Viewing age: Lifespan identity and television viewing choices

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Version of record first published: 18 May 2009.

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This paper introduces a theoretical perspective on media viewing choices that is grounded in social identity theory. The idea that viewing choices are driven by age identity motivations is tested via a content analysis and an experiment. The content analysis demonstrates that child, younger adult, and older adult television viewers demonstrate a preference for viewing characters of their own age. The experiment demonstrates that young adults' preference for viewing young adult characters exists even when the content of the program is controlled. The findings are discussed in terms of the theoretical perspective, and implications for previous research on underrepresentation of particular groups on television are explored.

Individuals undoubtedly have many motivations for seeking out particular media messages. In recent years, the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) framework has stimu- lated considerable research demonstrating that individuals are creative in finding media messages that provide them with appropriate gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmgreen, 1985). To date, the motivations for viewing particular shows have been considered primarily at the individual level (e.g., to seek out information: Rubin, 1983), or at the interpersonal level (e.g., to have something to talk about with friends and coworkers: Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rayburn, 1980). More collective levels of motivation have rarely been considered (although see Blumler, 1985), and even more rarely been researched (although see Lull, 1985, for a discussion of the collective functions of popular music).

Social identity theory (SIT) focuses on the portions of our total identity that derive from our social group memberships (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It claims that people gain self-esteem from their social group memberships to the extent that they can positively contrast their in-group with various outgroups. For

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example, young people may gain self-esteem through positively contrasting their youth with negative impressions of being elderly (Harwood, Giles, & Ryan, 1995). SIT acknowledges that individuals are creative in the ways that they achieve this, actively seeking positive dimensions on which to make the comparisons. Considerable evidence exists for the processes suggested by SIT (see Lemyre & Smith, 1985; Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994; Oakes & Turner, 1980). However, SIT has paid little attention to media use.

The two perspectives described above (U&G, SIT) seem ripe for some theoretical integration. In particular, the current paper proposes that social identity gratifications are one determinant of media choices. That is, individuals seek out particular messages which support their social identities (i.e., provide positive social comparisons with outgroups), and avoid messages which do not support their identities. Viewing media messages featuring individuals who we identify as being "in-group" members will be one way in which positive social comparisons can be achieved.[1] As an initial test of this perspective, the current research focuses on age identity. It is proposed that viewing individuals of our own age will support our age identities, since such representations portray our age group as numerically abundant in the media universe (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980), and as being supported by important societal institutions (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977). In addition, in the case of lead characters in shows, we will generally see characters of our own age acting positively — lead characters are generally positively portrayed. A hypothesis was generated.

> H₁: A positive relationship is expected between the age of characters in a show and the age group of viewers of that show. This effect is hypothesized to be stronger when examining the lead characters of the shows.

The research reported below sought to test this hypothesis in two ways. First, the age of characters in shows popular among different age-groups of viewers was examined using content analysis. Second, an experiment was performed in which young individuals were given descriptions of television shows and asked to rate their likelihood of viewing those shows. The age of the primary character in the show was varied experimentally and preferences for the shows were rated. This was designed to test the preference for same-age characters when extraneous variables (such as content of show) are controlled.

No conclusive empirical evidence currently exists demonstrating that individuals prefer media messages featuring characters of their own age (although see Atkin, 1985; Bell, 1992, Bleise, 1982; Meyersohn, 1961; Mundorf & Brownell, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 1982, for suggestive and related data). Hence, this is an appropriate first step in investigating an identity approach to viewing motivations and gratifications. The focus on adults across a wide age range builds on Dimmick, McCain, and Bolton's (1979) call for a lifespan perspective on portrayals of age groups on television.

Study 1

Method

The data set was compiled using *Nielsen Media Research* ratings for the top ten prime-time shows among four different age groups — children (age 2-11), young adults (18-29 years old), middle-aged adults (35-54 years old), and older adults (65+ years old). The ratings reflected viewership for the first 10 weeks of the 1994-1995 season. The age categories reflected Nielsen's standard demographic blocks. For each age group, the four shows that were rated highest and that did not appear in any other age group's top ten were selected for further analysis. Two age groups were pooled (young and middle-aged adults: henceforth referred to as younger adults) because their show preferences overlapped considerably.[2] Only fictional shows were included (i.e., news, sports, and the like were excluded).

