University of South Florida
Scholar Commons

Graduate School Theses and Dissertations | Graduate School

6-1-2009

Humor and attitude toward homosexuals: The case of Will & Grace

Heather Cribbs
University of South Florida

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd

Part of the American Studies Commons

Scholar Commons Citation
Cribbs, Heather, "Humor and attitude toward homosexuals: The case of Will & Grace" (2009). *Graduate School Theses and Dissertations.*
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/1915

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate School Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Humor and Attitude Toward Homosexuals: The Case of Will & Grace

by

Heather Cribbs

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
School of Mass Communications
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Scott Liu, Ph.D.
Randy Miller, Ph.D.
Roxanne Watson, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:
July 17, 2009

Keywords: humor, contact hypothesis, para-social, homosexual acceptance, distraction

© Copyright 2009, Heather Cribbs

Table of Contents

List of Tables iii

List of Figures iv

Abstract v

Chapter One Introduction 1
- Overview 1
- Why Homosexuality, Why Will and Grace? 2
- Significance of the Study 5

Chapter Two Review of Relevant Literature 6
- Humor 6
- Distraction 9
- Interpersonal Communication 13

Chapter Three Research Hypotheses 24
- List of Hypotheses 26

Chapter Four Research Design 28
- Structural Equation Model 28
- Research Methodology 29
  - Selection of Sample 29
  - Survey Instrument 30
  - Data Gathering 31
  - Measures 31
    - Humor of the Show 31
    - Distraction Level 32
    - Perceived Level of Interpersonal Communication 32
    - Attitude Toward the Show 32
    - Attitude Toward Gays/Homosexuals 33
    - Frequency 33

Chapter Five Results 35
- Descriptive Results 36
- Measurement Model Evaluation 39
- Structural Model Results Analysis 39
- In-Depth Key Path Analysis 40

Chapter Six Discussion and Recommendations 44
Implications 46
Limitations 48

References 50

Appendices 55
Appendix A: Extended Path Diagram 56
Appendix B: Survey Questionnaire 57
Appendix C: Survey Questions and Variables 61
Appendix D: Hypotheses 63
Appendix E: Frequency Distributions 64

List of Tables

Table 1	Descriptive Results	36
Table 2	Measurement Model Results	38

List of Figures

Figure 1	Model of Hypothesized Paths	24
Figure 2	Structural Equation Model	28
Figure 3	Structural Model Results	35
Figure 4	Portion A of the Path Diagram	40
Figure 5	Portion B of the Path Diagram	41
Figure 6	Portion C of the Path Diagram	42
Figure 7	Portion D of the Path Diagram	42
Figure 8	Extended Path Diagram	56

Humor and Attitude Toward Homosexuals: The Case of Will & Grace

Heather Cribbs

ABSTRACT

Data collected from a survey questionnaire disseminated to college students was used to examine the relationship between humor in the mass media on audience attitude. This research study attempted to link the comedic nature of media with a heightened tolerance toward unpopular messages by looking specifically at the show Will & Grace. Results supported the hypothesized positive relationship between humor on attitudes toward the show, as well as attitudes toward real life homosexuals. In addition, distraction and interpersonal communication served as mediators between humor and attitudes. Results supported positive relationships between humor and both distraction and interpersonal communication, and supported the mediated path involving distraction. But the interpersonal communication mediated path was negative. Results, implications, and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Chapter One

Introduction

Overview

Many studies using cultivation analysis have shown that television shapes an audience's views on particular social groups, such as racial groups, specific genders, or religious sects. Cultivation theory suggests that audiences who watch many hours of television portrayals develop and "cultivate" views of society consistent with the patterns of television's pseudo-reality (Nacos, 2000). Subsequently, cultivation analysis measures the extent to which television plays a role in shaping audience views and perceptions. This research study hopes to link the comedic nature of media with a heightened tolerance toward unpopular messages by looking specifically at the show Will & Grace.

Studies have shown humor to be a means of facilitating relationships, defining and redefining a situation, easing tension brought on by new information, and in many cases, a social lubricant (Graham, Papa & Brooks, 1992). Studies also support humor as a technique of social influence. O'Quin and Aronoff (1981) refer to politician Henry Kissinger's use of humor to lighten the international diplomatic scene, which affected his success as a negotiator. It is reasonable to look into humor's effects, particularly when used by the mass media.

Why Homosexuality, Why Will and Grace?

To put it mildly, homosexuality has had a tremendously difficult time gaining acceptance in American society. Historically, homosexuality has been kept secret, or "in the closet," and not accepted by the mainstream. Homosexuals have suffered physical abuse, familial rejection, and have even been subject to fines and jail time. Though homosexuality can be dated back to even the earliest human civilizations, documentation in the U.S. dates back mainly to around the beginning of the 20th century. It is possible that the burgeoning rise of capitalism is to blame, as many found themselves migrating to more industrialized cities to find work, and in turn found themselves outside of traditional familial and religious communities, (McWorter, 1996).

However, it has taken nearly a century for the traditional familial and religious presuppositions to leave the minds of American society, and many would say Americans still aren't fully rid of the stronghold. One reason for homosexuality not being accepted by society could perhaps be because lawmakers throughout the century have deemed the practice illegal. In addition, President Eisenhower, by executive order, deemed homosexuality a sufficient and necessary reason to fire any federal employee from his or her job in 1953, and the order lasted until 1993. Mainstream religious organizations have condemned the practice and those who support it. And even the American Psychiatric Association listed homosexuality as a mental illness until 1973.

What is interesting to note is the homosexual's transition in society from criminal to comic relief. Cooper (2003) cites historian George Chauncey as saying, "When gay men were being assaulted (in the '30s and '40s), having a sharp wit could often diffuse dangerous encounters," (p. 514). In the past decade, popular culture and media presentations, with films such as "My Best Friend's Wedding" and "The Birdcage," as well as the television show Will & Grace, have portrayed homosexuals in a comedic light.

Will & Grace first aired in 1998 on NBC. The show centered around an openly gay male lawyer, Will, and his platonic relationship with heterosexual female interior designer, Grace. Surprisingly, the show garnered critical praise, and immediately did well with audiences. Ratings were high enough to secure a slot in the Thursday night NBC "must see TV" lineup, which brought in a substantial amount of advertising dollars.

Schiappa, Gregg & Hewes (2005) referred to Will & Grace as an "unusual communication phenomenon," (p.1). The success of Will & Grace is most interesting because of the relatively non-existent history of homosexual characters and storylines on television. As history shows, homosexuality was rarely accepted in real life American society, and as a result was seldom, if ever, seen in television plot lines. The year 1972 saw the first made-for-television movie with a gay theme, and ever since, the presence of homosexual themes and characters has been scarce. The material that did air was often met with critical praise, but petitioned by social groups, rejected by affiliates, or censured by legislatures. Even one of the first comedic homosexual characters, Jodie

Dallas of the ABC sitcom *Soap*, would later be written as bisexual in the show's third season (McCollum, 2006). Audiences just didn't seem ready for homosexuality in the mainstream. By 1995, homosexual characters accounted for 0.6 percent of the TV population, significantly less than estimated rates of homosexuality in the U.S. population (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999, p. 94). How then could Will & Grace become so popular just three years later? And, more importantly, did it affect the way audiences formed their perceptions of homosexuals?

According to studies over the years, negative attitudes toward homosexuals are seen as pervasive among the general adult population (Herek & Glunt, 1993), as well as among college students (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990), and adolescents (Morrison, Parriag, & Morrison, 1999). Gallup polls dating back to 1982 state that only 34% of those polled agreed that homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle (Saad, 2008). This view increased over the years, and was up to 42% in 1997, the year before Will & Grace aired. Interestingly, this number jumped to 50% in 1999, the year after the show first aired (Saad, 2008).

It seems reasonable to explore what role, if any, television has had in affecting audience attitudes toward homosexuals. The goal of this research study is to identify a positive correlation between the humor of Will & Grace and its popularity, particularly the acceptance of the homosexual characters and themes.

Significance of the Study

This study does not delve into the specific perceptions and stereotypes held by viewers, nor does it discuss any causal relationships between Will & Grace and a reduction or diffusion of prejudice. It is concerned with the attitudes held by viewers toward homosexuals, both on the show Will & Grace and in real life, and how these attitudes are influenced by the presence of humor.

The significance of this study is two-fold. Narrowly speaking, the study is designed to test theoretical explanations of the effect of humorous television content on the change of audience attitudes. On a broader level, the study has implications for research on the social functions of mass media. After fleshing out a structural model through a review of literature, research questions will be presented, then the results of an empirical survey will be discussed.

Chapter Two

Review of Relevant Literature

Prior research has been devoted to the area of humor and persuasion, particularly its ability to distract viewers. This distraction, it has been found, often leads the distracted to let their guards down, reduce their counterarguments, and accept the messages being presented to them.

In addition, research supporting the notion of perceived interpersonal contact through television viewing suggests that audiences get a one-on-one feel with the characters of television programs. It has been suggested that interpersonal communication in any form could reduce prejudice among the communicators, and humor has been found to facilitate interpersonal communication.

Humor

Much of the research regarding humor suggests that it is an effective persuasive tool, especially in the area of advertising. Leavitt (1970) linked humor with an advertisement's ability to enhance audience attention. Sternthal and Craig (1973), among others, maintain that humor increases the probability of communication acceptance. They state that humor appears to be linked to the

attention value attributed to television commercials (p.13). But beyond mere attention, humor, it seems, has the ability to humanize its message, “allowing the communicator to speak to the members of his audience on their own level,” (p. 12).

In his study, Leavitt (1970) asked the question, “On what dimensions can viewers rate television commercials?” Beginning with 525 descriptors, Leavitt filtered the words to 45 using a series of factor analyses. The final analysis resulted in seven factors: Energetic, Amusing, Personal Influence, Authoritative, Sensual, Familiar, Novel, and Disliked. The energetic factor accounted for 55% of the total variance and was by far the most important. Interestingly, words used in this category to describe the commercials were also used for the amusing category. This, according to Leavitt implies that television humor tends to be fast paced (p.428). The fast paced nature created by television humor, it can be said, could energize the audience and affect audience mood positively. Or, it could move too fast for audiences to keep up with, lessening their chance for counterargument, or even to form an informed opinion at all.

Sternthal and Craig (1973) examined humor research and support the belief that humor does have an effect on an advertisement’s message, and is in fact an effective persuasive vehicle. They address the difficult nature of even defining humor on a universal scale. One approach, according to the study, defines humor in terms of its stimulus properties. For instance, whether or not an advertisement uses puns, jokes, satire, etc. The second approach discussed defines humor in terms of the responses elicited to a stimulus, and often marked

by smiles, laughter, and heightened arousal. The approach used for the purposes of the study was the perceptual response approach. This involved audience recording of whether or not they perceived a message to be humorous.

