Can TV shows promote acceptance of sexual and ethnic minorities? A literature review of television effects on diversity attitudes

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Abstract

Until recently, western TV programming rarely featured sexual or ethnic minority members; if present, their representation was mostly negative. Increasingly, though, diverse characters start to play likeable protagonists as well. Thus, television can promote negative diversity attitudes and, at other times, positive ones. The present article reviews and connects theories and research from sociology, psychology, and media and communication studies to clarify the role of television in diversity attitudes formation and to identify directions for future research. Specifically, two research questions are addressed. First, through which processes does television influence diversity attitudes? Second, what features of TV shows contribute to positive diversity attitudes formation among viewers, according to different theories of television effects? Findings indicate that television can entrench existing negative diversity attitudes through the echo chamber phenomenon. However, TV content featuring numerous, likeable, attractive, and typical minority characters that have friendly interactions with the rest of society can promote positive diversity attitudes. Future
research should study openness to view content with minority characters, examine the effects of the complete video media diets, check media effects in non-western countries, explore media effects in longitudinal studies and investigate what constitutes attractive, likeable, and typical representation of ethnic and sexual minorities.

KEYWORDS
cultivation, diversity attitudes, echo chambers, minority representation, parasocial contact, social cognitive theory, television

1 | INTRODUCTION

Audiences incorporate media messages into their worldviews (Macey et al., 2014). Because American TV shows, which are often available globally, portray more ethnic and sexual minorities in various roles (Garretson, 2015; GLAAD Media Institute, 2019), contemporary television may have a considerable influence on diversity attitudes. Diversity attitudes are beliefs about others who are different in some respects, be it physical characteristics, behaviors, group memberships, or personalities (Strauss et al., 2003). Support for diversity can have different meanings, such as general inclusivity toward all groups or acceptance of particular minority groups (Hennekam & Tahssain-Gay, 2015). The present work reviews media effects studies featuring immigrants, racial/ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ people (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people) that constitute sexual minorities. There are many alternatives to the acronym LGBTQ, however, we chose this term following a recommendation of the GLAAD Media Institute’s (2016) reference guide to include various sexual and gender identities.

With the rise of globalization, societies across the globe have come to include more immigrants who bring their various cultural and religious practices into national cultures (Berry & Sam, 2014). In many places, this process has led to certain racial and ethnic minorities becoming stigmatized, contributing to the pervasive problems of racism and prejudice based on cultural or ethnic background (Babacan et al., 2009). Furthermore, while LGBTQ people gain more legal protections in some countries, they are still highly likely to face discrimination across the globe (Mendos, 2019). The enduring and omnipresent social problems of stigmatization and discrimination call for positive change on various levels, including the development of positive attitudes about ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities on the level of individual cognitions.

Recently, Lamont et al. (2017) called for cultural perspectives to explain cognitive phenomena behind social issues. Grindstaff and Turow (2006) argue that television produces and reinforces social representations, particularly relating to the notions of ethnic, racial, and sexual identities. This viewpoint is substantiated by an empirical study into ethnocentrism among a representative sample of around 7000 Belgian adolescents (Eichardus & Siongers, 2007). Cultural taste in movies and music along with preferred media channels proved to explain ethnocentrism better than traditional indicators such as participation in clubs and parental educational attainment, derived from classical sociological theories such as social integration or deprivation perspectives. Following this view, television should be treated as a powerful socializing agent, which influences diversity attitudes about ethnic and sexual minorities.

Numerous theories from sociology, psychology, and media and communication explain how cultural representations in media shape attitudes. However, these theories remain compartmentalized in their respective disciplines. Chen (2018) acknowledges this separation of fields and argues that media sociology should embrace multidisciplinarity and become more problem-driven. The present article is a response to the calls by Lamont
et al. (2017) and Chen (2018) and aims to review and integrate different streams of research to offer a comprehensive analysis of how television affects diversity attitudes.

Audiovisual narratives sometimes have a negative impact on audiences’ views about sexual and ethnic minorities, while at other times improve them. Yet little systematic knowledge exists of the specific features of TV shows that make them effective in improving diversity attitudes. It is worth investigating what types of character portrayal and on-screen interactions make television a positive and effective socializing agent. This article addresses two research questions. First, through which processes does television influence diversity attitudes? Second, what features of TV shows contribute to positive diversity attitudes formation among viewers, according to different theories of television effects?

Our exploration opens with zooming in on echo chambers and the reinforcing spirals model. We consider how media selection can strengthen existing biases towards minorities and solidify negative views. Then, we examine how and when television may change opinions and promote positive diversity attitudes. Cultivation theory, parasocial contact hypothesis, social cognitive theory, and the cognitive theory of stereotype change, respectively, create the backbone of this section. We discuss empirical evidence that supports each paradigm and identify knowledge gaps to propose directions for future research.

