

# Referee Report: Telenovelas and attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community in Latin America

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## Abstract

How does exposure to soap operas with LGBTQ+ characters affect attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community? To answer this question, we construct a novel database of 175 Telenovelas (soap operas) with LGBTQ+ characters airing in 14 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean between 2002 and 2019. Exploiting variation in the introduction of new soap operas with LGBTQ+ characters within country and survey-waves, we find that individuals exposed to more soap operas with LGBTQ+ characters are less tolerant toward the LGBTQ+ community. This short-term backlash is driven by shows with comedic storylines. The effect is stronger among traditionally more conservative individuals (e.g. older or frequently attending religious services).

## 1 Overview

This paper evaluates how exposure to the soap operas airing during prime time, with LGBTQ+ characters, could influence people's attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community. To do this, S. Gulesci et al. study the Latin America<sup>1</sup> soap operas between 2002 and 2019 and exploit the exogenous variation induced by the airing of new Telenovelas. To identify the causal effect of being exposed to the soap operas with LGBTQ+ characters on the behavior of the population, they use survey interviews, and compare individuals that

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<sup>1</sup>They analyzed the following Latin American countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, and Venezuela.

were interviewed before the soap opera aired, with interviewed people after the show's introduction, controlling for individual features.

The data is obtained from two main sources: (i) the survey interviews to capture information about what people think regarding the LGBTQ+ community, which is collected from the Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), the Latinobarómetro, and the World Value Survey (WVS); and (ii) the soap operas with the LGBTQ+ characters (they identified 175 Telenovelas). The behavior or attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community is captured in the surveys with the following questions: (i) what extent the respondent approves the homosexuals to running for office (from the LAPOP), and (ii) whether they consider homosexuality justifiable (from the Latinobarómetro and WVS)

The key findings are: (i) using the LAPOP question, they found that individuals interviewed after a new soap opera with LGBTQ+ characters aired are less tolerant of the LGBTQ+ community, compared to people that were interviewed before the airing of the show; (ii) using the the Latinobarómetro and WVS question, they found that respondents interviewed after the airing of a new soap opera with LGBTQ+ characters are less likely to believe that homosexuality is justifiable. Moreover, the impact is stronger - less likely to accept LGBTQ+ community - for individuals with traditional values, such as older people, people living in rural areas, and those who frequently attend religious services.

## 2 Contribution and Overall Assessment

This paper makes two main contributions. First, it relates to the literature that is still arising about the relationship between the role of media in shaping gender attitudes, expectations, and other outcomes. Existing literature has explored the connection between the exposition to the television and fertility rates, domestic violence, and women's autonomy. However, this paper shifts its attention to a less explored area, the LGBTQ+ community, capturing, unlike the other papers, a negative effect of TV, in which people's attitudes toward this group become worse.

Lastly, they contribute to the literature investigating possible determinants of attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ group. To accomplish this, they use the heterogeneous characteristics of the viewers, and find stronger effects to societies that have solid traditional values.

These points answer what were open questions in the field of the relationship between LGBTQ+ community and the attitudes from individuals after watching a soap opera with LGBTQ+ characters. I have, however, some concerns about the paper.

First of all, the authors set some graphs along the paper, and does not explain much about it. For example, in Figure 2, there is a huge peak in 2014 of number of soap operas with LGBTQ+ characters aired. I would like to know if there is a reason for this peak, they could contextualize a little bit more. Also, if this year was removed from the sample, they could find the same effect or not?

Second, regarding the data, there are three things that I am worried about. It should be interesting to have a table with the period of each soap opera and the period of each survey, it would establish credibility to the paper. Moreover, when they use the LAPOP

interview, in one of the examples presented in the paper, they interview a person after eight days that the telenovelas was in air. In this case, perhaps the effect that they find is a lowerbound, but since we do not have information about the period of each soap opera and each survey, I do not know if this effect happens for all soap operas analyzed. The last and most important concerned is about education<sup>2</sup>, the authors did not control for this feature. Curiously, from the demographic information<sup>3</sup>, this characteristic is the only one from the survey that is not used.

Finally, the last point is about to exploit the countries according to the government period. For example, in Brazil, for the whole period, 2002-2019, we had a left-wing government, which implies in policies that are favorable to groups as LGBTQ+. Therefore, the impact could be different if they analyze the same question, but for period 2019-2022, when we had Bolsonaro as president. For the other countries, I do not know how were the governments in the period, but perhaps it could have different outcomes, and effects, for periods with left-wing or right-wing governments.

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<sup>2</sup>These following papers found that higher educated people tend to be more accepting of homosexuality than lower educated people: (i) *Are More Educated States More Gay-Friendly? How the Increase in College Attainment Promotes Acceptance of Gay Men and Lesbians*, and (ii) *Acceptance of homosexuality through education? Investigating the role of education, family background and individual characteristics in the United Kingdom*

<sup>3</sup>I checked LAPOP survey.