Four episodes of each show were taped in a five week period at the start of 1995 (taping was completed January 18-February 21, 1995). Taping occurred in consecutive weeks to retain some plot development across shows. Four episodes of 12 shows resulted in a total of 48 shows — 34 hours of programming (there were 7 half-hour shows and 5 hour shows).[3]

Two independent coders (both were women in their early 20's, neither was the primary investigator on the project) assessed the age of all characters with speaking roles. For the purposes of the current analyses, this variable was collapsed into a three-level variable reflecting ages 0-19, 20-59, and 60+ years old. This minimized the number of low frequency cells in the chi-square analyses, and resulted in categories of characters that were closest to the age categories of viewers — an important feature given Hypothesis 1. Practice sessions preceded the coding of the actual episodes. During the practice sessions, coders examined multiple trial episodes of each show until they were familiar with the cast and flavor of each show, and evidenced acceptable reliability on the coding scheme (Cohen's Kappa = .85; 94.5% agreement). These trial episodes were taped prior to the episodes included in the database, and were not used as part of the final database. Following the trial phase, only one coder rated each show in the sample, although they were made aware that spot checks for reliability might occur.

Following completion of coding, the data set was examined for duplications of characters. When characters appeared in more than one episode (as was the case with all lead characters), one appearance was randomly selected for inclusion in the final data set. This resulted in a corpus of 490 characters: 74 lead characters and 416 supporting characters. All characters credited in the title sequence of a show were considered to be *lead* characters, all other characters were supporting characters. The total of 490 characters compares favorably with most previous research in this area, except for Gerbner et al.'s (1980), Greenberg, Korzenny and Atkin's (1979) and Robinson and Skill's (1995) large scale content analyses (see Vasil & Wass, 1993).

Results

Hypothesis 1 was addressed by examining 3 (Viewer Age: child; younger adult; older adult) x 3 (Character Age: 0-19 years old; 20-59 years old; 60+ years old) cross-tabulations of frequencies. These illustrate the distribution of different aged characters across shows popular among different aged viewers. Two analyses are reported, dealing with lead and supporting characters, respectively. Since lead characters are more likely to determine viewing choices, it seems reasonable to examine them separately.

Table 1 shows that the age distribution of lead characters was not random across the different age groups of viewers, χ^2 (4, N = 74) = 26.77, λ = .26; ρ^2 = .25, $p <$ .001.[4] Examination of the adjusted standardized residuals (ASR's) indicates that all viewer age groups are watching a TV population of lead characters that is skewed in favor of their own age.[5] For the shows popular among child viewers, 0-19 year old characters are present in substantially larger numbers than in other shows. All other age groups are (relatively) underrepresented. For the shows popular among younger adult viewers, the residuals indicate that the 20-59 year old character age bracket is overrepresented and the extremes of the lifespan are underrepresented. Finally, and again as expected, older adult characters (60+ year olds) are present in larger than expected numbers in shows popular among older adult viewers.

US Census data is also provided in the table (US Bureau of the Census, 1994). This indicates that all character age groups are underrepresented (compared to their presence in the population) in television viewed by at least one of the other age groups. In addition, all viewer age groups are viewing television in which lead characters of their own age are overrepresented compared to their presence in the population. Taken together, these findings support Hypothesis 1.

For the supporting characters the pattern is similar, χ^2 (4, N = 416) = 83.04, λ = .10; ρ^2 = .13, $p <$ .001. The only change from the analysis of lead characters is that the effect is somewhat weaker, accounting for only 13% of the variance (see Table 2). The ASR's indicate that in shows viewed by older adults, all adult characters are overrepresented, and only child characters are underrepresented. The pattern for child and adult viewers is unchanged from the findings for lead characters. Examination of the census information shows that older supporting characters are uniformly underrepresented compared to their population presence, even in shows viewed by older adults. However, their representation is still greater in shows viewed by older adults than in shows viewed by the other age groups. All other character age groups are overrepresented (relative to their population presence) in shows preferred by similar aged individuals. Hence, Hypothesis 1 receives additional support. Similar results are found for both lead and supporting characters, and the effects are weaker in the latter instance.