2 TELEVISION ECHOING EXISTING BIASES

Modern media are often said to strengthen existing attitudes rather than change them. This holds specifically for echo chambers, Internet-based communities of like-minded individuals who only consume content that reflects their views (Sunstein, 2007). Within echo chambers, people voice similar opinions, never challenge their beliefs, and tend to dismiss information sources that disagree with their views. For instance, online networks on Twitter have been found to be segregated by political beliefs (Barberá et al., 2015) and research on partisan news consumption has indicated similar ideological segregation (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

The echo chamber phenomenon is not restricted to online activities only. Uses and gratification theory posits that people choose media content consistent with their needs and motivations (Ruggiero, 2000). Building on uses and gratification theory, Slater (2015) created a reinforcing spirals model where media use is both the outcome and the predictor of users’ beliefs. The theory argues that social identity, values, and preferences determine media choices, which in turn reinforce the existing attitudes, beliefs, and identities. In some countries, especially those traditionally conservative, positive representations of ethnic and sexual minorities can be scarce. Theoretically, in such countries, negative portrayals that confirm viewers’ beliefs could be encountered more often in news and entertainment programs. Logically then, viewers would be inevitably placed in echo chambers that support their biases towards minorities. Moreover, even when there is some choice, already biased viewers might be more inclined to choose programs reflecting their views, thus following a reinforcing spiral.

There is some evidence that television exposure can contribute to negative diversity attitudes staying the same among viewers. Eyssel et al. (2015) examined longitudinal relations between private TV viewing and Islamophobia in German society. TV portrayals of Muslims proved to be overwhelmingly negative in German news and political programming on private networks. Moreover, initial Islamophobia was indeed found to predict later preference for private channels, and initial preference for private channels predicted later Islamophobia. Similar findings were reported in a study of violence acceptance towards outgroup members between Palestinian and Israeli youths (Gvirsman et al., 2016). Children who reported more exposure to mediated political violence had their views on physical violence towards Israeli or Palestinian people solidified at a later time. Finally, another study found that initial consumption of conservative channel Fox News predicted more negative attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement in the future among American audiences (Kilgo & Mourão, 2019). Initial negative attitudes towards the movement also predicted higher consumption of Fox News in the future in the same group. These studies
support the reinforcing spirals model by showing that television can reinforce negative diversity attitudes, as well as that negative attitudes may result in television consumption patterns that confirm them.

In general, the presented frameworks explain how television can hinder a change of views and the formation of positive diversity attitudes. Echo chambers prevent the exchange of ideas and exposure to different views. An expected outcome of the reinforcing spirals model is a strengthening of existing beliefs. Arguably, in a context of societies less open to diversity, television consumption can lead to even more negative attitudes. However, it is important to acknowledge that, in theory, echo chambers of positive diversity attitudes are also possible. Even though this has not been empirically shown, audiences open to diversity may follow a reinforcing spiral where television improves their positive diversity attitudes, and their existing positive attitudes determine their selection of media content that supports these views. In sum, there is empirical evidence that negative representation of minorities along with viewers choosing such content leads to diversity attitudes becoming more negative, but opposite effects are theoretically possible.

3 | TELEVISION CHANGING VIEWS

Recent years witnessed an increase in minority representation on TV. Garretson (2015) noted a general upward trend between the 1970s and 2000s for the representation of African Americans, working women, and LGBTQ people on network television in the United States. This rise in minority representation is not limited to American programming. Video-on-demand streaming platforms show the same trend. While not all streaming services are available globally and local differences in content endure, a lot of original platform content marketed globally adheres to this trend. For instance, GLAAD Media Institute (2019) reported that streaming platforms have high numbers of LGBTQ regular and recurring characters, including some people of color. While some of these portrayals still rely on negative stereotypes, increasing minority representation also increases the amount of positive, likeable, recurring characters. For example, Netflix’s diversity and inclusion report shows that original American series have numerous representations of LGBTQ characters and characters from racial and ethnic minorities (Smith et al., 2021).

Even though echo chambers and the reinforcing spirals of media consumption exist, given the vast media landscapes, saturated with multiple choices, viewers that are driven by curiosity, might want to explore programs outside of their comfort zone. For instance, would all conservative audiences unanimously abstain from entertainment TV shows that feature positive representations of sexual or ethnic minority characters? A review of media selectivity theories suggests that mediated intergroup contact is rare but possible (Johnson, 2017). While empirical evidence to give a clear answer is still lacking, media use motivation theory sets a promising direction for future research.