The study looked at two main areas: humor and creative strategy, and humor and vehicle selection. It found that, across the board, humor in the creative strategy of a message enhances audience attention. But, the study also found that sometimes the use of humor does not always equal message comprehension. Sternthal and Craig (1973) suggest that any studies of humor should measure comprehension as well as attitudes toward the messages.

They suggest that the preferred method of researching humor is to compare the persuasive effects of humorous and serious messages, as opposed to just examining humor's influence. However, in regard to message comprehension, studies that compared the retention of persuasive humorous and serious material failed to find significant differences attributable to the level of humor present (p.14). In addition, studies of persuasion also suggested that although humor does induce attitude change, it does not do so to a significant degree more than serious messages. Despite these findings, Sternthal and Craig (1973) feel strongly that these studies suffer from methodological inadequacies, among other interpretive issues, and that humor should be considered an important factor in audience persuasion.

Communication source also plays a role in the persuasiveness of a humorous message. In studies where the source was revealed to be trustworthy or an expert, humor was found to be persuasive. In addition, unidentified

sources who delivered the messages were found to have greater character attributes if they delivered a humorous message as opposed to a serious message. Furthermore, if the message itself is dull or unappealing, delivering it with humor may enhance the audience's perception of the message source.

In his review of humor studies, Gruner (1976) found that the communicator who chooses to use humor in discourse is likely to improve their image with the audience. Many studies focusing on teachers in classroom settings have found that teachers who employed humor were preferred by students. These teachers were viewed as very approachable and more able to build positive rapport with students. Humor was also found to aid in the establishment of developing relationships (Weaver & Cotrell, 1991) and in creating an open and relaxed atmosphere (Gilliand & Mauritsen, 1971).

Distraction

In regard to distraction, Sternthal and Craig posit that humor distracts an audience during the presentation of a persuasive communication. "Distraction, in turn, inhibits those audience members who initially oppose the arguments advanced in the persuasive messages from generating and rehearsing counterarguments" (p. 14). The reduction of counterarguments results in message acceptance. In other words, people are more likely to be persuaded by a message when distraction is present than if it is not present.

Osterhouse and Brock (1970) also found that increasing the level of distraction results in a decrease in counterarguments and an increase in

persuasion. In their study, college students listened to a pre-recorded message about increasing tuition by fifty percent. They were divided into three groups and given separate treatments. One group was given a high distraction treatment, another was given a moderate distraction treatment, and the final group was given a non-distraction treatment.

The high distraction group was given directions to listen to the speech, while simultaneously observing four colored lights in front of them. When a light was turned on, the participants were to call out the corresponding number assigned to the light. They were given an average of 24 light flashes per minute. Those in the moderate distraction group were given an average of 12 light flashes per minute. Finally, those in the non-distraction group weren't given any. After listening to the communication, participants completed a questionnaire that assessed their attitudes toward the tuition increase, provided them an opportunity to put forth a counterargument, and measured their level of recall of the facts discussed in the pre-recorded communication.

All participants were able to recall facts, and those in both the high and moderately distracted treatment groups were able to accurately respond to the colored lights. The most interesting result was that as the level of distraction increased, there was an increase in communication acceptance. Participants who were not distracted produced significantly more counterarguments than those who were.

In their seminal study of persuasion, Festinger and Maccoby (1964) found that distraction facilitates the acceptance of counter-attitudinal communications.

They proposed that individuals tend to present counterarguments when confronted with a message with which they disagree. Resistance is weakened when there is interference with counterargumentation. Their method of interference? Humor. In their study, Festinger and Maccoby (1964) placed members of a fraternity in two groups. One group viewed a humorous film while listening to an anti-fraternity message; the other group listened to the same anti-fraternity message, but without watching the humorous film. Those who viewed the film showed greater acceptance to the message than those who did not view the film. The presence of humor provided a distraction, and affected their attitudes.

Other research in the area of distraction suggests that positive affect experienced during message exposure may transfer to the message itself, thus enhancing the acceptance of the persuasive message. Burgess and Sales (1971) tested this by conducting two experiments, wherein they presented participants with a series of 'nonsense' words, and told them they would be tested for their recall of these words. Before the recall testing in the first experiment, participants were asked about their attitudes toward the context in which they took the test. Questions were about the testing itself, the nonsense words, their surroundings, their feelings toward the field of psychology, experiments, themselves, and life in general. In the second experiment, both positive and negative contexts were intentionally created.

The researchers found that repetition of nonsense words in a positive context increased acceptance of the words, while presentation in a negative

context increased rejection of the words. They suggest that, like classical conditioning, context can affect attitudes of a previously neutral message. It can be assumed that, if humor, which generally elicits positive feelings, were used to create the context of the distracting situation, then attitudes, like that in the study, could result in a positive response.

O'Quin and Aronoff (1981) studied humor as a technique of social influence and found that "humor may be a powerful agent of change in everyday life," (p.355). They distracted participants with humor in a buyer/seller format, and hypothesized that compliance was more likely to occur in participants who received the message with humor than those whose message was not received with humor. Participants were assigned to the position of buyer while the confederate served as the seller. The two were to haggle over the price of a painting.

As hypothesized, participants who received a demand accompanied by humor made a greater financial concession than those who did not receive humor. They also found that the participants exposed to humor reported an increase in the enjoyment of the task. Citing Goffman (1967) and Zijderveld (1968), they agree that "humor may allow the influenced person to save face by redefining the influence situation as one less threatening to him or herself," (p.354). In other words, because of this situational redefinition, or recontextualization, the situation isn't taken as seriously. This suggests that humor makes people less averse to concessions by lessening the importance of

the situation. Either way, humor does serve as a means of distraction, and in addition, can lead to positive attitude change.

Interpersonal Communication

This section of the literature review looks at interpersonal communication and it's role in diffusing prejudices and increasing positive attitudes toward a stimulus. In addition, it will discuss how television can often simulate a real-life interpersonal connection. The goal is to show a connection between interpersonal communication and positive attitudes, and how humor could play a role in developing both.

In a critical review of humor theory and research, Sprowl (1987) argued that a primary goal of interpersonal interaction is to enhance relationships with others and "humor serves as a valuable aid for the facilitation of that goal" (p. 58). Cheatwood (1983) suggested that humor allows individuals to decrease social distance between themselves. In addition, Kane, et. al. (1977), suggested that this reduction of social distance is achieved by allowing individuals to probe each other's values, motives, or intentions, and states humor as a facilitator. Kane also credits humor as being an antecedent to interpersonal attraction.

According to Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis, interpersonal contact is an effective way to reduce prejudice between minority and majority groups. Prejudice, he states, is a result of quickly made conclusions and generalizations about other groups based on incomplete or incorrect information. Other factors besides a negative initial experience include mass mediated stereotypes, or what they have learned from family, friends or other members of their social circle. In

other words, assumptions are based more on hearsay, if not incomplete personal experience. Based on this assumption, prejudice can be reduced if one a) has a positive experience with a member of a particular group, and b) learns more about a particular group.

Much research has been conducted supporting the importance of the 'contact' portion of the Contact Hypothesis. Amir (1976) among others has found that intimacy in contact vitally serves to reduce prejudice. Similarly, Works (1961) discusses the Prejudice-Interaction Hypothesis in his study of white tenants of mixed racial housing complexes. The study took place in one housing project, but on separate sides. One side, they found, was 94% occupied by black tenants and 6% white, while on the other side, 54% were occupied by black tenants and 46% were occupied by white tenants. Unlike many studies of the time, Works focused on prejudices held (or not held) by blacks against whites. He found that, as hypothesized, black tenants who lived on the integrated side of the housing project were far more accepting than those who did not, and more importantly, was able to attribute this acceptance to increased personal contact.

Desforges, et. al, (1991) conducted a study testing the veracity of the Contact Hypothesis by using former mental patients as the minority subject. Students were chosen based on their responses to a survey about attitudes toward former mental patients. Those who had negative attitudes were selected for another experiment that involved interaction with a confederate student posing as a former mental patient. Two forms of cooperative contact were utilized – jigsaw cooperative learning or scripted cooperative learning, while a

third method involved just studying in the same room. Later, an ‘unrelated’ study re-asked about their attitudes toward formal mental patients.

After participating in the learning activities with the supposed former mental patients, students who initially had negative attitudes toward former mental patients adopted more positive impressions of the confederates, more so than those who merely studied in the same room. Not only did they adopt a more positive attitude toward the specific confederate with which they came in contact, they also adopted a more positive attitude toward former mental patients in general.

In reference to homosexuals specifically, Herek and Glunt (1993) examined the effect of interpersonal contact with acceptance of gay men and found a positive correlation. Their research addressed the weaknesses of former studies that neglected to use reliable and valid attitude scales, as well as a large national probability sample. Their sample was selected using random digit dialing techniques, then interviewers asked a series of questions regarding the respondent’s level of interpersonal contact with homosexual men, as well as their attitudes toward homosexual men. Not only did they find that respondents with higher levels of personal contact reported higher levels of acceptance, they also found that interpersonal contact was the best predictor of attitudes toward gay men.

After studying attitudes toward homosexuals every year for a period of nearly 20 years, Altameyer (2001) found that his subjects were experiencing a decrease in prejudice toward homosexuals. (On a rather interesting note, a

notable significant increase in acceptance occurred in 1998, the year Will and Grace first aired.) One common cause of the increased acceptance among subjects was an increase in contact with professed homosexuals. Altameyer described “knowingly knowing” a homosexual as having a “magical capacity” to change minds (p.73).

One of the studies asked a sample of 407 students to rate, on a 24 to +4 to -4 basis, the extent to which they had had certain experiences with homosexuals. Almost all experiences listed had a positive effect, with the item dealing with personal contact topping the list. For the item, “I have personally known homosexuals and found that they are like everyone else except for sexual orientation,” X = 7.26. According to Altmeyer, “if the stereotypes are false, if homosexuals as a group behave in general like others (aside from their sexual orientation), then contact with them *can* prove the stereotypes wrong and reduce prejudice,” (p.68).

Another factor reported by Altameyer was that those who are considered “hard core” in their beliefs, described by the study as Right-Wing Authoritarians (RWAs), will change their attitudes if they perceive societal attitudes are changing. In fact, after showing the anonymous results to his classes who took the survey, which displayed a relatively favorable attitude toward homosexuals, he re-administered the survey and found that the High RWA’s attitudes shifted twice as much as the Low RWAs.

