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Little in Common: Racial and Gender Differences in Adolescents' Television Diets

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The world of television has changed dramatically over the past two decades as technological developments have resulted in many more channels and greater access than any previous generation has experienced. Recent studies have found that two-thirds of young people (8 to 18 years old) have a television set in their bedrooms, and many of these sets are hooked up to cable television and VCRs or DVDs (Roberts, 2000). As channel capacity and access have increased, the television industry has created networks and channels targeted to more narrowly defined audience segments—based on both basic demographic categories such as age, race, and gender, as well as interests and activities—so that now we have cable channels for everybody from sports fans to shoppers and news hounds. Whole channels and programs have been

developed primarily to appeal to younger audiences segmented by race and gender. Following the lead of MTV and the Black Entertainment Network (BET), the networks WB, UPN, and Fox have created a stable of programs designed especially for adolescents, with much more programming than ever aimed specifically at different racial and gender groups.

The basic premise of segmented programming is that viewers will choose programs that feature people who are like them (and will buy the products advertised). From a marketer's point of view, it is an advantage to have a relatively narrowly defined audience so products can be pitched more precisely to the specific needs and desires of that audience. From the consumer's point of view, the programming is more relevant to their lives

because it features people, situations, and dilemmas similar to their own. From a cultural point of view, however, audience segmentation could have the undesirable effect of reducing exposure to other generations, alternative viewpoints and values, and perhaps reducing what might be called the common culture. As Wilson and Gutierrez (1995) suggest, "The media, rather than trying to find commonalities among diverse groups in the mass audiences, classify the differences and ways to capitalize on those differences through content and advertising. The force in society that once acted to bring people together, now works to reinforce the differences that keep them apart" (pp. 260–261).

Thus, television may no longer be the glue that keeps the melting pot together but rather may be "a new form of segregation" (Salamon, 2002, p. E1). In this article we consider to what extent television is serving as a form of common culture or as a form of segregation for young adolescents. We look at what kinds of television worlds Black and White, male and female adolescents are living in. Is the world so fragmented and specialized that there is little in common, or is it a world in which racial and gender differences are less important than they were in the past?

Literature Review

Adolescents and the Media

Steele and Brown (1995) and Steele (1999) proposed a model of adolescents' media practice that suggests that identity formation is a key motivation in the selection of, attention to, and interpretation of media. They theorized that as adolescents take on the developmental task of creating a sense of self, they may use the media as sources of models. Building on the Media Practice Model, Brown and Witherspoon (2001) proposed a model of teens' media diets, focused on the differential selection of media among adolescents. They theorized that adolescents will select media with the goal of creating a sense of self in which they are sometimes like all other members of their age cohort, sometimes like only some of their peers, and sometimes like no one else. They predicted that some of the

variance in choice will be explained by basic social positions, such as gender and class, such that girls will choose different television shows than boys and Blacks will choose different television shows than Whites. They also predicted, however, that some shows will be watched by all teens, regardless of race or gender, and those shows could be considered the "common teen culture." That proposition has not been tested empirically since the segmentation of the television market.

Studies have shown that even young children prefer characters who are similar to themselves in gender, age, or race, and "wishful identification" with characters the viewer would like to resemble increases with age (Comstock & Scharrer, 2001; von Feilitzen & Linne, 1975). Recent work suggests that it may be useful to think of these kinds of identifications as part of the development of "social" identities. As first defined by Tajfel (1978), "social identities" derive from the individual's knowledge of membership in social groups. In one of the first studies to apply Social Identity Theory to media use, Harwood (1999) found that college students who had strong identification with being young were more likely to say they watched television because they enjoyed "watching young people like me" and were more likely to choose shows that featured young characters. The study also found some evidence of reciprocal causation—i.e., as shows were chosen because they featured young people, the viewer's identification with the age group increased. Thus, Harwood (1999) concluded, "the mere act of making a viewing choice may enhance one's sense of belonging in a group and be important to overall self-concept" (p. 129).

Interestingly, Social Identity Theory also predicts that prejudice toward outgroups is a function of identification with ingroups because part of the process of developing a social identity involves comparison with the other group. A young Black male, for example, in the process of distinguishing himself as a Black man may compare what it is to be Black and male with what the culture says it is to be a White male and/or female and may in the process accept negative stereotypes that make Whites and females less attractive. Thus, it may

be that as young people identify more strongly as "Black" or "White," "male" or "female," and are reinforced in these group identifications by what they see on television, prejudices toward the other gender or race may be developing, and the idea of a "common culture" may break down as differences rather than similarities become more salient.

