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Age identity and television viewing preferences

Jake Harwood [a]

[a] Assistant professor in the Department of
Communication Studies, University of Kansas,
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Age Identity and Television Viewing Preferences

JAKE HARWOOD

This research finds that young adults with high levels of age identity are more likely to incorporate young characters in their open-ended descriptions of an "ideal" television show than are young adults with lower levels of age group identification. These results are discussed in terms of the role of social identity in influencing media consumption. Future theoretical and empirical directions are briefly outlined.

◼Tajfel (1978) defined social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 63). Subsequent research has demonstrated the importance of social identity in influencing behavior in a number of spheres (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Robinson, 1996). The role of social identity in intergroup prejudice and discrimination has been a central concern (e.g., Spears, Oakes, Ellemers, & Haslam, 1997). However, the construct has also been useful in understanding behaviors such as crowd disturbances (Reicher, 1987) and industrial relations (Brown, 1978), as well as more "communicative" phenomena such as variations in accent (Giles & Coupland, 1991) and second language learning (Garrett, Giles, & Coupland, 1989).

Little social scientific work, however, has examined the ways in which social identities may be related to mass media use. The current study contends that levels of social identification are associated with television viewing choices. Individuals choose to view shows that bolster their identification with the social groups that are important to them. Hence, we would expect that young adults who are highly identified with being young will choose to view shows featuring younger characters engaged in "young" activities and encountering situations commonly encountered by young people. Young adults for whom being young is less central to their sense of self will be less likely to seek out such fare. Broad social group patterns in viewing are hence explained in terms of the behaviors of the more identified segments of those groups. Intragroup variation in viewing patterns is explained as a function of intragroup variation in identification. This research

is important in extending the explanatory range of social identity theory into the mass media realm, and in providing expanded understanding of motivating factors for using various media.

The current paper is part of a program of research investigating the role of a particular social identity (age identity) in influencing individuals' television viewing choices. Previous experimental work has demonstrated that individuals display a preference for television shows that feature characters of their own age group, even when all other aspects of content are controlled (Harwood, 1997). In addition, research has shown that this preference is strongest in individuals scoring higher on measures of age group identification (Harwood, 1999). Finally, it has been demonstrated that making such viewing choices may, in turn, have positive consequences for age identity (Harwood, 1999).

Researchers have previously made calls for such research (e.g., Blumler, 1985), and considerable ethnographic and sociological work has provided useful information concerning links between group membership and media use (e.g., Hebdige, 1981; Lippmann, 1922; Lull, 1985; Morley, 1992). However, a number of differences exist between the previous research and the current line of work. First, while the ethnographic nature of the prior work provides rich insights into individuals' relationships with the media, it does not always provide clear delineations of the variables under consideration. The current research uses a reliable, quantitative measure of identity. Second, the previous work tends to focus on the role of viewers' group memberships in influencing their interpretations of media stimuli (e.g., Brunsdon & Morley, 1999). While this is clearly important, the current paper approaches the issue a little differently by examining the role of group memberships in driving media selection. Third, the previous research often treats social groups as somewhat homogenous demographic entities, focusing on explaining intergroup variation in media consumption. The current study places an equal emphasis on understanding intragroup variation in these intergroup patterns.

To date, our research on age identity and television viewing choices has examined responses to closed-ended questions about media preferences, often featuring artificially-constructed program descriptions. Such research can be subject to the criticism that specific show descriptions may lead respondents toward particular responses, and that such responses lack external validity. The current paper examines individuals' free-response descriptions of their "ideal" television show. Such responses are less subject to demand characteristics, and they offer a more stringent test of the link between identity and viewing preferences. It is hypothesized that there will be an association between age identity and television viewing preferences such that individuals with higher levels of age identity will be more likely to describe ideal shows that feature characters of their own age group than will those with lower levels of age identity.

METHOD

Participants were 202 students under the age of 30 at a large Midwestern US university (mean age=19.45 years, SD=1.69; 63% female; 83% European American). Participants received course credit in exchange for their participation. They wrote open-ended descriptions of their "ideal" television show. Instructions for the open-ended response read: "In the space below we would like you to imagine your IDEAL television show. What would a show include that would keep you coming back week after week? Please write absolutely anything that you can imagine that would make a show a "must watch" for you. Anything goes!" The instructions did not mention the characters' ages, or indeed any description of the characters. These open-ended responses were coded in order to assess their age-salience. Age-salience was operationally defined in terms of the presence of any of three features: first, explicit description of the characters in the show as "young"; second, explicit reference to a character with a chronological age in the 16–30 range, or a character belonging to an age group in that range (e.g., "early twenties"); third, reference to characters in a college setting. The presence of at least one of these features resulted in coding the show description as "age-salient." The author and a research assistant independently coded a subset of 62 open-ended responses and achieved good reliability (Scott's pi = .87; inter-coder differences were resolved by discussion). The remainder of the descriptions were coded by the author. Of the open-ended descriptions, 24.75% (50/202) were categorized as age-salient.