Oliver and Raney (2011) identified two different types of motivation for entertainment seeking: Hedonistic motivation is about fulfilling one’s need for fun, while eudaimonic motivation refers to the need to contemplate the meaning of life. For instance, people watch life dramas or sad stories for leisure to fulfill a eudaimonic need. In theory then, majority viewers, regardless of their social beliefs, may find it interesting to consider the life of someone completely different. The experiences and struggles of minorities could stimulate reflections on the human condition. Research already shows that identification and perspective-taking happen even with highly stigmatized characters in a video (Chung & Slater, 2013). While viewers might not actively seek programs disagreeing with their beliefs, they still could be interested in seeing them upon encounter. Broad exposure to entertainment media can also result in exposure to different points of view. An algorithmic recommendation system can limit this broad exposure by suggesting content similar to previous consumption, however, looking for new series is then still possible. Perhaps exploring different entertainment show options offers a way to break out of echo chambers in some respects. While people might be segregated by the news outlets they follow, they could come together as audiences of the entertainment series they watch. Still, to what extent political and social beliefs determine entertainment media choices calls for further research.
In sum, television, accessible globally, already provides some narratives featuring minorities in a positive light. Entertainment shows with such characters could gather an audience base with different initial opinions. Viewers’ diversity attitudes could become more positive upon consumption of such TV content. A major question that remains is through which processes the changes in worldviews occur. Several theoretical paradigms shed light on the mechanisms and conditions under which TV shows promote positive diversity attitudes. While these paradigms sometimes appear together in television effect studies, their specific features are rarely analyzed side-by-side. The following part reviews three relevant media effects theories—namely cultivation theory, parasocial contact hypothesis, and social cognitive theory. Subsequently, the focus moves to the cognitive theory of stereotype change. The approach stems from psychology and has not been applied extensively in the context of television yet.

3.1 Watching multiple TV programs

Cultivation theory was introduced in 1970s research on the effects of prime-time television exposure. The theory posits that programs and shows cultivate particular beliefs: Audience members are driven to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the world portrayed on television (Morgan et al., 2009). Shrum (2009) discussed two types of cultivation effects: first- and second-order effects. First-order effects pertain to the estimation of prevalence and probability of a given event portrayed in media. When a viewer watches multiple programs, mental representations of the televised messages accumulate in the mind. These representations become easier to retrieve from memory. First-order effects are the strongest when audience members make the estimation automatically, without thorough consideration. For instance, viewing many shows featuring minorities can make people believe that such individuals are common in society. In societies where people of different ethnicities are segregated or LGBTQ individuals are not comfortable being publicly out, these first-order effects could make viewers more aware of the presence of minorities.

Second-order effects concern the development of attitudes and beliefs. Some television messages are persuasive enough to be incorporated by the audiences into their thinking. The viewers who pay more attention and are more involved in the shows have stronger second-order cultivation effects. Possibly, shows that present ethnic or sexual minority members in a positive light have the power to convince viewers that such individuals could be valuable members of society. Still, different audiences could process television messages differently. Morgan et al. (2009) argued that the recurrent messages on television could be unanimously adopted by diverse audiences. Accordingly, the result is a mainstreaming effect, where people with divergent viewpoints come closer together, forming a consensus. Other studies argued that it is also possible that media effects follow a pattern of resonance where the strongest cultivation happens for the viewers with beliefs agreeing with televised messages (Shrum & Bischak, 2001). The resonance effect, on the contrary to mainstreaming, can result in the strengthening of existing opinions. Similar to echo chambers and the reinforcing spiral models, those with more negative diversity attitudes might stay this way—and vice versa, more positive diversity attitudes could be reinforced.

There are two important conditions for cultivation to take place, namely the possibility of repeated exposure over time and the homogeneity of messages across different content pieces (Morgan et al., 2009). Increasingly, viewers choose and stream their content at leisure through various video-on-demand platforms. Netflix prides itself on promoting diversity and having multiple shows dealing with various marginalized groups such as people of color or LGBTQ individuals (Smith et al., 2021). Thus, heavy exposure to Netflix could result in conditions similar to the homogeneity of prime-time television broadcasting in the past. Devoted fans of the platform have greater chances of watching various series showcasing minorities, which potentially could lead to the cultivation of positive diversity attitudes.

The algorithmic recommendation system, prevalent in online television, results in targeted advertising, which creates challenges for cultivation to take place. Viewers’ watching history determines what new shows are promoted to them. Therefore, audience members could be segmented into pockets of similar interest groups for
advertising purposes. For example, those seeking foreign shows or those seeking sci-fi shows could see content according to their interests. Similarly, audience members not interested in shows with diverse characters might have a smaller chance to encounter shows that would change their views. While the risk that such segmentation leads to echo chambers persists, Netflix also promotes certain shows to all audience members in the section Netflix Originals or on their social media. Often, these shows feature cast members and characters representing diverse backgrounds. Therefore, even with algorithmic recommendations, video-on-demand platforms can still lead to the cultivation of positive diversity attitudes.

