other sexual orientations and in different cultural contexts.

Limitations

This study has some noteworthy limitations. First, other research should generally try to replicate the present results (e. g., using quota-based samples and full-length cartoons or non-animated productions), including through systematic comparison of adults with and without children. Also, we used a German sample in this study. While we believe that the effects found may be detectable in other cultural contexts, future research should test this. For instance, effects might be even stronger in highly polarized countries such as the United States or democracies with less positive mean attitudes towards homosexuality (Andersen and Fetner, 2008). Second, our study presented participants with a lesbian couple. Future research should examine the age-rating effects of other situations presented in similar cartoons: a gay male couple, other sexual orientations and/or identities, other themes than marriage. While attitudes towards homosexuals have been shown to predict atti-

tudes towards same-sex marriage, which means the two constructs are correlated (Moskowitz, Rieger, and Roloff, 2010), future research should try to disentangle both constructs testing whether attitudes and/or evaluations of same-sex marriage drive age-rating effects, especially in countries that do not legally recognize same-sex marriage. Third, we used the Powtoon software to create a trailer that was roughly aimed at children between the ages of five and seven. Future research should test whether the effects found in our study extend to older age groups as well.

5 Conclusion

Today's children's media content includes more pluralistic storylines and characters. Recently, media representations of LGBTQIA* characters have increased, which is also observable in content targeted at children (Ellison, 2019). The results of an experiment revealed that exposure to a cartoon trailer featuring a lesbian couple (as opposed to a heterosexual couple) prompted adults to give higher age ratings. This age-rating effect was detected in centrists and right-leaning individuals (but not in left-leaning individuals). People who believe in protection myths gave significantly higher age ratings. Thus, the increased inclusion of gay characters in children's animated cartoons may increase tolerance towards homosexuality in some people, but also inadvertently contribute to polarization effects between those who support and those who oppose the integration of gay characters in children's animated cartoons.

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Appendix

As a stimulus, the participants watched a trailer of a fictitious cartoon series. *Die Müllers* purportedly tells the story of a family consisting of Timmy, his parents, and his sister Kimmy. Furthermore, the viewer is introduced to Kimmy's girlfriend/boyfriend Alex. The Müllers are invited to the wedding of aunt Katja. This invitation prompts a discussion at the dinner table about how marriage makes partners become part of a new family. In response to that, Timmy asks whether Alex would like to marry his sister Kimmy one day and become part of their family. Below, some screenshots exemplify what the trailer looked like. The content of the story was kept completely constant, the only variable being the identity of Kimmy's partner.

Experimental condition



Control condition