In this study we take a first step toward expanding on these ideas to see if young people are making television choices based on race and gender. With increased programming directed at young people segmented by race and gender, television may be serving as a way to strengthen identifications as a male or female or as a Black or White young person. It remains to be seen if this is overall a healthy or unhealthy trend for the culture.

Age and Gender Differences in Media Choices

Media research has long shown that gender is a significant predictor of media choices. Some of the first studies of children's use of television found that girls and boys choose different kinds of programming along stereotypical lines (Himmelweit, Oppenheim, & Vince, 1958; Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961). Gender differences show up early. In one study of three to five year old children, twice as many girls as boys named a family cartoon (*The Flintstones*) as a favorite, while boys were three times as likely as girls to name a violent cartoon (Comstock, 1991).

Recent studies of European and American children and adolescents have found significant and consistent age and gender preferences. From a comprehensive cross-sectional study of 6- to 16-year-olds in 12 European countries, Garitaonandia, Juaristi, and Oleaga (2001) reported that both older boys and girls were less interested in cartoons than younger children. Girls between 9 and 13 years old were most interested in soap operas, but maintained a lack of interest in sports. Sports, in contrast, increased in interest for boys. In a longitudinal analysis of 9- to 12-year-olds in Belgium, Roe (1998) also found increasing gender differentiation of media preferences in 11 of 15 television genres and concluded that "it is perhaps not too much of an exaggeration

to say that, in this period of their lives, boys and girls increasingly inhabit different media worlds" (p. 23). Girls rated children's programs, music, quiz and talk shows, and soap operas more highly than boys, who preferred sports, movies and science/technology programs.

A nationally representative sample of more than 2,000 8- to 18-year-olds in the United States found similar patterns: Boys were more than three times as likely as girls to say they had watched sports programs the previous day and girls were slightly more likely than boys to say they had watched a comedy program (Roberts & Foehr, 2004).

Racial Differences in Media Choices

The proportion of Black characters on entertainment television has increased dramatically since the 1980s. In an analysis of the 1996-97 television season, Mastro and Greenberg (2000) found that Blacks occupied 16% of the main and minor roles on prime time, exceeding their proportion in the population (12%). Despite their increased prevalence, critics remain concerned that Black characters are "largely ghettoized by network, day of the week, and by show type (i.e., concentrated in sitcoms)" (Hunt, 2002, p. 3). A content analysis of 85 fictional series airing on the 6 major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, WB, and UPN) in fall 2001 found that Black characters were concentrated on UPN, the network with the lowest total audience share, and Black characters were more likely to appear on shows airing on Monday and Friday nights, the two weekday evenings attracting the fewest viewers. Black characters also were most likely to appear in situation comedies, and no prime-time drama on any of the major networks focused on Black characters. Three of the newest networks, Fox (debuted in 1985), WB, and UPN (both begun in 1995), grew quickly because they initially featured predominantly Black shows such as *In Living Color*, *The Steve Harvey Show*, and the multiracial *21 Jump Street*, that drew the Black audience. But by early 2001, UPN was the only network that continued to feature prime-time shows with primarily Black casts (Freeman, 2001).

Even in the 1980s, when there were far fewer portrayals of Blacks on television, it was clear

that Black audiences favored shows featuring Black characters or all Black casts (Dates, 1980; Eastman & Liss, 1980). Black adolescents also reported greater levels of identification with Black rather than White characters (Greenberg & Atkin, 1982). In a recent study of 200 Black urban adolescent girls, Edwards (2001) found strong preferences for Black television programming and preferences for characters who looked like them and had lifestyles they admired.

Since the recent studies of gender differentiation in television program preferences were conducted without simultaneously considering racial differences, and most of the research on racial differences in television viewing preferences and motivations was conducted before the proliferation of demographically segmented channels, it is valuable to now look at how the social identities of race and gender intersect to affect television programming preferences. Has the burgeoning of cable channels designed especially for young Black audiences and young White audiences and shows designed to appeal to girls and/or boys decreased the possibility of a common youth culture? Do Black and White males and females live in a segregated television world?

Method

Sample

Students from three public school districts in the southeastern United States that included urban, suburban, and rural populations, and approximately equal proportions of Black and White male and female students, were recruited to participate in a study of 7th and 8th graders' media use. Fourteen of the 16 eligible middle schools agreed to be involved. Students were recruited over an 8-week period in the Fall of 2001. Members of the research team went to each participating school and told groups of students about the study. Students who were interested in participating filled out cards with their names, addresses, and telephone numbers. A packet of materials, including the parental consent form, the media use survey, and return stamped envelopes, were sent to parents. Each packet was given a unique ID number

so that when questionnaires were returned, all other identifying information was removed. All aspects of the protocol were approved by the university's institutional review board for protection of human subjects.