Further examples reported by the study were a decrease in practicing religious society members, an increase in research reports claiming

homosexuality is genetic, the changing face of AIDS from deserved to unfortunate, and an increase in positive media portrayals.

Overby and Barth (2002) studied the effect of the Contact Hypothesis on homosexual men and lesbians, but took into account community context. They used this context as a measure of opportunities for contact with homosexuals. Using a randomly generated national sample, they tested a multivariate model using the community context variable and found that contact with homosexuals had a substantial impact on respondent's attitudes toward homosexuals. Using a feeling thermometer, they studied the results of a telephone survey that asked questions about attitudes as well as demographic information. According to the study,

> the size of the coefficient indicates that for every 1 percent increase in the percentage of gays in their community and holding all other factors constant, respondents reported a one-third of one degree increase in their feeling thermometer ratings of homosexuals. (p.453)

Though the cause of interpersonal communication is not limited to humor, interpersonal communication does often lead to positive attitudes. The next section of the interpersonal communication literature review discusses how television affects audience members and their views on the real world, specifically by simulating a real-life personal connection.

As referenced earlier, Cultivation Theory concerns the effects of television viewing on audience's perceptions, attitudes, and values. Developed in the 1960s by George Gerbner, it suggests that the pervasiveness of television

results in an effect on views, causing audiences to assume the views portrayed to them by what they see on television. For example, because of a large number of television shows involving law enforcement officers, heavy television viewers often assume a higher percentage of the population work in law enforcement, or that crime rates are higher than in reality. This is often based on a “drip, drip” belief which claims that audience members are heavy viewers, but the portrayals are limited to the cultivated stereotype.

Cultivation Theory has come under a lot of criticism throughout the years, and researchers have further expounded on the basic idea to test television effects more accurately. For instance, the extended cultivation hypothesis suggests that cultivation theory may only hold true for specific types and genres of television programs (McCleod et al., 1995). Graves’ (1999) study of young television viewers suggested Cultivation Theory causes viewers whose race is lacking or stereotyped to experience low self esteem. In addition, she agreed that the constant “drip” of restricted images would lead young viewers to develop stereotypes and prejudice, and concluded that “among White children, there is evidence that positive portrayals are more likely to lead to positive attitudes,” (p.10). Though still not considered a perfect theory, the idea does act as a spring board for examining television’s effects on viewers.

Building upon Cultivation Theory, or perhaps what the theory lacked, is Greenberg’s (1988) “drench hypothesis.” This is the belief that portrayals are more effective when they are more salient, or have more of an impact. In short, quality versus quantity. The drench hypothesis is in general used to examine

positive portrayals, and suggests that when these positive portrayals are given more airtime, the viewers develop a more positive perception. These positive portrayals have a profound effect on the viewer “because of their strength, intensity, or authenticity,” (Graves, 1999, p.6). Examples would be *The Cosby Show* and its portrayal of African Americans, or *The Golden Girls* and its portrayal of elderly women.

Reep and Dambrot (1989) tested the drip and drench hypotheses against each other in their examination of gender roles on television. By examining shows where women had roles of authority, they conducted an experiment wherein subject watched the shows portraying women in non-stereotypical roles, then conducted a survey. They found support for the drench hypothesis to be much higher then that for the drip hypothesis. They concluded that “television’s portrayal of a few, high-impact, non-stereotypical characters is more important than sheer numbers of characters which make little or no impact,” (p.556).

Though there is much support for the drench hypothesis, many researchers agree that not all presentations, salient or not, have the same impact on audience members. To make a more in depth conclusion, Bahk (2001) considers three factors in his drench study of health messages: perceived realism, role identification, and media involvement. Perceived realism in this study is defined as the degree to which a viewer perceives that the content of a particular program is likely to be seen in the real world. Bahk cites other studies, such as Atkin (1983), who found that viewers with higher perceived realism are

more impacted by depictions of violence than viewers with lower levels of perceived realism.

Role identification in this study refers to the degree to which the viewer feels attracted and affiliated with the characters of the program. This supports studies by Sternthal and Craig (1973), Petty and Cacioppo (1986), and others who claim message source as a credible factor in message acceptance. Bahk adds that "people who become highly attracted to a dramatic character could be 'drenched' by the character's advocacy of certain beliefs, attitudes, and behavior," (p.191). He cites other studies which found that likeable characters have more impact on viewers (Greenberg, et. al., 1979), and that characters who are favored because of charming qualities, such as humor, are more likely to be imitated by viewers than those who are less favored (Bandura, 1977).

Media involvement refers to the level of which the viewer is paying attention, captivated, or "involved" with the media. Bahk posits that the level of media involvement is important because low levels can nullify message effects. Similarly, high levels of media involvement enhance message effects.

According to Bahk, media involvement is influenced by three factors, the first of which is the characteristics of the media presentation. For instance, if it is suspenseful, humorous, or boring. Exciting presentations elicit more involvement, while tedious and boring presentations elicit less involvement (Bowen & Chaffee, 1974). The second influencer is the viewer's pre-existing attitudes and personality. Bahk reports that some people are more prone to become involved than others based on their personal levels of empathy. The

third influencer is the viewer's environmental and situational factors. This can include people the viewers are with, viewer motives, and sources of distraction, to name a few.

Though discussion on the topic of interpersonal communication and its role in diffusing prejudice may seem irrelevant to a study of a television show, Horton and Wohl's (1956) notion of para-social interaction suggests that viewers form beliefs and attitudes about people through television because of a simulated interpersonal contact. In other words, television provides an opportunity for interpersonal communication, albeit simulated. "One of the most striking characteristics of the new mass media—radio, television, and the movies—is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer," (p. 215). If an audience member has little to no contact with a particular subgroup in their real life, para-social interaction can often serve as their window to these absent subgroups.

Para-social interaction increases when the television performer acts informally, or like they are in real-life situations. This is most evident in television story programs, such as soap operas, situation comedies or dramas. These simulated story lines and characters allow audiences to forget the action is taking place in a television studio, thus heightening the feeling of reality.

In addition, through the inclusion of others on the show, intimacy is personified, and the viewer by extension feels a part of that intimate group. Being part of a group naturally assumes that group members share commonalities, perhaps even common views. According to Horton and Wohl,

"…the very act of entering into any interaction with another involves some adaptation to the other's perspectives, if communication is to be achieved at all" (p. 219). This does not assume necessarily that group members held the same views prior to joining said group. But, like the Contact Hypothesis states, through heightened positive interaction with the simulated group, an increase in learning can take place, causing a decrease in prejudice. The level of intimacy created by television personas are seen as so powerful, that it is this level of intimate relationship that advertisers hope to capitalize on when having these personas endorse their products.

Perse and Rubin (1989) expounded on the idea of para-social relationships and found para-social interaction to be a "normal consequence of television viewing" (p.61). According to their study, most people use the same cognitive process for relationships in the real world and those with the media. Real people and people in the media, they found, have striking similarities and meet similar needs. Respondents in their study were asked to describe two of their peers, one liked and one disliked, as well as the attributes about these peers that made them like/dislike them. Then, respondents were to do the same exercise for soap opera characters. Construct systems were found to be linearly related, suggesting that audiences of television programming use a significant percentage of their interpersonal constructs for real life personalities when they describe television personalities.

Schiappa, Gregg & Hewes (2005) merged the Contact Hypothesis along with the theory of Parasocial Interaction to form the Parasocial Contact

Hypothesis. The PCH, as they referred to it, suggested that “exposure to positive portrayals of minority group members that produce parasocial interaction will be associated with a decrease in prejudicial attitudes,” (p.5). They looked specifically at Will & Grace and tested to see if the show had a direct effect on the reduction of prejudices against homosexuals. They administered a 74-item survey to college students assessing their viewing frequency, attitudes toward the show, as well as their level of interaction with homosexuals, both real life and para-social. Results indicated that respondents found the portrayals of the characters to be positive and had positive correlations between high viewing frequency and low levels of prejudice. There was also a positive correlation between high levels of para-social contact and reduced level of prejudice.

Interpersonal communication, both in the real world and simulated through para-social contact, has been shown to increase positive attitudes and decrease prejudice. The literature supports these attitude changes particularly in the social realm of racial prejudice and prejudice against homosexuals. It also supports that positive portrayals and experiences are conduits to the development of positive attitudes. Though humor was not necessarily used in the prior studies, it can be assumed that humor, because it is a positive stimulus, could be an effective catalyst to positive attitude change.

Chapter Three

Research Hypotheses

After reviewing the literature, this study has chosen five variables to represent the hypothesized paths and structural model. These five variables are: humor (HUMOR), distraction level (DIS), perceived level of interpersonal communication (IP), attitude toward the show (ATTS), and attitude toward those who are gay in real life (ATTG).

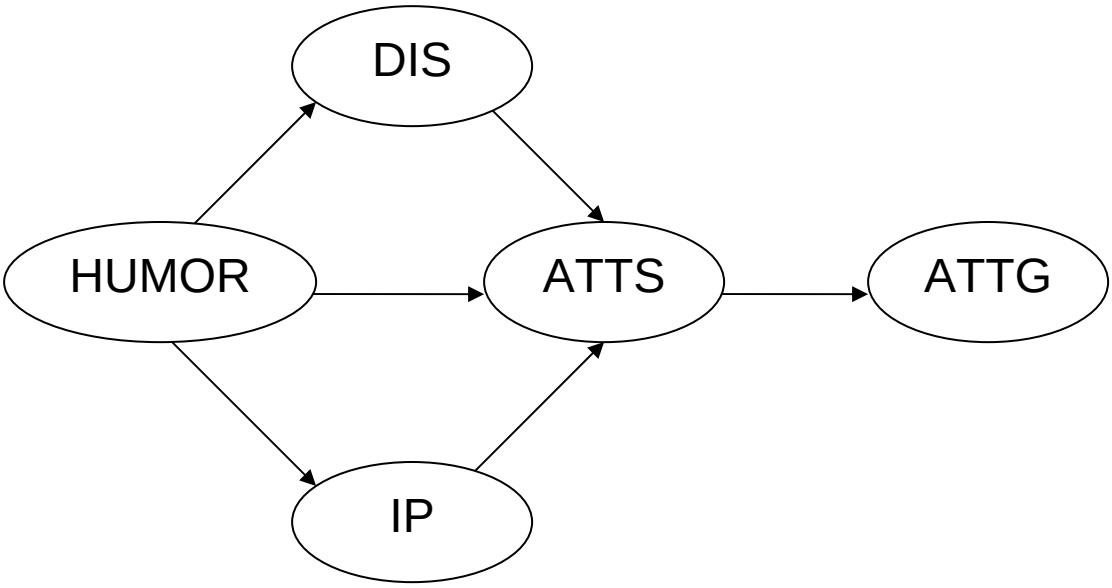

Figure 1. Model of Hypothesized Paths

As depicted in the figure, humor (HUMOR) is the starting point for all findings in this research study. All variables in the model are first affected by humor, some directly, and some through a mediated relationship. The direct legs of the path – HUMOR → ATTS, HUMOR → DIS, HUMOR → IP – are recognized in the model as well as mediated paths – HUMOR → DIS → ATTS, HUMOR → IP → ATTS, HUMOR → ATTS → ATTG.