The cultivation paradigm gathered large empirical support for shaping viewers’ beliefs, specifically about violence, sex roles, or science (for a summary see Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). The theory was also used to explain changes in views on some minorities. Calzo and Ward (2009) explored general attitudes toward homosexuality. The authors noted that frequent exposure to soap operas and daytime talk shows among American men, a group less accepting of homosexuality, correlated with higher acceptance of this sexual orientation in general. Thus, the study lends credence to the mainstreaming aspect of cultivation theory, at least in the context of minority acceptance. Similarly, Hefner et al. (2015) reported that greater cumulative exposure to different queer-themed shows correlated with more positive attitudes toward gay men and lesbian women. Therefore, repeated exposure to similar messages about homosexuality results in more positive diversity attitudes toward LGBTQ people. The studies also suggest that American television shows increasingly feature positive representations of gay people, which has a positive effect on viewers, making them more accepting.

In contrast, cultivation effects on racial minorities offer less promising results, at least in the United States. Heavy television viewing results in more negative stereotypes about African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans (Lee et al., 2009). A primarily negative representation of ethnic minorities on American television could explain these effects. While the situation is changing with more ethnically diverse casts in streaming platform shows, a recent study on the representation of diversity in Netflix shows concludes that some portrayals still reinforce negative stereotypes about Latin women (Gonzalez-Sobrino et al., 2018). The results about cultivation and LGBTQ acceptance offer some hope, though. Perhaps a rise in positive representations on mainstream television could improve the views of ethnic minorities as well.

Some knowledge gaps in cultivation theory remain to be explored. First, empirical studies demonstrating that the content featuring positive racial minority representations improves acceptance of these groups are needed. Such research could explore the complete audiovisual media diets, including the content on broadcast television and shared online. More positive minority representations may be already available on specific social media platforms like YouTube, which features more user-generated content. Second, there should be more research specifically on video-on-demand platforms. Positive minority representations featured in shows available online are likely prominent enough to effectively shape positive beliefs about others among audience members. As mentioned, Netflix users, exposed to programming with diverse characters, could develop more positive diversity attitudes.

In general, the available evidence indicates that television can cultivate positive diversity attitudes by featuring minorities in a positive light across different programs. The discussed theory focuses on general exposure to television, while the subsequent two paradigms, parasocial contact hypothesis, and social cognitive theory, focus on the mediated contact with characters.

### 3.2 Feeling a connection with the characters

The parasocial contact hypothesis focuses on the content of televised messages, specifically the characters’ portrayal (Schiappa et al., 2005). The theory argues that audiences have the potential to form social bonds with certain characters. Such bonds are called parasocial due to their one-sided nature from the viewer to the character. They have strong effects on audience members, even changing their attitudes, which resembles the influence of real-life contacts. The theory extends Allport’s (1954) classic contact hypothesis, which predicted
that friendly contact between groups reduces animosity between their members. Similarly, the parasocial contact hypothesis posits that mediated contact on television reduces prejudice because it allows viewers to learn about the outgroup members (Schiappa et al., 2005). Sometimes parasocial bonds can resemble friendships. For instance, if the character is a disadvantaged minority member portrayed positively, mediated contact can result in a friendly bond, which promotes greater acceptance, understanding, and appreciation. Moreover, these mediated interactions are especially effective when real-life contact possibilities are limited (Schiappa et al., 2005). Therefore, similarly to the first-order cultivation effects, this theory predicts that television is especially important in promoting positive diversity attitudes in societies where numerous contacts with minorities are not commonplace.

Friendly parasocial contact is more likely to happen under specific conditions. Frequent exposure to television is important for parasocial bonds to be formed, just like frequent exposure to television is important for cultivation to take place. Schiappa et al. (2007), drawing on a meta-analysis, claimed characters should be presented as realistic, attractive (physically, socially, and/or relationally), and similar to the viewers. Such representation ensures that mediated contact is positive and has a chance to promote acceptance of ethnic and sexual minorities.

Vast empirical evidence shows that parasocial contact affects perceptions of a disliked outgroup. A recent meta-analysis on mediated contact reported 56 studies, which examined both negative and positive parasocial contacts with different minority groups and their effects on prejudice (Banas et al., 2020). The paper cited numerous studies showing an improvement in attitudes upon positive exposure in videos toward immigrants, LGBTQ individuals, Muslims, African Americans, people with mental illnesses, and with STDs. Such a broad application shows that parasocial contacts affect multiple different minorities, and thus could promote positive diversity attitudes.

Specifically, the parasocial contact hypothesis has been developed with a focus on LGBTQ people. Schiappa et al. (2005) examined parasocial contact effects in experimental studies. Two of their studies were comparing experimental groups to control and preexposure groups. The authors showed that even one-time exposure to Queer Eye for the Straight Guy or Eddie Izzard’s standup show resulted in decreased prejudicial attitudes toward gay men and male transvestites, respectively (Schiappa et al., 2005). However, the demonstrated improvement in attitudes was observed only shortly after the stimulus was presented, hence it is unclear whether the change was lasting. In their third study, they were screening Six Feet Under episodes for 5 weeks and then noted improvements in attitudes toward gay men among American university students. The attitude change measurement took place some time after the long-term exposure to the show, which suggests that a change in diversity attitudes was more lasting than a change measured immediately after exposure to the stimulus. In yet another research, the same authors found that frequency of viewing Will and Grace, as well as a level of parasocial interaction with a gay character (i.e., Will), correlated with lower prejudice toward gay men (Schiappa et al., 2006). In sum, the cited research demonstrates that positive, attractive representations of queer characters such as David Fisher and Keith Charles from Six Feet Under, the crew from Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, or Will from Will and Grace, can change perceptions of the entire social group.