Based on the average monthly attendance for students across all participating schools (5,886), the questionnaire successfully reached 85% of the currently enrolled students. Initial nonresponders were sent follow-up postcards and a second set of materials to maximize response rates. By the end of the 4-month survey administration period, 3,262 completed surveys (with parent consent forms) were returned, for a final response rate of 65%.

Participant demographics were generally representative of the entire student body, although White females were slightly overrepresented in the sample compared to the school population (26% vs. 22%), and Black males were slightly underrepresented (18% vs. 22%). The income of the sample was somewhat higher than the total student body; 28% of the sample reported receiving free or reduced price breakfast or lunch, while 34% of the total school enrollment did.

Measures

The questionnaire was a 36-page booklet that included a number of questions about adolescents' current use of 6 different kinds of media (television, music, movies, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet). We focused only on the following variables in these analyses:

Gender

Respondents self-reported whether they were a "Girl" or "Guy." If this question was left blank, earlier self-reports from the school recruitment information were used to determine gender.

Race/Ethnicity

Respondents were asked to circle one of the following categories in response to the question: "The race that best represents you is?" "White," "African-American," "Hispanic," "Asian," or "Other (write in)." If left blank, school recruitment information was used. Due to the relatively small number of Hispanic, Asian, or "other" respondents (about

7% of the sample), analyses focused on only those respondents designating themselves as "White" or "African-American."

The analyses reported here focus on the 2,942 teens who provided complete responses to the 6 pages of questions about their television use and those respondents who identified themselves as African-American or White (93% of the sample). These analyses include 761 (26%) Black females, 577 (20%) Black males, 843 (29%) White females, and 761 (26%) White males. Respondents ranged in age from 11 to 16, with a mean and median of 12.8 years old.

Time spent watching television

Respondents were asked: "How often do you watch TV Mondays through Fridays during the school year?" and circled one of the following categories: "never," "once a week or less," "two or three times a week," "almost every day," "at least once a day," or "almost all the time I'm not in school."

Television shows watched regularly

A list of 140 currently running television programs was included in alphabetical order with the instruction, "Circle all the TV shows that you watch regularly." This list was created after extensive pilot work that generated a comprehensive inventory of shows most often watched by this age group. Commercial lists typically are based only on relatively small samples of larger age ranges and thus many of the shows on our list would not achieve sufficient audience numbers to be included. We began by visiting classrooms in area schools in the spring and summer previous to survey administration, and showing students a list of all television shows that Nielsen data indicated

were watched by 12- to 17-year-olds. The students were encouraged to name other shows they watched frequently. This enlarged list was then tested in focus groups and in other classrooms. The list was then supplemented with all prime-time shows that would debut during the data collection period.

Results

There is little evidence of a common teen television culture across race and gender among adolescents in this sample. Strikingly, only 4 of the 140 television shows included on the list were watched regularly by more than one-third of each of the four race/gender groups (see Table 1). These four shows would have little in common if they had been grouped by genre as most previous studies have done, and only two of the shows were in the top 10 shows on prime-time at the time of the survey (Network prime-time averages, 2002). *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, one of the hottest shows of the 2001 season, is a game show, and *The Simpsons* is a long-running prime-time cartoon, and both were watched by adults as well. *Boy Meets World* and *Malcolm in the Middle*, in contrast, are coming-of-age situation comedies, both featuring a White boy. Neither of them has ever been in the top 10 of shows overall.

Black teens, regardless of gender, showed a clear preference for shows featuring Black characters. All ten shows watched by the largest proportions of Black teens in the sample featured Black characters. As shown in Table 2, the proportion of Black teens who reported watching these shows regularly is quite remarkable, ranging from almost

Table 1. Television Shows Watched by More Than One-Third of Each Teen Audience Segment

Television Shows	% Black Females N = 761	% Black Males N = 577	% White Females N = 843	% White Males N = 761
<i>Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?</i>	59.9	52.3	45.9	40.9
<i>Boy Meets World</i>	51.1	41.1	63.8	36.1
<i>The Simpsons</i>	40.1	61.9	40.3	65.0
<i>Malcolm in the Middle</i>	33.9	44.9	35.8	40.7

Note: All row entries are significantly different, $\chi^2, p < .001$.