Distraction (DIS) and interpersonal communication (IP) are not related to one another, but both act as mediators in different portions of the path. Based on the review of literature, humor has been shown to affect both variables. Though they are affected in different ways by different means, both affects have been found to be positive. Both serve as mediators between humor and attitude toward the show (ATTS).

Attitude toward the show is an important factor, not only because the study is based largely on respondent's attitude toward the show, but because it acts as a mediator between humor and attitude toward real life people who are gay (ATTG). The review of literature shows support for attitudes toward television characters resembling attitudes held toward real life people. The model represents this "para-social" realm and its potential effects in the real world.

List of Hypotheses

Using the five variables depicted in Figure 1, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: There will be a positive relationship between the perceived level of humor and attitude toward the show and/or characters. (HUM → ATTS)

H2: There will be a positive relationship between the perceived level of humor and attitude toward homosexuals when mediated through attitude toward the show. (HUM → ATTS → ATTG)

H3: Perceived level of humor will be positively related to the level of distraction. (HUM → DIS)

H4: Distraction level will be positively related to the attitude toward the show and/or characters. (DIS → ATTS)

H5: The indirect relationship from HUM to ATTS mediated through DIS will be positive in both legs of the path. (HUM → DIS → ATTS)

H6: There will be a positive relationship between perceived level of humor and perceived level of interpersonal communication. (HUM → IP)

H7: There will be a positive relationship between the perceived level of interpersonal communication and attitude toward the show and/or characters. (IP → ATTS)

H8: The indirect relationship from HUM to ATTS mediated through IP will be positive in both legs of the path. (HUM → IP → ATTS)

H9: There will be a positive relationship between attitude toward the show and/or characters and attitudes toward homosexuals. (ATTS → ATTG)

Chapter Four

Research Design

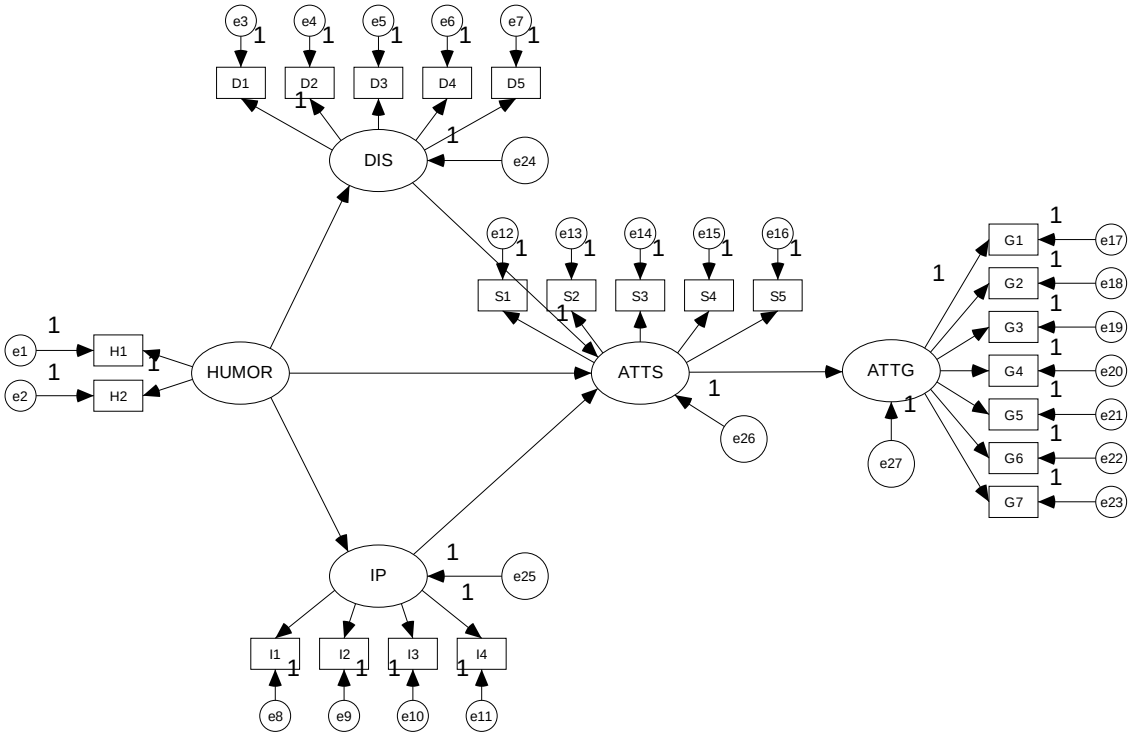

Figure 2. Structural Equation Model

The Structural Equation Model

Figure 2 summarizes the hypothesized theoretical relationships among the variables in a path diagram. Each proposed relationship is sketched with arrows indicating the hypothesized path. The boxes around the circled variables

represent the questions on the survey instrument. Questions were selected using a pre-tested questionnaire and represent valid measurements of each variable. The circles represent the margin of error for each question.

Research Methodology

Selection of Sample

Though approximately 300 undergraduate students enrolled in a large southern university were surveyed, only 167 were used as the sample size for structural equation analysis and hypothesis testing. These 167 respondents were chosen because they reported to have watched the show Will and Grace either on first-run prime time, in syndication, and/or on DVD. Approximately 61 were left out due to participant error, and the remaining 239 were used to determine demographic information.

Respondent's mean age was 20.12 (SD = 3.4), and 29.5 percent were male while 70.5 percent were female. Percentage of White respondents was 66.1 percent, Hispanic respondents made up 15.9 percent, 5.4 respondents were Black, 2.5 percent were Asian, and 6.7 percent reported to be Other. As expected, most respondents reported to have at least some college (62.1 percent), and only 1.7 percent reported high school as their highest form of education. The reported income for most respondents was between $0 and $10,000 annually (668 percent), the next highest percent being for those who made between $10,001 and $30,000 annually. Only 1.8 percent made over $150,000 annually. Also as expected, a high percentage of respondents

reported to be Straight (95.7), with the next highest being Gay and Lesbian, both reporting 1.7 percent.

As for viewer frequency, 6.3 percent watched the show every week when it first ran in prime time, 26.8 percent watched it regularly, 21.8 percent watched it somewhat regularly, and 45 percent only watched it every once in a while. Of those who watch the show in syndication and/or DVD, 13.3 watch it regularly, 23.8 watch it somewhat regularly, only 2.9 percent watch it every day, and the majority (60 percent) only watch it every once in a while.

Survey Instrument

The survey questionnaire was pre-tested on an undergraduate research methods class in the fall 2008 semester. Students were asked to critique the questionnaire and remark on any unclear items. Revisions were made by the primary researcher and the final questionnaire was developed using feedback from those who took the pre-test and among the research team.

The questionnaire consisted of 43 questions total, including 37 Likert-scaled questions about attitudes and thoughts concerning Will and Grace, its humor, characters, and about homosexuals in general. The remaining six questions were about each respondent's age, gender, income, ethnicity, education level, income level, and sexual orientation.

Data Gathering

Surveys were disseminated to undergraduate courses during the spring 2009 semester. Course titles and departments varied, and included Mass Communications courses, Women's Studies courses, and Anthropology courses. Participation for all respondents was voluntary, and responses were kept confidential. No names or personal identifying information was gathered, therefore, answers were kept anonymous.

Nearly 300 surveys were disseminated in total, but only a portion of those were retained for relevancy. Of the approximately 300 disseminated, only 167 reported to be viewers of the show. As previously stated, these 167 were used to determine structural equation analysis and hypotheses testing.

Measures

The following list includes the key measures contained in the survey. Final questions were developed after a pre-test and extensive review to minimize confusion and enhance clarity and relevancy. The pre-tests and reviews were conducted weeks before the survey was handed out. Though 43 questions appeared on the survey, not all questions were used to determine key measures. The questions used are listed below.

Humor of the Show (HS). Two items were used to measure audience perceived humor of the show. One Likert-scaled (5: Strongly Agree, 1: Strongly

Disagree): “I watch Will and Grace to laugh.” And another Likert-scaled (1: Very Funny, 5: Not Funny At All): “How would you rate the humor of Will and Grace?”

Distraction Level (D). Five items were used to measure the amount of distraction that occurs while watching the show. All were Likert-scaled (5: Strongly Agree, 1: Strongly Disagree): “When watching Will and Grace, I am relaxed,” “Jack causes me to think about serious issues that real-life homosexuals face,“ “Will and Grace is a source for understanding the homosexual community,” “While watching Will and Grace, I am encouraged to think positively about homosexual issues,” “Watching Will and Grace makes me more sensitive to homosexual issues.” The Cronbach’s alpha was .72.

Perceived Level of Interpersonal Communication (IP). Four Likert-scaled (5: Strongly Agree, 1: Strongly Disagree) items were used to measure the level of perceived interpersonal communication that occurs while watching the show: “I would be friends with Jack if he were a real-life person,” “I would not like to get to know someone like Jack,” “I would like to get to know someone like Will.” The Cronbach’s alpha was .79.

Attitude Toward The Show (ATTS). Five Likert-scaled (5: Strongly Agree, 1: Strongly Disagree) items were used to measure respondent’s attitude toward the show Will and Grace: “I consider myself a fan of Will and Grace,” “I like Jack because he is funny,” “Jack represents a refreshing challenge to normal

conceptions of gender," "I like Will because he is funny," and "Will and Grace is an important step forward in network television situation comedies because it features gay men in major roles." The Cronbach's alpha was .75.

Attitudes Toward Gays/Homosexuals (ATTG). Seven Likert-scaled (5: Strongly Agree, 1: Strongly Disagree) were borrowed from Herek's Attitudes toward Gays and Lesbian Scale (ATTGL): "Male homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt children the same as heterosexual couples," "Male homosexuals should not be allowed to teach school," "Just as in other species, male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in men," "I would not be too upset if I learned my son was a homosexual," "The idea of male homosexual marriage seems ridiculous to me," "Male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should not be condemned," and "The only normal relationships are heterosexual relationships." The Cronbach's alpha was .90.