Some aspects of the parasocial contact hypothesis still need further exploration. For instance, the optimal conditions for the theory do not specify how to portray disadvantaged minorities as realistic, attractive, and similar to viewers. Perhaps representing minority members in an overwhelmingly positive light, as having superior moral and intellectual qualities, makes them more attractive. However, portraying them as complex and fallible human beings, facing ethical dilemmas might also be attractive. In this way, TV show characters could be perceived as closer to the everyday viewer. It remains to be researched whether some less positive attributes such as character flaws could make minority representation more relatable and easier to identify with. Future research should focus on ways, in which attractive character representation could be achieved.

Another research avenue is based on Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis, which specified optimal conditions to ensure that intergroup contact reduces prejudice. These included equal status, common goals, intergroup
cooperation, and support for authorities, law, or customs. They were later confirmed in a large-scale meta-analysis (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Yet these contact conditions are specific to real-life situations. How they could be achieved through parasocial interaction with outgroup members is unclear (Park, 2012). It could be interesting to explore empirically what could constitute a shared goal or an equal status with a show character. Perhaps the similarity of social class or age and sharing some general life goals makes mediated contact with minority members more effective in promoting positive diversity attitudes.

In sum, the extant research shows that the parasocial contact hypothesis explains how television can promote positive diversity attitudes. The theory distinguishes itself from the cultivation approach by specifying how some features of TV shows, for instance, different ways of character portrayal, may impact the effectiveness of changing viewers' beliefs about others.

3.3 Learning positive intergroup interactions

In contrast to cultivation and the parasocial contact hypothesis, social cognitive theory argues that mere exposure to television and mediated contact with minorities is not enough to promote positive attitudes toward others. To shape opinions effectively, TV shows should include specific interactions between characters, which can be learned by the viewers. TV characters model various beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors through their on-screen interactions with each other (Bandura, 2009). The audiences observe these interactions and learn them, often incorporating the presented values, beliefs, and behaviors into their own repertoire of thought and action. Bandura (2009) argued that vicarious experiences have a similar role to personal ones. TV viewership would thus greatly expand the realm of scenarios to learn from. Social cognitive theory explains how openness for diversity can be modeled and taught on-screen. Positive interactions between majority and minority members could be learned, and as a result, viewers could feel more comfortable in having such interactions in real life.

Social cognitive theory specifies conditions that promote observational learning. Bandura (2009) argued that the similarity between the model and the viewer can enhance social learning. For instance, perceived attitude similarity and sharing gender with a TV character was found to increase wishful identification, a desire to be like a favorite TV show character (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). An analogical study indicated that perceived similarity correlated with a greater willingness to change to be like the character of the show Lost (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Interestingly, people reported more perceived similarity with liked rather than disliked characters. The limitation of these studies is their cross-sectional design and reliance on correlations. It could be that willingness to be akin to characters makes viewers like them more and thus perceive more similarity with the characters, rather than the other way around. People tend to see themselves more in the characters they like.

The second condition under which social cognitive theory predicts learning from vicarious experiences is rewarding the modeled behavior. Bandura (2009) stressed that modeled behaviors should be made desirable to ensure that viewers are willing to emulate them. To promote positive diversity attitudes, group interactions should be portrayed in a positive light as well. For instance, some series show that majority and minority members engage in friendly contact. They promote positive diversity attitudes because the presented interactions result in rewarding, successful cooperation. Moreover, these portrayals teach viewers how intergroup contact could take place without tension. Audiences could feel less nervous about interactions with dissimilar others and feel more inclined to have them in real life.