Table 2. Top 10 Television Shows Watched by Black Teens

Television Show	% of Black Teens Who Watch N = 1,338	% of White Teens Who Watch N = 1,604
<i>Parkers</i>	85.0	8.3
<i>Martin</i>	81.4	14.3
<i>Hughleys</i>	78.8	12.2
<i>Moesha</i>	78.8	15.3
<i>106 and Park</i>	78.4	10.6
<i>Wayan Brothers</i>	71.6	15.9
<i>Parenthood</i>	70.6	12.5
<i>One on One</i>	70.3	3.2
<i>Steve Harvey Show</i>	69.0	5.4
<i>Living Single</i>	67.0	11.0

Note: All row entries are significantly different, $\chi^2, p < .001$.

Table 3. Top 10 Television Shows Watched by White Teens

Television Show	% of White Teens Who Watch N = 1,604	% of Black Teens Who Watch N = 1,338
<i>The Simpsons</i>	51.5	49.4
<i>Boy Meets World</i>	50.2	46.8
<i>Whose Line Is it Anyway?</i>	48.5	25.5**
<i>Friends</i>	47.8	23.4**
<i>Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?</i>	43.2	56.6**
<i>Seventh Heaven</i>	40.2	38.1
<i>Sabrina the Teenage Witch</i>	39.9	48.8**
<i>Malcolm in the Middle</i>	37.8	38.6
<i>Survivor</i>	36.7	30.3**
<i>Lizzy McGuire</i>	35.5	33.1

Note: ** $p < .001, \chi^2$.

two-thirds to more than three-fourths. None of the Black teens' top 10 shows were watched by more than 16% of the White teens.

For Whites, the apparent interest in same race characters prevailed as the top 10 shows for White teens all featured White casts (see Table 3). In contrast with the Black teens' top shows, however, the highest proportion of White teens watching any one show was only about half (51.5%) for *The Simpsons*, as compared to the Black teens' number one show that 85% reported watching

regularly. Interestingly, all of the top 10 shows for the White teens were also watched by sizeable proportions of Black teens, and in some cases, such as *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?*, a higher proportion of Blacks watched than Whites.

Overall, Blacks reported many more shows they watched regularly. White teens, on average, circled 20.5 ($SD = 15.12$) television shows while Black teens circled 34.6 ($SD = 17.83$) shows, $t [2,938] = -23.14, p < .000$. The difference in the number of shows

watched by Blacks and Whites is probably due to the more time the Black teens spent watching television than the Whites. In this sample, 39% of the Black teens reported watching television "almost all the time I'm not in school" as compared to 16% of the White teens, $X^2 [5, N = 2,947] = 297, p < .001$. These patterns are similar to those found in a national sample of U.S. teens in which Black adolescents reported watching almost two hours more per day (4:41 hrs.) than Whites (2:47 hrs.) (Roberts, 2000). There was no significant difference in time spent viewing television by gender in our sample.

In general, gender differences were less dramatic than racial differences, but still only two of the top 10 shows for boys were also in the girls' list (*Cribs*—a show about celebrities' homes—and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*) (see Tables 4 and 5). The other eight shows watched regularly by sizeable proportions of boys consistently featured men or boys engaged in male adolescent humor (e.g., *Jackass*, *Southpark*) or action and/or adventure (e.g., *WWF Smackdown* [professional wrestling]). Interestingly, sizeable proportions ranging from one-fourth to one-half of the girls watched

Table 4. Top 10 Television Shows Watched by Teen Boys

Television Show	% of Boys Who Watch N = 1,485	% of Girls Who Watch N = 1,776
<i>The Simpsons</i>	62.9	40.5
<i>Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?</i>	44.4	51.3
<i>Rocket Power</i>	44.3	37.6
<i>Jackass</i>	43.6	28.9
<i>South Park</i>	42.5	27.8
<i>Dragon BallZ</i>	42.3	10.1
<i>Malcolm in the Middle</i>	41.7	34.8
<i>Cribs</i>	41.3	47.5
<i>Celebrity Deathmatch</i>	40.9	25.3
<i>WWF Smackdown</i>	40.7	26.7

Note: All row entries are significantly different, $\chi^2, p < .001$.