Table 1
Age Distribution of Lead Characters in Shows Popular Among Different Viewer Age Groups

	Age of characters		
	0-20 years old	21-60 years old	60+ years old
Child viewers			
frequency	20	13	0
percent of row total	60.61%	39.39%	0%
ASR	4.1	-3.4	-1.6
Younger adult viewers			
frequency	4	21	0
percent of row total	16%	84%	0%
ASR	-2.5	2.9	-1.3
Older adult viewers			
frequency	2	11	3
percent of row total	12.5%	68.75%	18.75%
ASR	-2.1	.7	3.4
US Census Data	28.63%	54.62%	16.75%

Table 2
Age Distribution of Supporting Characters in Shows Popular Among Different Viewer Age Groups

	Age of characters		
	0-20 years old	21-60 years old	60+ years old
Child viewers			
frequency	37	33	3
percent of row total	50.68%	45.21%	4.11%
ASR	8.6	-7.2	-.8
Younger adult viewers			
frequency	24	134	7
percent of row total	14.55%	81.21%	4.24%
ASR	-.9	1.6	-1.4
Older adult viewers			
frequency	8	154	16
percent of row total	4.49%	86.52%	8.99%
ASR	-5.7	3.9	2.0
US Census Data	28.63%	54.62%	16.75%

Study 2

Alternative explanations are available for the findings of Study 1. The shows popular among particular age groups may not only feature peer-age characters, but also age-related content, or they may be supported by network marketing aimed at particular age groups of viewers. Given this, a test of the hypothesis was required which eliminated those confounding variables present when studying "real life" viewing patterns. Hence, an experimental procedure was adopted in which individuals were asked to rate their viewing preferences based on short descriptions of fictional shows. The age of the lead characters in the shows was manipulated in a between subjects design, while all other elements of content were held constant. This permits a test of the hypothesis which is independent of other confounding variables.

Method

109 undergraduate students in an introductory communication class received course credit for completing a questionnaire on their preferences for particular television programs. The questionnaire featured 21 synopses of television programs, modeled on show descriptions from past years' copies of *TV Guide* (the show content was disguised so as not to resemble currently or recently popular shows). For each synopsis subjects were asked to rate how often they might choose to view the show on a 1-7 scale. Nine of the synopses were distractors and are not considered here. The remaining twelve synopses were experimentally manipulated such that half of the respondents received a description in which the main character(s) were described as older adults (either by chronological age or a descriptive age term), while the other half received an identical show description, but the main character(s) were presented as younger adults. This manipulation was counterbalanced so that all respondents rated six "young" shows and six "old" shows. Hence the independent variable is the age of the lead character(s) in the show (younger vs. older adult). The 12 different synopses constitute replications of this design (Jackson, 1992). The dependent variable is rating of desire to view the show.

Results

A discriminant analysis was performed to see whether ratings of viewing preference discriminated between the individuals who received the two different versions of the questionnaire. One significant discriminant function emerged, χ^2 (12, N = 109) = 49.787, $p < .001$; $l = .611$, Press's $Q = 31.94$, $p < .001$.) 77.1% of the cases were correctly classified which exceeds the 25% better than chance prediction criterion (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1992). Examination of the discriminant function coefficients, variable-function correlations, and univariate analyses indicates that the results were not consistent across all replications (i.e., across the dif-

ferent synopses). Discriminant function coefficients ranged from .80 to .08, and of the twelve shows only four resulted in significant univariate comparisons ($p < .05$) with another two being borderline significant ($p < .10$). All of these were in the predicted direction (i.e., displaying a preference for the show in the "young" condition). In three instances of the twelve, results were not in the hypothesized direction. In all cases, these comparisons were nonsignificant in the univariate analyses, and the discriminant function correlations were extremely small (all $< .07$).

These results offer additional support for Hypothesis 1. The pattern of results is consistent with young viewers having a preference for viewing young characters (at least under some conditions), while demonstrating no preference for viewing older characters. However, they also indicate that the precise nature of the show affects viewer choices, and that in some instances the age of the lead character makes no difference in raters' expressed desire to view a show.