The third and last condition for modeling to take place effectively comes from social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). While social cognitive theory does not normally include social comparison theory, they both analyze behavior modeling. Therefore, to enrich the understanding of when modeling of onscreen interactions is likely to happen, it is beneficial to integrate these paradigms. When individuals compare themselves to others perceived as better, they want to emulate the model's behavior. This is called upward social comparison. Existing research shows that people compare themselves to media figures and try to reach presented body ideals.
Multiple research projects indicated that modeling of positive intergroup interactions results in the vicarious learning of positive diversity attitudes. The aforementioned meta-analysis of mediated contact listed 22 studies featuring vicarious intergroup contact (Banas et al., 2020). The cited studies reported an improvement in attitudes toward immigrants, LGBTQ people, Muslims, and African Americans, thus proving that vicarious intergroup contact on television affects the audiences' perceptions. Ortiz and Harwood (2007), for example, checked whether shows can model positive intergroup interactions between straight and gay people. They indeed found that viewers who identified with Grace from *Will & Grace* had less intergroup contact anxiety and showed a lesser social distance to gay people in general. The results can be explained by the fact that Grace, a heterosexual woman, modeled positive attitudes toward gay people through friendship with Will who is an openly gay protagonist. The viewers of the series were shown rewards for openness to a gay man in the form of a lasting and satisfying friendship. Moreover, the straight audience members could see a similarity with the protagonist and incorporate easier her thoughts and behaviors into their own lives.

Other studies on racial minorities had similar conclusions. Joyce and Harwood (2014) used clips from *30 Days*, an American show, which in one episode portrayed interactions between border patrolling US citizen and illegal immigrants. The viewers exposed to positive contacts showed more positive attitudes toward illegal immigrants than those exposed to neutral and negative contacts. In another study, German students who were shown promotional clips of friendly contact between German and Chinese youth scored higher on intergroup affect and willingness to contact the Chinese than those who were shown no interactions or only minority members (Mazziotta et al., 2011). These studies demonstrate that a friendly intergroup contact portrayal has positive effects on viewers’ beliefs on various ethnic minorities—at least in the short term, that is, since the measurement of the attitudes was done immediately after exposure to the videos.

Nevertheless, more research is also needed on specific aspects of social cognitive theory and diversity attitudes as some unresolved issues remain. First, if the characters have to be almost the same as the viewers to be convincing, then the potential to change diversity attitudes is weakened. Majority viewers would not be able to identify with minority characters and learn from them because of lacking similarity. Yet a recent experimental study found no differences in the persuasiveness of the written story where protagonist’s sex, nationality, age, and city of action were similar and dissimilar to the attributes of the readers (Cohen et al., 2018). This finding points to a similar gap in knowledge within television effects. How exactly does the similarity between viewers and characters influence modeling? Is it possible that characters have to be similar to viewers only on particular dimensions, such as attitudes and personality features, but not on all characteristics like gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation? More empirical research could clarify the dimensions of similarity between viewer and character that are necessary to promote positive diversity attitudes.

The second research gap concerns how positive attitudes toward one minority might spread to general positive diversity attitudes due to vicarious learning. A meta-analysis of 94 studies on the intercultural group climate demonstrated that diversity appreciation could be cultivated in a workplace, and, moreover, such value positively affects organizational outcomes (Holmes et al., 2020). Perhaps this positive general climate could be modeled in TV shows as well. It remains to be studied whether television might not only promote acceptance of particular minorities but also a general sense of diversity openness.

So far, cultivation theory, the parasocial contact hypothesis, and social cognitive theory offer various explanations on how television can promote positive diversity attitudes. All three theories are widely used in the field of media studies. However, they do not fully explain how the change in perceptions about other people happens. Often minority members are perceived through negative stereotypes, which have to be overcome to improve general diversity attitudes. For this reason, it is important to bring in insights from psychology to enrich the understanding of particular mechanisms behind cognition change.
3.4 Changing negative stereotypes

The psychology of stereotype change provides concrete mechanisms that explain how new information changes the existing attitudes. The theory has not been extensively used in media studies. Still, some research indicates that media messages can disprove stereotypes. Stereotypes are standardized beliefs about another group (Weber & Crocker, 1983). Negative diversity attitudes are reinforced by negative stereotypes, which cause discriminatory behaviors and social exclusion. For instance, a recent study found that even implicit negative associations about ethnic minorities correlate with discrimination in hiring (Rooth, 2010). Changing negative stereotypes could increase minority acceptance and create positive diversity attitudes. While television often stereotypically portrays minorities (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000), previously discussed examples show that TV shows can also improve the image of minorities (Calzo & Ward, 2009; Joyce & Harwood, 2014; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). Possibly, stereotype change took place because of the media representations.

A classic study by Weber and Crocker (1983) tested three models of stereotype change, namely the bookkeeping model, conversion model, and subtyping model. The bookkeeping model assumes that each piece of new information accumulates and the resulting change in cognitions is incremental. In this model, stereotypes are treated as homogenous structures; their change occurs gradually and finishes when new information pieces outnumber the old information pieces. The conversion model argues that stereotype change is a drastic process that happens when an individual is confronted with a salient example, which disproves the stereotype. Finally, the subtyping model sees stereotypes as hierarchical, heterogeneous structures. New information often helps to establish a new subtype first, which differs from the overall stereotype. Each instance of a similar stereotype disproving information is categorized as exceptional and classified with a created subtype. Subtyping slows down the overall stereotype change because new information does not readily affect the main stereotype. Cognitions can change when the new subtype becomes more prominent than the overarching stereotype. Alternatively, stereotypes change easier when the new information is not classified as exceptional but rather as typical information that disproves the overall stereotype.