Respondents also completed the Age Group Identification Scale (AGIS: 13 items, Cronbach's alpha = .90; see Garstka, Branscombe, and Hummert, 1997, for validity information). No items on the AGIS refer to media use (sample item: "I am proud to be a member of my age group"). The order of these two sections was counterbalanced, along with other questions concerning television viewing not analyzed herein. Hence, most respondents did not complete the two measures consecutively. Given the embedding of the measures in the larger questionnaire, demand characteristics were not seen as a problem. As reported later, the order of completion of the portions of the questionnaire had no impact either as a main effect or in interaction with age identity, which supports this contention.

RESULTS

Predicting the age-salience of the program descriptions (a dichotomous variable) from the age identity scores required the use of logistic regression analysis. A hierarchical analysis proceeded in two steps. The first step predicted age-salience from level of age identity and the order in which the measures were completed (age salience first or program description first). In the second step, the interaction between these two predictor variables was entered. In line with the recommendation of Aiken and West (1991), the two predictor variables were "centered" (i.e., standardized) before computation of the interaction term. This procedure reduces multicollinearity among

predictor variables when an interaction term is computed. Results are displayed in Table 1. As revealed by the significant chi-square, the variables entered on the first step accounted for significant variation in the dependent variable. As indicated by the Wald statistics, only age identity predicted significant unique variation in the age salience of the program descriptions. The order in which the questionnaires were completed did not account for significant variance. In the second step, the interaction between order and age identity was added. This step was designed to uncover effects of either variable on the other within the counterbalanced design. As revealed by the non-significant chi-square change, there were no such effects. In addition, even with the addition of the interaction effect, the original effect of age identity remained significant.

To simplify understanding of the significant result, a t-test was performed comparing levels of age identity in individuals who provided age-salient versus non-age-salient open-ended responses. Individuals who provided age-salient descriptions had significantly higher levels of age identity ($M =$ 3.74, SD $= .60$) than individuals who provided descriptions that were non-age-salient ($M = 3.44$, SD $= .74$; $t_{200} = 2.64, p < .01$, point-biserial $r^2 =$ .034).

DISCUSSION

This research provides support for the contention that media viewing choices are driven, in part, by social identity concerns. Young adults who scored higher on a measure of age identity were also more likely to provide open-ended descriptions of ideal television shows in which young adult characters were explicitly mentioned. This is the first time that an empirical

TABLE 1
Results of Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Age Salience of Program Descriptions

	Unstandardized Logistic Regression Coefficient (S.E.)	Odds Ratio	Wald (df = 1)
Step 1 (Model Chi Square $= 7.83^*$; $R_L^2 = .03^a$)			
Age identity	.48 (.18)	1.62	6.96**
Order	−.14 (.17)	.87	.67
Step 2 (Model Chi Square improvement $= .51$; $p > .40$)			
Age identity	.45 (.18)	1.57	6.00*
Order	−.12 (.17)	.89	.46
Age identity × order	−.13 (.18)	.88	.51

$^*p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.
$^a R_L^2$ is calculated according to the suggestion of Menard (1995) as the ratio of the initial -2 log likelihood function to the -2 log likelihood function with the predictor variables entered (see also Hosmer & Lemeshow, 1989).

relationship has been demonstrated between social identity and television viewing choices within a free-response format.

The effect size that emerged in the current research is relatively small. Naturally, individuals have multiple social identities beyond their age identity, and numerous other reasons for viewing television (see Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmgreen, 1985; Rubin, 1983). In addition, given the open-ended response format, the respondents may not have mentioned the age of the characters in the show, even though it was clear to them. Therefore, the current design constitutes a fairly conservative test of the link between age identity and viewing preferences. It could not be expected that age identity would account for a massive proportion of the variation in the descriptions.

This research suggests exciting new territory for those interested in the use of the media. The idea that media may be used to bolster our sense of self-as-part-of-social-group is relatively unexplored in empirical, social scientific research. While we know a good deal about demographic differences in media use, little attempt has been made to explain such differences in terms of variation in an individual's group identity. The current research demonstrates that the use of identity measures can help us account for both *inter*group and *intra*group variation in media consumption. This discussion clearly has implications for uses and gratifications theory, which has previously considered gratifications on a predominantly individual level (Blumler, 1985; Rosengren et al., 1985).

In the future, it will be important to understand more about the *effects* of viewing television shows that are selected based on ingroup identities. It is possible that television viewing results in self-esteem benefits (personal or collective), increased prejudice against outgroups, increased ingroup solidarity, increased self-stereotyping, or other unconsidered outcomes. It will also be interesting to examine whether other social identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity) are important in influencing media consumption, as well as whether the current findings extend to other age groups. Work in other areas has found that the relative strength of particular identities can be quite contextually variable (Collier & Thomas, 1988; Giles & Coupland, 1991; Ross, 1979). In the context of the current study, however, it should be noted that absolute levels of identity tend to be fairly stable over time (Garstka et al., 1997). That is, while a particular context may temporarily enhance or suppress a particular social identity, those who are strongly invested in a particular group will remain so over time, independent of context. Hence, it may be important to examine the identity-media use link under different contextual constraints (e.g., are gender identities more salient in mixed-gender versus same-gender viewing settings, and if so, how does that influence media choices?).

Ultimately, it is hoped that this program of research will link theories of social identity and media use in ways that inform and develop both perspectives. If we want to understand why members of particular social groups choose particular media, we must seek to understand and measure individual variation in the *meaning* of belonging to those social groups.

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