Frequency (F). Three scaled questions were asked to determine the level of frequency respondent's watched the show Will and Grace: "How frequently did you watch Will and Grace when it first ran in prime-time?" (1: Every week, I rarely missed an episode, 2: Regularly, a few times a month, 3: Somewhat regularly, about once a month, 4: Every once in a while, 5: Never.) "Currently, how frequently do you watch Will and Grace in syndication and/or DVD? (1: Almost everyday, 2: Regularly, a few times a week, 3: Somewhat regularly, about once a month, 4: Every once in a while, about once every few months, 5: Never.)

After the previous two questions were asked, respondents were instructed to continue the survey if their responses were anything besides ‘Never.” If they responded ‘Never” to both questions, then they were to skip the section of questions related to the show and answer the remaining items. If viewers responded that they had watched the show to some degree, then they were also asked to answer another question measuring frequency: “Select which describes how often you view Will and Grace” (1: Always, 2: Sometimes, 3: Seldom, 4: Never).

Chapter Five

Results

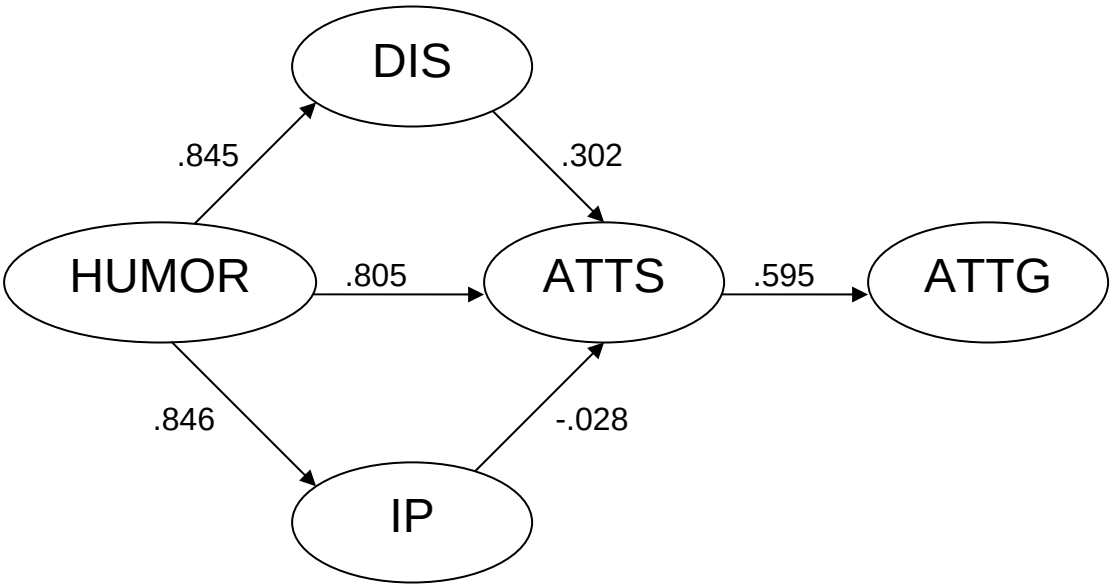

Figure 3. Structural Model Results

Figure 3 is a pictorial display of the descriptive results in the structural model diagram. In this model, every represented path was proven to be valid and significant, except for the path between IP and ATTS, which had a negative value of .028. The relationships and paths of this diagram will be examined in the following pages, and the findings will be discussed.

Descriptive Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of all independent and dependent variables examined in this study. Following the table, each section will be broken down then discussed for more clarity.

Table 1
Descriptive Results

Variables	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Humor (HUM)	4.0		***
Show's humor rating (H1)	4.0	.82	
Watch show to laugh (H2)	3.9	.91	
Distraction Level (DIS)	3.14		.72
Watch show to relax (D1)	3.4	.89	
Think of serious issues (D2)	2.7	.87	
Understand homosexuals (D3)	3.0	1.0	
Think positive of homosexuals (D4)	2.8	.93	
More sensitive to homosexual issues (D5)	3.8	.83	
Perceived Level of Interpersonal Communication (IP)	4.05		.79
Would be friends with Jack (I1)	4.0	1.0	
Would not like to know Jack (I2)	4.0	1.01	
Would like to know Will (I3)	4.0	.9	
Would not like to be friends with Will (I4)	4.2	.9	
Attitude Toward the Show/Characters (ATTS)	3.71		.75
Fan of show (S1)	4.1	.86	
Like Jack because he's funny (S2)	3.51	.88	
Jack a refreshing challenge to norms (S3)	4.0	.8	
Like Will because he's funny (S4)	3.6	1.04	
Show an important step forward (S5)	3.32	1.02	
Attitude Toward Gays/Homosexuals (ATTG)	3.9		.9
Homosexuals should be able to adopt (G1)	3.82	1.25	
Homosexuals should not teach school (G2)	4.5	.8	
Homosexuality is natural expression (G3)	3.6	1.21	
Not be upset if son was a homosexual (G4)	3.3	1.4	
Homosexual marriage seems ridiculous (G5)	4.0	1.22	
Homosexuality should not be condemned (G6)	3.8	1.32	
Only heterosexual relationships are normal (G7)	4.0	1.3	

As expected, participants found the show Will and Grace to be humorous. Overall humor rating was favorable (Mean H1 = 3.94, SD = .82), and many

reported watching the show in order to laugh (Mean H2 = 3.9, SD = .91). There was a favorable reporting of those who watch the show to relax (Mean D1 = 3.4, SD = .89), and it was more favorable than those who think of serious issues homosexuals face (Mean D2 = 2.7, SD = .87) or who think positively about homosexuals because of the show (Mean D4 = 2.8, SD = .93). This finding supports the distraction hypotheses. As for perceived level of interpersonal communication, results were consistent; there were equal reports of a desire to be friends with the characters and a desire to not be friends (Mean I1 = 4.0, Mean I2 = 4.0).

Attitudes toward the show were favorable, though reported fans of the show (Mean S1 = 4.1, SD = .86) were less than those who thought the show was an important step forward in television because it featured gay men in prominent roles (Mean S5 = 3.32, SD = 1.02). Attitudes toward homosexuals were fairly consistent, though in most cases, unfavorable responses toward homosexuals outnumbered favorable responses. For instance, responses for heterosexual relationships being the only normal relationships (Mean G7 = 4.0, SD = 1.3) were higher than responses for homosexuality is a natural expression (Mean G3 = 3.6, SD = 1.21).

Overall, attitudes toward homosexuals were consistent with attitude toward the show (Mean ATTS = 3.71, ATTG = 3.9), supporting Hypothesis 2. However, in some instances, individual variables for attitudes toward homosexuals (ATTG), though relatively favorable, were not as favorable as the individual variables for attitude toward the show (ATTS). For instance, reported

fans of the show (Mean S1 = 4.1, SD = .86) weren't as high as those who reported that homosexuals should not be able to teach school (Mean G2 = 4.5, SD = .8). In addition, those who think homosexuality should not be condemned (Mean G6 = 3.8, SD = 1.32) were less than reported fans, as were those who think homosexuality is a natural expression (Mean G3 = 3.6, SD = 1.21).

Table 2
Measurement Model Results

Latent Constructs and Indicators	Standardized Factor Loadings	Standard Error
Humor (HUM)		
Show's humor rating (H1)	.782**	.080
Watch show to laugh (H2)	.793	---
Distraction Level (DIS)		
Watch show to relax (D1)	.636	---
Think of serious issues (D2)	.484**	.157
Understand homosexuals (D3)	.503**	.173
Think positive of homosexuals (D4)	.752**	.162
More sensitive to homosexual issues (D5)	.507**	.148
Perceived Level of Interpersonal Communication (IP)		
Would be friends with Jack (I1)	.806**	.253
Would not like to know Jack (I2)	.622**	.227
Would like to know Will (I3)	.804**	.173
Would not like to be friends with Will (I4)	.534	---
Attitude Toward the Show/Characters (ATTS)		
Fan of show (S1)	.774	---
Like Jack because he's funny (S2)	.737**	.078
Jack a refreshing challenge to norms (S3)	.625**	.082
Like Will because he's funny (S4)	.577**	.075
Show an important step forward (S5)	.526**	.098
Attitude Toward Gays/Homosexuals (ATTG)		
Homosexuals should be able to adopt (G1)	.829	---
Homosexuals should not teach school (G2)	-.692**	.046
Homosexuality is natural expression (G3)	.820**	.065
Not be upset if son was a homosexual (G4)	.822**	.075
Homosexual marriage seems ridiculous (G5)	-.621**	.072
Homosexuality should not be condemned (G6)	.640**	.077
Only heterosexual relationships are normal (G7)	-.882**	.067

**p<.01

Measurement Model Evaluation.

Standardized factor loadings and their standard errors for construct indicators are presented in Table 2. The indicator loadings for all constructs are generally high and statistically significant. Also, the standard errors are generally small, demonstrating acceptable validity of the measurement model.

Structural Model Results Analysis

Structural equation analysis provided adequate fit to the data according to research standards. Bentler and Bonnett (1980) posit that a Normed Fit Index (NFI) of less than .9 can be improved, but is a reasonable fit, and that a Comparative Fit Index, when close to a value of 1 is a very good fit. NFI for this study was .9 when rounded, indicating room for improvement, but reasonably acceptable fit. CFI was also .9, indicating a good fit of the model to the data.

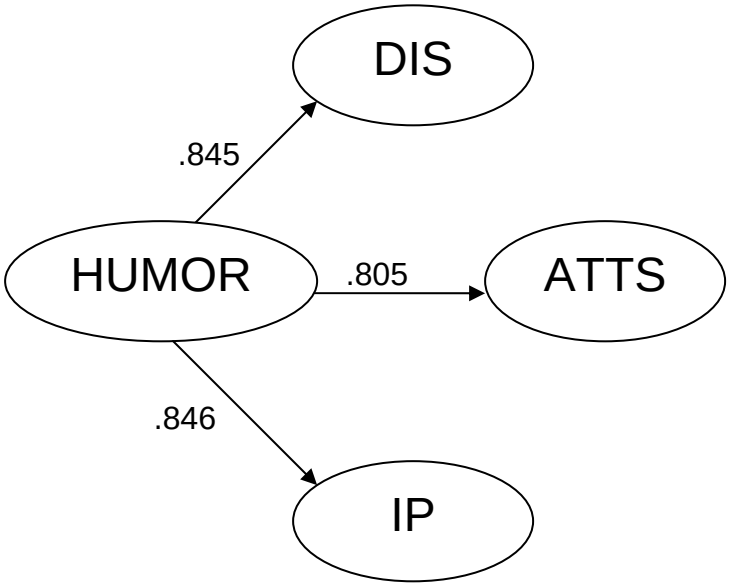

Figure 4. Portion A of the Path Diagram

Figure 4 shows the three most significant paths, which were the three direct paths from humor: HUMOR→DIS (path = .845), HUMOR→ATTS (path = .805), and HUMOR→IP (path = .846). It was hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between humor and the level of distraction experienced by audience members, the level of interpersonal communication perceived by audience members, and audience member's attitudes toward the show. Humor, as the results indicate, has a significant effect on the distraction process and interpersonal communication audience members go through while watching the show, as well as their attitudes toward the show itself. Thus, hypotheses 1,3, and 6 were supported.