Table 5. Top 10 Television Shows Watched by Teen Girls

Television Show	% of Girls Who Watch N = 1,776	% of Boys Who Watch N = 1,485
<i>Sabrina the Teenage Witch</i>	59.6	24.6
<i>Boy Meets World</i>	57.3	37.2
<i>Seventh Heaven</i>	54.1	20.7
<i>Moesha</i>	52.5	30.2
<i>Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?</i>	51.3	44.4
<i>Clueless</i>	50.1	15.0
<i>Cribs</i>	47.5	41.3
<i>Parkers</i>	47.5	33.3
<i>Lizzy McGuire</i>	47.2	18.0
<i>Braceface</i>	46.5	14.2

Note: All row entries are significantly different, $\chi^2, p < .001$.

the boys' top 10 shows, too. The one exception, *Dragon BallZ*, is an animated show based on a videogame. Only 10% of the girls said they watched that program regularly.

In contrast, boys were less likely to watch the girls' top 10 shows. Four shows featuring White teen girls (*Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Seventh Heaven*, *Clueless*, and *Braceface*) were watched regularly by about half the girls, but fewer than one-fourth of the boys. Shows that both boys and girls watched either featured Black casts (e.g., *Moesha*, *Parkers*) or were shows that all groups tended to watch (e.g., *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, *Boy Meets World*).

Discussion and Conclusions

There is little evidence of a common teen television culture among adolescents in this sample. The most striking findings are that, overall, only 4 of 140 television programs were watched by more than one-third of all the teens, and that so few of the shows watched regularly by Black teens are watched by White teens. Although it appears there is more commonality in television show viewing among males and females, males are less likely to be watching girls' shows than vice versa. In general, these analyses suggest that adolescent Black and White boys and girls in the United States are living in largely different television worlds.

This pattern of findings suggests that race and gender are basic motivators for choice of television content, and that adolescents may, indeed, be seeking models with whom they can identify as they develop a sense of themselves in the larger culture. These analyses suggest, too, that race may be a primary motivator, especially among Blacks, and perhaps more salient than gender. Ten of the programs listed were watched regularly by more than two-thirds of the Black teens, both male and female. All of those shows featured Black casts. None of those shows were watched by more than 17% of the White teens. These patterns may be explained to some extent by the still smaller range of selection Black teens have in the television landscape. Although Black characters occur much more frequently than they once did on television, there still are relatively few shows

that include Black characters in contrast to the vast majority that include only White characters (Hunt, 2002). Apparently, Black adolescents have found and are loyal to these few shows that feature Blacks in the overall whiteness of the television world.

Observers have noted that the media world is more male than female oriented, and that girls will attend to content created for boys, but boys will rarely cross over to "girl" content (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). We found more evidence of this phenomenon, as girls watch shows featuring teen girls struggling with teen relationships while boys watch boys behaving badly.

Given these different television worlds in which young people are living, we should learn much more about how adolescent audiences are interpreting and applying what they see in these television portrayals to their own lives. If, indeed, they are coming to television with an interest in learning more about how others their age, gender, and race are coping with similar issues, we should know more about what they are taking away. A small body of adolescent audience interpretation studies suggests that all adolescents will not interpret or incorporate gender portrayals in the same way (Ward, 2003), and some will critique and resist potentially harmful stereotypes (Brown, White, & Nikopoulou, 1993). Some viewers may be empowered by the newer portrayals of capable adolescent girls such as on *Charmed*, and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, but critics have argued that such portrayals may also reinforce "dominant norms of femininity, sexuality, race, class and the disciplining of the female body, all in the interests of capital" (Durham, 2003, p. 30).

Previous studies of the effects of television portrayals of minorities have found that programs such as *The Cosby Show* that attracted both White and Black audiences increased racial understanding and enhanced Black viewers' self-esteem, but the show may also have contributed to the perpetuation of the stereotype that Black people who are not successful have only themselves to blame (Inniss & Feagin, 2002). With more programs now on the air featuring Black casts, it is important to know if stereotypes are being reinforced or broken down. Our

data suggest that it is unlikely that Whites are seeing many more Black characters than they ever did since most of the Black characters are appearing on programs White teens rarely watch.

In the future, given the rapid penetration of the Internet into homes and children's bedrooms (Roberts, 2000), we might expect such trends of bifurcated media worlds to be even more pronounced. The Internet is the epitome of segmentation, designed to appeal to highly idiosyncratic tastes and interests. Surveys show that young people often go to media sites on the Internet and join chat rooms and virtual fan clubs for their favorite television shows and characters (Teenage life online, 2001).

Finally, it is important to consider what it means for young people to grow up in an increasingly segregated media world while the world in which they are living is increasingly diverse. Since the civil rights era and the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, we have been concerned about the lack of minority representation and racial and gender stereotyping on television (Signorielli, 2001). The television world today, in some ways, is much different than it was then, but it is not clear that as a culture we are in any better shape if our children can now choose a television diet that features only people who look like them.

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