General Discussion

The results of Study 1 are supportive of the hypothesis. As predicted by Hypothesis 1, *all* age groups are viewing a television universe in which lead characters of their own age group are overrepresented relative to their presence in the population. The findings for supporting characters are similar, although elderly characters are underrepresented (relative to census data) in *all* the viewer age group conditions — even shows popular among older adults. It should be acknowledged that the "middle-aged" group is very broad in Study 1 (ages 18-54). This was necessary due to the very similar programming preferences within this group, but it is a limitation of the study. Attempts to differentiate age groups in a more fine-grained fashion will be valuable in the future. An informal examination of shows that distinguish 18-29 year olds (e.g., *Beverly Hills, 90210, Melrose Place*) and 35-54 year olds (e.g., *NYPD Blue, Frasier*) indicates that such examination might be productive, and would not contradict the current results.[2] However, an insufficient number of such shows were available for analysis within the top ten lists. Study 2 also supports Hypothesis 1. The results show that the preference for same-age characters remains (in young adults), even when all other aspects of the content of a show are controlled. This rules out a number of alternative explanations for the findings of Study 1. At least part of the viewing preferences discovered in Study 1 appear to be purely a function of the viewer selecting shows which feature characters of their own age group, and avoiding shows featuring characters of other ages.

In considering the findings of Study 2, an examination of differences between the show descriptions which yielded significant results and those which did not is illuminating. Of those which revealed significant (or borderline significant) differences, all six featured romantic couples as a significant element in the synopsis. In contrast, of the six which did not reveal significant differences, only two had a romantic couple as a key element, and in one of those cases the couple was only hinted at in the

description. While additional data would clearly be necessary to validate this suggestion, it appears that young individuals may be happy to view older adults in non-romantic settings (e.g., police dramas), but not in situations where relationships are a key issue. This has interesting implications for the theoretical perspective outlined earlier. It may be that our young respondents' age identities were grounded in the idea of youth as a time of romance and relationship building. In this case, older characters in non-romantic settings would present few social identity concerns for a young viewer, whereas an older romance might be viewed as threatening, and hence unpleasant to watch. The current data provide only very sketchy support for such an explanation.

Implications

Previous research has provided anecdotal evidence that older adults prefer to view older characters on television (e.g., Meyersohn, 1961; Mundorf & Brownell, 1990). However, this paper is the first to provide clear, quantitative evidence of this pattern, as well as an experimentally controlled replication of the real world phenomenon. In addition, this study is among the first to provide a truly lifespan perspective on portrayals of age groups on television — an approach repeatedly called for in the literature (Dimmick et al., 1979). It illustrates that a preference for viewing same-age television characters extends across child, younger adult, and older adult audience members (albeit Study 2 is restricted to younger individuals). There are a number of implications of this research which deserve brief mention.

First, this study provides support for the theoretical suggestions made at the outset. While it is clearly not possible to present, or test, a full theoretical integration at this point, the findings are consistent with a social identity gratifications perspective. The next step in this development will be to examine individuals' responses to shows featuring characters of different ages. Social identity theory would predict that those who view shows featuring characters of their own age would experience elevated age identity or even self-esteem. Such findings would provide strong support for the value of this theoretical approach. An alternative next step would be interviews or focus groups in which viewers of different ages were encouraged to talk about their gratifications from viewing particular shows, and their responses to age-peer, and non-peer, characters. Such research might be illuminating in understanding the complexities of age identity gratifications (Blumler, 1985).

Second, these findings have implications for the literature on "underrepresentation" — the much replicated finding that older adults, along with many other social groups, are numerically underrepresented in the media (see Gerbner et al., 1980; Nuessel, 1992; Robinson & Skill, 1995; Roy & Harwood, in press; Vasil & Wass, 1993). The present results suggest that underrepresentation may be less of a problem for active viewers than has been acknowledged previously. If older adults are actively seeking and finding portrayals of their own age group on television, then their

overall underrepresentation may be of little concern. Of course, the psychological consequences of having to search harder for a peer-age television character may be worthy of consideration. However, these consequences are likely to be different in nature from the traditionally considered consequences of passively absorbing a television universe in which your age group is underrepresented. In addition, if younger adults are actively avoiding portrayals of other age groups, increased representation of older adults may do little to increase younger adults' exposure to that group. Younger adults' attitudes/perceptions are not likely to be changed by television portrayals of older adults which they (the younger adults) are not watching.