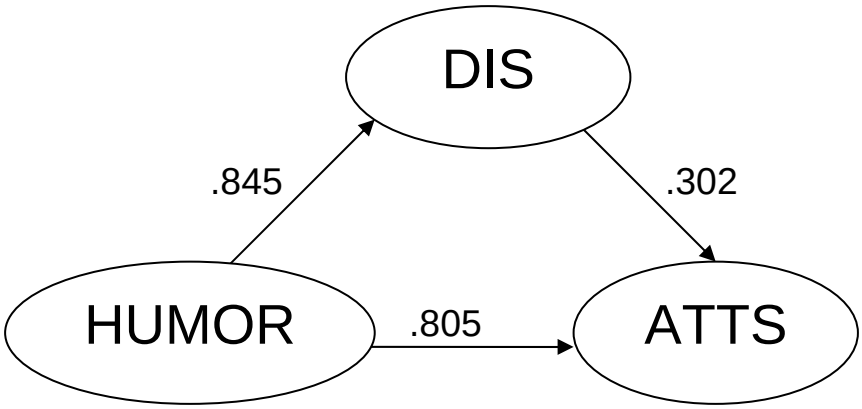

Figure 5. Portion B of the Path Diagram

Hypothesis 5 proposed that distraction level would be positively related to the attitude toward the show held by audiences. The path DIS→ATTS, as shown in Figure 4, was positive (path = .302), supporting that the higher the level of distraction experienced while watching the show, the more favorable the attitude was toward the show. Therefore, hypothesis 4 was supported. In addition, because hypothesis 3 was supported along with hypothesis 4, hypothesis 5 was by default supported (path = HUMOR→DIS→ATTS). As you can see in Figure 4, both legs of the path were positive (.845, .302). Therefore, humor, when mediated through distraction, positively affects attitude toward the show. Put another way, the higher the humor, the higher the distraction, and the higher the distraction the greater, and more positive, the attitude toward the show.

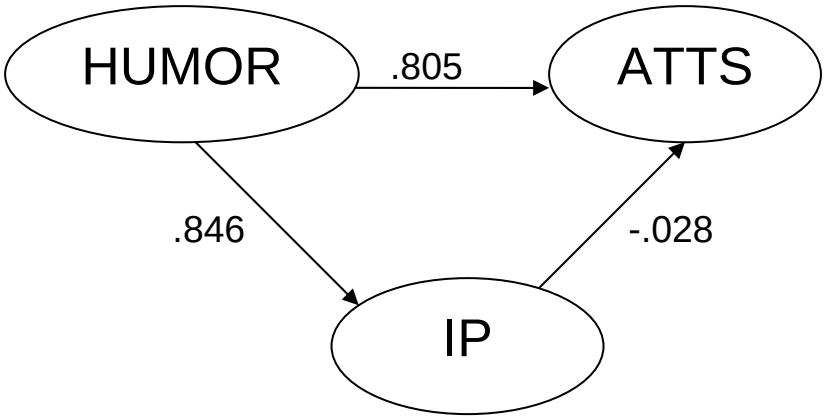

Figure 6. Portion C of the Path Diagram

The bottom portion of the path, portion C as depicted in Figure 6, did not have as positive or significant results as the rest of the model. Other than, of course, the path HUMOR→IP, which was the highest and most significant in the model (path = .846). Unlike every other path in the model, the path IP→ATTS was negative (path = -.028), suggesting that the perceived level of interpersonal communication, though highly affected by humor, does not translate to a positive effect on attitude toward the show. Thus, hypothesis 7 was not supported, and by default, neither was hypothesis 8.

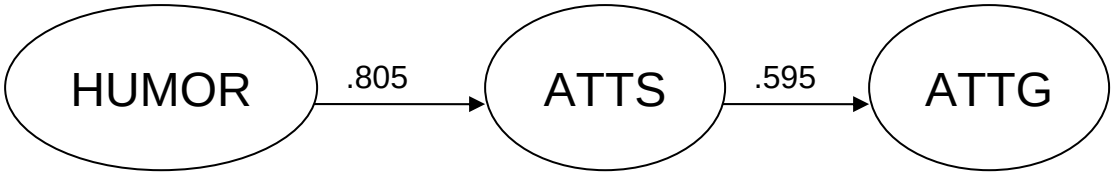

Figure 7 . Portion D of the Path Diagram

Figure 7 depicts the final path, ATTS→ATTG, which was significant and positive (path = .595), and supports hypothesis 9, which suggests that there will be a positive relationship between the attitudes held toward the show and attitudes held toward real life homosexuals. That is, the more positive one feels about the show Will and Grace, the more positive one will feel about homosexuals in the real world. In addition, hypothesis 2 was also supported, in that both paths HUM → ATTS, and ATTS → ATTG were positive.

Chapter Six

Discussion and Recommendations

Nearly every path of the model was positive, and significantly so, thus supporting the claims of this research study. Humor, no doubt, has an effect on audience attitudes toward mass mediated content, as well as on their attitudes toward the real world. As mentioned before, humor softens and even humanizes a message; it helps relate to the audience members. It is a trait that advertisers hope to capitalize on when selling a product. In the case of Will and Grace, homosexuality served as the “product” being endorsed.

The most important finding is the positive path between ATTS and ATTG. It supports the research that attitudes held toward fictionalized para-social representations on television translate into real life attitudes toward particular people groups. In a time of heightened sensitivity to gay rights and policy specifically, as well as any message not historically easily accepted by the mainstream, using humor could be the key to breaking staunch barriers.

Though research into the reasons why people hold their views on unpopular messages is necessary, it is possible that humor can break these barriers if attitudes held aren’t deeply founded or strongly rooted in anything

sound. So, when confronted under the guise of humor, positive cognitive responses may have the ability to alter the negative views held.

On the other hand, in his study on attitude change and subsequent behavior, Festinger (1964) found that a change in attitude did not always result in behavior modification. He in fact found that an inverse relationship often existed, wherein participants who reported the most attitude change, showed the least behavioral change. Festinger suggested that environmental factors played a role. In the case of viewing Will and Grace, the humorous, relaxed, and distracting atmosphere could play a large role in its acceptance. If taken out of one's living room and placed in a voting booth, would viewers be as accepting of homosexuals in terms of gay rights and governmental policy? Further research into how favorable attitudes affect actions is also recommended.

Greenwald (1968) coined the term "cognitive response" in the context of persuasion when he argued that people remember their personal reactions to a message rather than the message itself. Wright (1973) echoes this finding in his study that states "a receiver relies heavily on her evaluative mental responses to message content, rather than on the content itself, to arrive at an attitudinal position after exposure, (p.60)." This effect of cognitive response, when combined with the research on humor, as well as distraction and interpersonal communication, has potential to greatly benefit mass communicators because of its social implications, and further research is recommended.

Though most findings in this study were positive, the negative path between IP and ATTS does bear further discussion. This finding seems to

contradict most of the previous findings, such as the Contact Hypothesis, as well as the Para-social Contact Hypothesis. Perhaps this is due to faulty answers, or perhaps hypotheses and theories dealing with television's effects, such as Cultivation theory, are inherently flawed. But, perhaps there is something more concrete hindering the path from perceived interpersonal communication with the show's characters to positive attitudes toward the show. Further research is recommended.

The negative finding is particularly puzzling because, according to the model, the path between humor and interpersonal communication was positive; it was, in fact, the strongest positive path in the model. Further research on interpersonal connection and positive attitudes in the para-social realm should be further looked into and tested. Perhaps the fact that positive connection is made doesn't necessarily mean positive attitudes are formed. Maybe connection and attitudes are parts of two totally separate processes, and require further research.

Implications

As previously stated, when confronted under the guise of humor, positive cognitive responses may have the ability to alter any negative views. The findings in this study can be used by a number of organizations, government agencies, as well as racial, religious, and ethnic people and groups to further their less popular messages. In addition, ideas, products, lifestyles, etc., that are not historically accepted, be they controversial, costly, or new, can benefit from

the findings of this research study. Advertisers have further support for using humor to not only promote any product, but products that are less popular, due to high cost, etc., or even for new products. Listed below are a few organizations that may benefit specifically.

1. Gay Rights Organizations: This study presents a victory of sorts for those who would promote a homosexual agenda. One major finding of the research is that humor has positive effects on message reception. There was a direct positive effect on the level of distraction, the perceived level of interpersonal communication, and on the show itself. This, in turn, had a positive effect on attitudes toward real-life homosexuals. Humor makes the homosexual message positive. This positive reception translates into more favorable attitudes.

2. Political Parties/Lobbyists: This study provides adequate data for political parties and lobbyists hoping to pass legislation, especially one that would deal with issues not historically accepted by mainstream society. Though this study does not hope to aide in deceiving the voting public, utilization of the distracting effects humor has could help to pass positive legislation. New ideas aren't inherently bad, but can have trouble gaining acceptance by those who are accustomed to what has always been. If this complacency prevents people from investing proper research in what may be beneficial to society, then perhaps a humorous message could help to break barriers.

3. Message Receivers and Message Opposers: This study exposes the means necessary to 'distract' from what some would call important fundamental

moral issues. In so many words, one could find support for humor's ability to manipulate message receivers. Getting a message across, depending on the message, should perhaps not be under the guise of humor, but more straight forward, and decided upon by clear minded individuals. Message receivers, therefore, should be aware and cautious of message encoders' ability and potential to mask unpopular messages with humor. Perhaps this works well toward messages for human rights and societal progress, however in the wrong hands, it has potential for negative ramifications. In fact, further research is suggested as to how effective humor is, and under what types of conditions is it effective, particularly when dispensing a negative message.

To perhaps counter this manipulation, message opposers could either expose the distraction, or present the same message in a non-humorous manner. For instance, in regards to homosexuality, organizations who oppose a gay agenda could present homosexuality in a more serious light, or the "cons" as defined by the particular organization. The same could be true with other organizations, be they political, social, or business-related.