The cognitive theory of stereotype change stipulates a particular set of conditions for the change in perception to take place. Following the bookkeeping model, many instances of stereotype disconfirming information should occur. This situation could be achieved through exposure to many different instances of non-stereotypical individuals or repeated exposure to one non-stereotypical person. Following the conversion model, there should be a salient example of an individual disproving stereotypes. Lastly, following the subtyping model, there should be numerous instances of stereotype disproving people and the individuals should be seen as typical of their respective groups.

Numerous studies found support for the discussed models. McIntyre et al.'s (2016) meta-analysis of 35 studies on exemplar’s influence on stereotypes concluded that stereotypes change following bookkeeping and subtyping models. An exemplar sample size and typicality correlated with a greater stereotype change. However, existing evidence focusing on media exemplars indicates that stereotypes change according to conversion and subtyping models. For instance, exposure to American television shortly before Obama's election, during the presidential campaign, was found to be correlated with more positive stereotypes of African Americans (Zhang & Tan, 2011). The results offer some support for the conversion model. The authors reasoned that Obama was a singular exemplar, often portrayed on television, who affected attitudes toward an entire African American community. In another study, exposure to Jimmy Smits, a well-known Latino actor, appeared to improve perceptions of the entire Latino community (Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2011). These research projects show that the conversion model can be useful in explaining how negative stereotypes change due to media exposure.

The subtyping model also finds support in studies focusing on media. For example, Joyce et al. (2020) demonstrated how media exemplar typicality influences stereotype change. The researchers showed young adults three types of clips of older adults driving in Top Gear. The videos varied in their degree of disproving the stereotype that older people are bad drivers. The first type featured a bad elderly driver, the second a decent elderly driver, and the last an excellent elderly driver. The study checked, which portrayal produced the biggest change in stereotypes. People who viewed a moderate counter stereotypical clip ended up having the most positive
beliefs about the driving skills of the elderly. Thus, Joyce et al. (2020) argued that there is a "sweet spot" where an exemplar is atypical enough to change the stereotype but still typical enough to be considered representative of the entire group. However, the change in stereotype was demonstrated only in the short term, as the attitude measurement was applied immediately after showing the stimulus. As shown in the study, stereotypes change when subtyping does not take place.

More knowledge on the application of the cognitive theory of stereotype to the media context is needed. For instance, direct empirical support for the bookkeeping model is still scarce. Previous studies found that the frequency of exposure to diverse characters predicted better attitudes toward gay people (Hefner et al., 2015, Schiappa et al., 2006). Therefore, it is possible that each time exposure to the same positive minority character happened, a piece of information accumulated to improve existing negative stereotypes. Perhaps, exposure to many minority characters from the same show or different shows could work similarly. Future research should explore how the number and sources of instances of stereotype disconfirming information in media affects stereotype change.

In short, the cognitive model of stereotype change can be used to explain how television promotes positive diversity attitudes. While media studies have not used this theory extensively, the existing evidence suggests that the model is a promising avenue for future research.

4 | TELEVISION INFLUENCING DIVERSITY ATTITUDES

This article reviewed various theories from sociology, psychology, and media and communication studies to explain the relation between television and diversity attitudes. In response to the first research question (i.e., through which processes does television influence diversity attitudes), television plays a vital role in shaping opinions about sexual and ethnic minorities. TV shows can represent minorities in various ways, both positive and negative, thus affecting their levels of acceptance and diversity attitudes. On the one hand, television could play a role in strengthening existing negative attitudes by supporting echo chambers. Audiences can segregate into pockets of similar consumption where their TV choices support their existing views on diversity. This situation results in those with negative views on ethnic and sexual minorities staying this way and even becoming more certain of their views. On the other hand, entertainment media could bring people together as fans of shows that feature minority members in a positive light. Then, exposure to a positive image of diversity on television could promote positive diversity attitudes among viewers. The theories popular in media studies and psychology such as cultivation, the parasocial contact hypothesis, social cognitive theory, and cognitive model of stereotype change, provide a comprehensive overview of how and when television can affect viewers’ beliefs. It is important to acknowledge that while this review focused on how these theories could improve diversity attitudes, the same theories could explain how diversity attitudes become more negative if sexual or ethnic minorities are represented negatively.

In response to the second research question (i.e., what features of TV shows contribute to positive diversity attitudes formation among viewers, according to different theories of television effects?), the main conclusion is that the entertainment media should include numerous characters that represent ethnic and sexual minorities. Such characters should be shown in friendly interactions with the rest of society. Additionally, there is a set of specific ways to represent minorities that promote positive diversity attitudes such as being likeable, attractive, similar to viewers, and typical. Finally, this article also identified unresolved tensions in the theories. Based on these knowledge gaps, the directions for future research are outlined below.