The current data suggest, instead, that energy would best be directed to producing shows featuring characters of multiple generations, in which all generations are portrayed in a realistic and diverse fashion. *Home Improvement* is a partial example of the success of this approach, featuring strong child and adult characters, and maintaining popularity among both audiences. However, it does not feature elderly characters on a regular basis, and is not popular among that age group.[2] Shows which featured multiple generations in this fashion might be a boon to producers (tapping, as they would, a very large market), and would also be good news for intergenerational relations (for instance, in providing shared fodder for interpersonal communication between the generations).

Finally, this research suggests that more attention should be paid to the kinds of thematic content which appeal across generations. Younger adults may tolerate watching older adults in certain contexts (e.g., in occupational roles), while eschewing portrayals in other contexts (e.g., relationships). Theoretically, this would be of interest in understanding the contexts within which viewers may gain gratifications from viewing other age groups. This, in turn, might better inform us as to when viewing non age-peers may be damaging for intergenerational relations (for instance, when the older adult is the butt of all the jokes: see Harwood & Giles, 1992). More practically, a focus on age transcendent themes might again suggest possibilities for developing shows with intergenerational appeal.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this paper constitutes a spur to examining the role of television viewing in supporting, and being driven by, social (and particularly age) identity processes. Rather than examining broad samples of programming, there appears to be theoretical merit in looking at the content of shows viewed by particular groups of individuals. In situations where the programming selected by a group of people is relatively homogeneous, it may be possible to understand that group's media use as a form of collective action. This understanding may bring us closer to considering television viewing as a social activity, in the broadest sense of that term.

Notes

[1]Within a Uses and Gratifications framework, Blumler (1979) has raised the issue of identity motivations. He described these as "ways of using media materials to give added salience to something important in the audience member's own life or situation" (1979, p. 17). Through this mechanism, media provide support for our ideas, values, and lifestyles (see also Bleise, 1982). However, these identity motivations have been considered at the level of personal identity, with no attention being paid to social identity issues.

[2]For the 18-54 age group, the top four shows that appealed to both young and middle-aged adults were chosen. The most popular shows for each of the four age groups are listed here, in order of their popularity. Those which were included in the analysis are indicated with asterisks. Age 2-11: *Boy Meets World*, Home Improvement, Step by Step*, Full House*, Hangin' with Mr. Cooper*, Family Matters, Me and the Boys, Simpsons Two, ABC Saturday Movie, Simpsons*; Ages 18-29: *Seinfeld*, Beverly Hills 90210, Grace Under Fire*, Melrose Place, Home Improvement, Roseanne*, E.R.*, Simpsons Two, Ellen, Friends*; Ages 35-54: *Home Improvement, Grace Under Fire*, NYPD Blue, Seinfeld*, E.R.*, Roseanne*, Monday Night Football, Frasier, Murphy Brown, Earth 2*; Ages 65+: *Murder, She Wrote*, 60 Minutes, CBS Sunday Movie, Diagnosis Murder*, Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, Matlock*, Under Suspicion, Due South, CBS Tuesday Movie, Dave's World*. *Home Improvement* was excluded due to its popularity among children and younger adults. Inclusion of this show would have made statistical comparisons between viewer age groups considerably more complicated.

[3]Ultimately, taping required five weeks due to the occasional "bumping" of shows due to special events (e.g., *Murder She Wrote* was displaced one week by a *60 Minutes* anniversary special). Older adults' shows included in the final database were all hour-long dramas, younger-adults' shows included one hour-long drama (*E.R.*) and three half-hour comedies, and the children's shows were all half-hour comedies.

[4]Goodman and Kruskal's (1954) symmetrical lambda (λ) indicates the extent to which knowledge of either variable reduces error in predicting category membership on the other variable. The squared nonparametric Spearman correlation coefficient (ρ^2) is a measure of the percentage of variance shared by two variables. For the lead characters, the lambda statistic indicates that there is 26% reduction in error in predicting viewer age from character age (or vice versa). Similarly, the squared Spearman correlation coefficient indicates that there is a 25% shared variance between the two variables.

[5]ASR's indicate whether a frequency in a given cell differs from its expected value, and indicate the direction of that difference (negative residuals indicate a lower than expected frequency). ASR's are standardized scores, hence residuals greater than 1.96 are of particular interest (Haberman, 1973; Reynolds, 1977).

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