Limitations

One draw back to a study on Will and Grace is that the show no longer airs in prime time, and is not considered current. Though the show does still air in syndication and can be purchased for viewing on DVD, as well as have a large fan base, it is not as popular as it once was, particularly to the younger college-

age sample studied. Future studies might consider more age and interest-specific samples.

This study was more quantitative, and therefore limited in how specific the findings could be. Because humor is difficult to define, future researchers might also consider more in-depth interviews with participants to get a better gauge on their definition of humor, and how humor impacts their attitudes. In addition, research shows that certain people are predisposed to certain reactions when presented with humor. A study more qualitative in nature is recommended to further develop this factor and how it affects attitudes toward the show as well as homosexuals.

References

Allport, G. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. New York: Doubleday.

Altameyer, B. (2001). Changes in attitudes towards homosexuals. *Journal of Homosexuality, 42,* pp. 63-76.

Amir, Y. (1976). Contact hypothesis in ethnic relations. *Psychological Bulletin, 76,* pp. 319–342.

Atkin, C. K. (1983). Effects of realistic TV violence vs. fictional violence on aggression. *Journalism Quarterly, 60,* pp. 615–621.

Bahk, C. (2001). Drench effects of media portrayal of fatal disease on health locus of control. *Health Communication, 13(2),* pp.187-204.

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Bentler, P.M. & Bonett (1980). Significance tests and goodness of fit in the analysis of covariance structures. *Psychological Bulletin*, 88, pp. 588-606.

Bowen, L.,&Chaffee, S. H. (1974). Product involvement and pertinent advertising appeals. *Journalism Quarterly, 51,* pp. 613–621, 644.

Burgess, T.D.G., II & Sales, S. (1971). Attitudinal effect of “mere exposure”: a reevaluation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 7,* pp. 461-472.

Burke, K., Peterson D., & Nix, C.L. (1995). The effects of coaches’ humor on female volleyball players’ evaluation of their coaches. *Journal of Sport Behavior 18(2).* PP.83-90.

Cheatwood, D. (1983). Sociability and the sociology of humor. *Sociology and Social Research, 67,* pp. 324-338.

Cooper, E. (2003). Decoding “Will and Grace:” mass audience reception of a popular network situation comedy. *Sociological Perspectives, 46(4)*, pp. 513-533.

D'Augelli, A. & Rose, M.L. (1990). Homophobia in a University Community: Attitudes and Experiences of Heterosexual Freshmen. .*Journal of College Student Development, 31(6)*, pp. 484-91.

Davis, M. (1995). The sociology of humor: a stillborn field? *Sociological Forum, 10(2)*, pp. 327-339.

Desforges, D. M., Lord, C. G., Ramsey, S. L., *et al* (1991). Effects of structured cooperative contact on changing negative attitudes toward stigmatized social groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *60*, pp. 531 - 544.

Entman, R.M. & Rojecki, A. (2000). *The black image in the white mind: Media and race in America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Festinger, L., & Maccoby, N. (1964). On resistance to persuasive communications. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology (68).*

Fujioka, Y. (1999). Television portrayals and African-American stereotypes: Examination of television effects when direct contact is lacking. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 7*6*,* pp. 52-73.

Gilland, H. & Mauritsen, H. (1971). Humor in the classroom. *Reading Teacher 24.* pp. 753–756.

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction Ritual*. New York: Doubleday.

Graham, E., Papa, M. and Brooks, G. (1992). Functions of humor in conversation: conceptualization and measurement. *Western Journal of Communication*, *56(2),* pp.161-183.

Graves, S. B. (1999). Television and Prejudice Reduction: When Does Television as a Vicarious Experience Make a Difference? *Journal of Social Issues*, *55(4),* pp. 707-725.

Greenberg, B. (1988). Some uncommon television images and the drench hypothesis. In S. Oskamp (Ed.), *Television as a social issue: Applied social psychology, 8,* pp. 88–102.

Greenwald, A. (1968). Cognitive Learning, Cognitive Response to Persuasion, and Attitude Change. In A. Greenwald, T. Brock, & T. Ostrom (eds.), *Psychological Foundations and Attitudes*. (pp. 147-170). New York: Academic Press.

Gruner, C. (1976). Wit and humor in mass communication. In A.J. Chapman and H.C. Foot (eds), *Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications* (pp. 27-311). London: Wiley.

Herek, G.M. (1988). Heterosexuals' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men: Correlates and gender differences. *Journal of Sex Research (25),* pp.451-477.

Herek, G.M., & Glunt, E.K. (1993). Interpersonal contact and heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay men: Results from a national survey. *Journal of Sex Research*, *30*, pp. 239-244.

Herold, D. (1963). *Humor in Advertising and How to Make It Pay*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Horton, D. & Wohl, R.R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction. *Psychiatry, 19*, pp. 215-229.

Kane, T. R., Suls, J. M., & Tedeschi, J. (1977). Humour as a tool of social interaction. In A. J. Chapman & H. C. Foot (Eds.), *It's a funny thing humour* (pp. 13-16). New York: Pergamon Press.

Leavitt, C. (1970). A multidimensional set of rating scales for television commercials. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 54*, pp. 427-429.

Lehman, Burke, Martin, Sultan, & Czech (2001). The effects of head and assistant coaches' uses of humor on collegiate soccer players evaluation of their coaches. *Journal of Sport Behavior (26)*.

McLeod, J. M., Daily, K., Eveland, W., Guo, Z., Culver, K., Kurpius, D., Moy, P., Horowitz, E., & Zhong. M. (1995). The synthetic crisis: Media influences on perceptions of crime. Paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication convention, Washington, D.C.

McCollum, C. (2006). Goodbye "Will and Grace." Retrieved February 12, 2007 from http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/entertainment/television/14572914.htm.

McWorter, L. (1996). A brief history of homosexuality in America. Retrieved May 19, 2009 from http://www.iwu.edu/multicultural/aboutus/Brief_History_of_Homosexuality.pdf.

Morrison, Todd G., A. V. Parriag, A. V., and Morrison, Melanie A. 1999. The psychometric properties of the Homonegativity Scale. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 37: 111-126.

Nacos, B. L.(2000). Television and its viewers: Cultivation theory and research by james shanahan and michael morgan. *Political Science Quarterly*, pages 317-319.

O'Quin, K. & Aronoff, J. (1981). Humor as a technique of social influence. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 44(4),* pp. 349-357

Osterhouse, R. & Brock, T. (1970). Distraction increases yielding to propaganda by inhibiting counterarguing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 15,* pp. 344-358.

Overby, L.M. & Barth, J. (2002). Contact, community context, and public attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. *Polity, 34(3),* pp. 433-456.

Perse, E. & Rubin, R. (1989). Attribution in social and parasocial relationships. *Communication Research 16(1),* pp. 59-77.

Petty, R.E, & Cacioppo, J.T. (1986). The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology (19)*, pp.123-205.

Reep, D. & Dambrot, F.H. (1989). Effect of frequent television viewing on stereotypes: 'drip, drip' or 'drench.' *Journalism Quarterly, 66(3),* pp. 542.

Saad, L. (2008). Americans Evenly Divided on Morality of Homosexuality. Retrieved May 19, 2009 from http://www.gallup.com/poll/108115/Americans-Evenly-Divided-Morality-Homosexuality.aspx.

Schiappa, E., Gregg, P., & Hewes, D. (2005). Can one TV show make a difference? Will & Grace and the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis. *Communication Monographs, 72(1)*, pp. 92-115.

Shanahan, J. & Morgan, M. (1999). *Television and its viewers: Cultivation theory and research*. Cambridge: Cambrige University Press.

Sprowl, J. (1987). Humor theory and communication research. *World Communication, 16*, pp.47-65.

Sternthal, B. & Craig, S. (1973). Humor in advertising. *Journal of Marketing, 37(4),* pp.12-18.

Sully, J. (1902). *Essay on Laughter*. New York: Green.

Weaver, R.L & Cotrell, H.W. (1991). Guided Mental Imagery Dynamation Sequences as Practical confrontation and intervention strategies for changing weak (non-constructive) business professionals' habits. *Business Communication Quarterly 54(3).* Pp. 91-96.

Works, E. (1961). The prejudice-interaction hypothesis from the point of view of the negro minority group. *American Journal of Sociology, 67(1),* pp. 47.

Zijderveld, A. (1968). Jokes and their relation to social reality. *Social Research, 35*, pp. 286-311.

Appendices

Appendix A

Extended Path Diagram

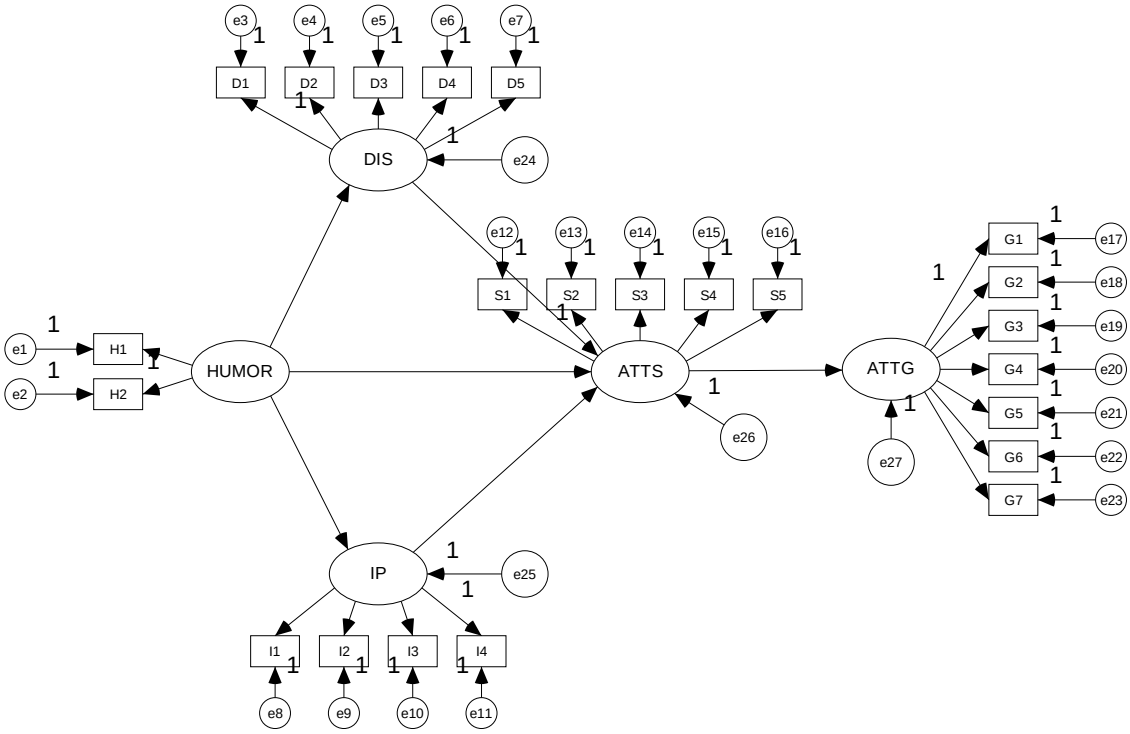

Figure 8. Extended Path Diagram

HUMOR: Humor (produced by show Will and Grace)
DIS: Distraction level
IP: Perceived level of interpersonal communication
ATTS: Attitude toward the characters/show
ATTG: Attitudes toward real life people who are gay

Appendix B

Survey Questionnaire

We're conducting a study of audience's reception to the television show Will & Grace. Please answer each question as honestly as possible. Your responses will be confidential.