4.1 | Directions for future research

First, it is important to establish whether people choose TV shows with diverse points of view or whether they stay within echo chambers reflecting their beliefs and preferences (Slater, 2015; Sunstein, 2007). Entertainment media
do not necessarily support echo chambers. On the contrary, programs with diverse characters could be more appealing to watch. Nevertheless, further empirical support of these claims is needed. This knowledge gap could be addressed in a study focusing on how people select their TV shows for leisure and what type of characters the audiences want to see.

Second, baseline diversity attitudes toward immigrants, refugees, or ethnic minorities already differ significantly between countries (Berry & Sam, 2014). Attitudes toward sexual minorities also vary between cultures (Mendos, 2019). Therefore, media effects on diversity attitudes could have different magnitude depending on existing beliefs in the country. Most of the cited research comes from Western and mostly English-speaking contexts (for instance Calzo & Ward, 2009; Joyce & Harwood, 2014; Schiappa et al., 2005). It is important to replicate the existing studies in other cultural contexts with different diversity attitudes. Research suggests that television plays a greater role in positive diversity attitudes promotion where people are less likely to encounter minorities face-to-face (Schiappa et al., 2005).

Third, future research should explore whether positive diversity attitudes could develop toward different minority groups at once. As mentioned before, the meta-analysis from Holmes et al. (2020) identified multiple studies with workplaces, which fostered positive general diversity attitudes. Perhaps, positive views on one minority group could spread and encompass different ones as well.

Fourth, research should examine complete media diets and their effects on diversity attitudes. Multiple cited studies investigated the role of a single show (Joyce & Harwood, 2014; Joyce et al., 2020; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). A future study could measure the complete narrative audiovisual media consumption, including those shared on social media. Such a study could also identify sources and numbers of positive minority representations to examine whether the bookkeeping model explains some changes in stereotypes. The insights from all consumed videos could clarify prevalent minority portrayals and their effects on viewers’ beliefs. It is also likely that media sources have a total cumulative effect that depends on all viewed programs.

Fifth, an in-depth study of minority representation is needed to establish portrayals that promote positive diversity attitudes the most. The similarity to the viewer (Bandura, 2009; Hofner & Buchanan, 2005; Tian & Hoffner, 2010), and being perceived as prototypical (Joyce et al., 2020), attractive, and realistic (Schiappa et al., 2007), all play a role in cognition change. Yet it is still unclear how these features can be achieved. Future studies could explore dimensions of similarity between viewers and characters, including demographics, appearance, and personality traits. Another line of research should focus on how to achieve an attractive portrayal of minorities. On the one hand, this attribute could mean an idealized portrayal of minorities as heroic figures with superior moral character. On the other hand, attractiveness could come from being portrayed as a fallible human being, facing, and overcoming ethical dilemmas and problems. Moreover, optimal conditions of Allport’s contact theory, such as equal status and shared goals (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), should be explored in the context of a mediated contact.

Sixth, while the discussed theories come from research on television, the same theories apply to the audiovisual narratives shared on social media. For example, YouTube also contains user-generated content that showcases minority characters and issues, and many vloggers belong to sexual and ethnic minorities. Short series and audiovisual narratives could also be shared on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok among others. Moreover, social media give a possibility of greater engagement with authors of the content, who often feature in the videos. Comment options and immediate reactions such as likes could facilitate stronger parasocial bonds creation. The content creators can also respond to their fans, which makes the relationship more equal and perhaps even more effective. Thus, applying television-based theories to the content on social media is a promising avenue for future research.

Finally, television and media effects should be explored using different methodologies. The majority of media effects studies rely on a cross-sectional design (Calzo & Ward, 2009; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Schiappa et al., 2006). Though experiments (Schiappa et al., 2005) suggested that TV shows affect diversity attitudes, effects may also occur in the opposite causal direction. Perhaps already more open-minded people choose to watch shows with
diverse characters as suggested by the reinforcing spirals model (Slater, 2015). A longitudinal study of exposure to given shows could help to establish causation between media choices and diversity attitudes and provide a better understanding of the relationship between these variables across different time intervals. Additionally, more research showing that the improvement of diversity attitudes is a lasting change is needed. Only one experiment from Schiappa et al. (2005) measured attitude change some time after exposure to the stimulus material, while other experimental studies (i.e., Joyce & Harwood, 2014; Joyce et al., 2020; Mazziotta et al., 2011; and two studies from Schiappa et al., 2005) demonstrated only a direct short-term causal link. Lastly, few studies employ cognitive models of stereotype change in the media context (Joyce et al., 2020; Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2011; Zhang & Tan, 2011). An in-depth study of media figures as prominent sources of information disproving stereotypes can enrich the understanding of television’s role in promoting positive diversity attitudes. In conclusion, we hope that our review inspires other scholars to engage with the topics of diversity attitudes and media in multiple new studies.

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