Answer the following questions by circling the appropriate response.

1. How frequently did you watch Will and Grace when it first ran in prime-time?

- **1-** Every week, I rarely missed an episode
- **2-** Regularly, a few times a month
- **3-** Somewhat regularly, about once a month
- **4-** Every once in a while, about once every few months
- **5-** Never

2. Currently, how frequently do you watch Will and Grace in syndication and/or on DVD?

- **1-** Almost every day
- **2-** Regularly, few times a week
- **3-** Somewhat regularly, about once a month
- **4-** Every once in a while, about once every few months
- **5-** Never

**If your answer to questions 1 and 2 was 'Never' please skip ahead to question 28.*

3. Select which describes how often you view Will and Grace:

- **1-** Always
- **2-** Sometimes
- **3-** Seldom
- **4-** Never

4. How would you rate the humor of Will and Grace?

- **1-** Very funny
- **2-** Pretty funny
- **3-** Somewhat funny
- **4-** Not very funny
- **5-** Not funny at all

Please answer the following questions by circling the number that best reflects your feelings. Please circle whether you **Strongly Agree**, **Agree**, **Neither Agree nor Disagree**, **Disagree**, or **Strongly Disagree**.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5. I consider myself a fan of Will and Grace	5	4	3	2	1
6. I watch Will and Grace to laugh.	5	4	3	2	1
7. When watching Will and Grace, I am relaxed.	5	4	3	2	1
8. While watching Will and Grace, I seldom think of serious issues.	5	4	3	2	1
9. Will and Grace is a source for understanding the homosexual community.	5	4	3	2	1
10. While watching Will and Grace, I am encouraged to think positively about homosexuals.	5	4	3	2	1
11. Will and Grace rarely opens my eyes to serious issues homosexuals face.	5	4	3	2	1
12. I like Jack because he is funny.	5	4	3	2	1
13. Jack represents a refreshing challenge to normal conceptions of gender.	5	4	3	2	1
14. Jack causes me to think about serious issues that real-life homosexuals face.	5	4	3	2	1
15. Jack is a character not to be taken seriously.	5	4	3	2	1
16. I would be friends with Jack if he were a real-life person.	5	4	3	2	1
17. Jack correctly represents most gay males.	5	4	3	2	1
18. I would not like to get to know someone like Jack.	5	4	3	2	1
19. I like Will because he is funny.	5	4	3	2	1
20. Will represents a refreshing challenge to normal conceptions of gender.	5	4	3	2	1
21. I would like to get to know someone	5	4	3	2	1

like Will.					
22. While watching Will and Grace, I am always focused on the homosexual themes.	5	4	3	2	1
23. I would not be friends with Will if he were a real-life person.	5	4	3	2	1
24. Watching Will and Grace makes me more sensitive to homosexual issues.	5	4	3	2	1
25. Watching Will and Grace has helped shape my view of gay marriage.	5	4	3	2	1
26. Will and Grace is an important step forward in network television situation comedies because it features gay men in major roles.	5	4	3	2	1
27. I care about the characters of the show Will and Grace as if they were real people.	5	4	3	2	1

Answer the following questions by circling the appropriate response.

28. How would you rate your level of social contact with homosexuals?

1- I have more than 3 homosexual friends or close co-workers
2- I have a few [3 or less] homosexual friends or close co-workers
3- I am acquaintances with a few homosexuals, but not as friends
4- I do not know any homosexual people personally

29. How would you rate your experiences with homosexuals?

1- Very positive experiences
2- Fairly positive experiences
3- Fairly negative experiences
4- Very negative experiences
5- No experiences

30. How would you rate your knowledge of homosexual lifestyles?

1- Know almost everything about homosexuals
2- Know a lot about homosexuals
3- Know some about homosexuals
4- Know very little about homosexuals
5- Know nothing about homosexuals

Please answer the following questions by circling the number that best reflects your feelings. Please circle whether you **Strongly Agree**, **Agree**, **Neither Agree nor Disagree**, **Disagree**, or **Strongly Disagree**.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
31. Male homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt children the same as heterosexual couples.	5	4	3	2	1
32. Male homosexuals should *not* be allowed to teach school.	5	4	3	2	1
33. Just as in other species, male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in human men.	5	4	3	2	1
34. I would *not* be too upset if I learned that my son was a homosexual.	5	4	3	2	1
35. The idea of male homosexual marriages seems ridiculous to me.	5	4	3	2	1
36. Male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should *not* be condemned.	5	4	3	2	1
37. The only normal relationships are heterosexual relationships	5	4	3	2	1

Answer the following questions by filling in the blank or circling the appropriate response.

38. Age: ____

39. Gender: M F

40. Ethnicity: Black Hispanic Asian White Other_____

41. Education: High School College Some college Graduate School

42. Income: $0-$10,000 $10,001-$30,000 $30,001-$70,000 $70,001-$150,000 Over $150,000

43. Sexual Orientation: Straight Gay Lesbian Bisexual Not sure

Appendix C

Survey Questions and Variables

HUMOR

Q4: How would you rate the humor of Will and Grace?
Q6: I watch Will and Grace to laugh.

Distraction (DIS)

Q7: When watching Will and Grace, I am relaxed.
Q14: Jack causes me to think about serious issues that real-life homosexuals face. (Reverse Coded)
Q9: Will and Grace is a source for understanding the homosexual community.
Q10: While watching Will and Grace, I am encouraged to think positively about homosexuals.
Q24: Watching Will and Grace makes me more sensitive to homosexual issues.

Interpersonal Communication (IP)

Q16: I would be friends with Jack if he were a real-life person.
Q18: I would not like to get to know someone like Jack. (Reverse Coded)
Q21: I would like to get to know someone like Will.
Q23: I would not be friends with Will if he were a real-life person. (Reverse Coded)

Attitude Toward the Show (ATTS)

Q5: I consider myself a fan of Will and Grace
Q12: I like Jack because he is funny.
Q13: Jack represents a refreshing challenge to normal conceptions of gender.
Q19: I like Will because he is funny.
Q26: Will and Grace is an important step forward in network television situation comedies because it features gay men in major roles.

Attitude Toward Gays

Q31: Male homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt children the same as heterosexual couples.
Q32: Male homosexuals should *not* be allowed to teach school. (Reverse Coded)
Q33: Just as in other species, male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in human men.
Q34: I would *not* be too upset if I learned that my son was a homosexual.
Q35: The idea of male homosexual marriages seems ridiculous to me. (Reverse Coded)
Q36: Male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should *not* be condemned.
Q37: The only normal relationships are heterosexual relationships. (Reverse Coded)

Appendix D

Hypotheses

H1: There will be a positive relationship between the perceived level of humor and attitude toward the show and/or characters. (HUM → ATTS)

H2: There will be a positive relationship between the perceived level of humor and attitude toward homosexuals when mediated through attitude toward the show. (HUM → ATTS → ATTG)

H3: Perceived level of humor will be positively related to the level of distraction. (HUM → DIS)

H4: Distraction level will be positively related to the attitude toward the show and/or characters. (DIS → ATTS)

H5: The indirect relationship from HUM to ATTS mediated through DIS will be positive in both legs of the path. (HUM → DIS → ATTS)

H6: There will be a positive relationship between perceived level of humor and perceived level of interpersonal communication. (HUM → IP)

H7: There will be a positive relationship between the perceived level of interpersonal communication and attitude toward the show and/or characters. (IP → ATTS)

H8: The indirect relationship from HUM to ATTS mediated through IP will be positive in both legs of the path. (HUM → IP → ATTS)

H9: There will be a positive relationship between attitude toward the show and/or characters and attitudes toward homosexuals. (ATTS → ATTG)

Appendix E

Frequency Distributions

% who watched WG on primetime

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	9	6.3	6.3	6.3
	2.00	38	26.8	26.8	33.1
	3.00	31	21.8	21.8	54.9
	4.00	64	45.1	45.1	100.0
	Total	142	100.0	100.0	

% who watched on syndication

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	3	2.9	2.9	2.9
	2.00	14	13.3	13.3	16.2
	3.00	25	23.8	23.8	40.0
	4.00	63	60.0	60.0	100.0
	Total	105	100.0	100.0	

% who either watched primetime or syndication/DVD

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	72	30.1	30.1	30.1
	1.00	167	69.9	69.9	100.0
	Total	239	100.0	100.0	

GENDER

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	69	28.9	29.5	29.5
	Female	165	69.0	70.5	100.0
	Total	234	97.9	100.0	
Missing		5	2.1		
Total		239	100.0		

ETHNICITY

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	13	5.4	5.6	5.6
	2.00	38	15.9	16.5	22.1
	3.00	6	2.5	2.6	24.7
	4.00	158	66.1	68.4	93.1
	5.00	16	6.7	6.9	100.0
	Total	231	96.7	100.0	
Missing	9.00	8	3.3		
Total		239	100.0		

EDUCATION

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	4	1.7	1.7	1.7
	2.00	84	35.1	36.2	37.9
	3.00	144	60.3	62.1	100.0
	Total	232	97.1	100.0	
Missing	9.00	7	2.9		
Total		239	100.0		

INCOME

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	145	60.7	66.8	66.8
	2.00	48	20.1	22.1	88.9
	3.00	10	4.2	4.6	93.5
	4.00	10	4.2	4.6	98.2
	5.00	4	1.7	1.8	100.0
	Total	217	90.8	100.0	
Missing	9.00	22	9.2		
Total		239	100.0		

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	223	93.3	95.7	95.7
	2.00	4	1.7	1.7	97.4
	3.00	2	.8	.9	98.3
	4.00	4	1.7	1.7	100.0
	Total	233	97.5	100.0	
Missing	9.00	6	2.5		
Total		239	100.0		