

AN INVESTIGATION OF RELATIONSHIPS
BETWEEN A VIEWER'S AGE AND HIS OR HER
TELEVISION VIEWING PATTERNS

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Abstract

In the 1960's and 1970's various studies emerged in the field of television viewing patterns. More recently Jaffe (1989) found that age played a significant role in viewing selection, while Robertson (1988) found that people's preferences in what they want out of life are changing.

This paper explored the relationship between age and television viewing patterns by means of a survey of 138 subjects. Subjects were asked (a) how many hours of television they viewed on the average weekday, (b) their favorite TV program, (c) their favorite TV character, and (d) their age.

Analysis of the data yielded several significant relationships. Children between the ages of 0 and 18 demonstrated a high frequency of television viewing, while adults between the ages of 19 and 54 view television infrequently.

The 0 to 18 year-olds identify with fantasy characters, while the 19 to 55+ year-old category appeared to identify with real characters. Situation comedy was the most popular type of program for all age categories, with the exception of the 55+ age group. This group favored drama.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

As the United States' population ages, more research is being dedicated to the study of television viewing patterns within specific age demographics. Increasingly, members of the "Baby Boomer Generation" are being studied as targets for effective television advertising because of their increasing wealth, where previously most advertising had been aimed at a younger demographic (Jaffe, 1989).

Research has indicated that viewing preferences are varied between age groups. An adult between the ages of 18 and 24 has far different viewing patterns from an older viewer ("Disney eyes," 1990).

Age seems to be a great factor in determining viewing patterns (Rubin, 1977). A review of current literature shows that a number of television studies use age as an independent variable in determining viewing habits (e.g. Hefzallah, 1987; Robertson, 1988).

Studies have also been done on the effects of television on the different age groups, especially young children. These studies were primarily to examine the good and bad effects of heavy television viewing and a child's social interaction. Research has also indicated a relation between television viewing and the viewer's sense of reality vs. fantasy (Hefzallah, 1987).

Problem Statement

What is the relationship between a viewer's age and his or her television viewing patterns?

Definition of Terms

1. television- regular series or specials carried on broadcast or cable television.
2. viewing patterns- the frequency of viewing television expressed in hours per day, the category of the respondent's favorite program (news, sitcom, etc.), and the status of the respondent's favorite character (real or fantasy).

Significance of the Study

It has been suggested that children and adults alike get caught up in the fantasy world of television and sometimes have an emotional adjustment period in coming back to reality (Hefzallah, 1987). The impact of the "baby boomers" has been best summarized by Robertson (1988) who claims that CBN's Family Channel viewing study supports the concept that the "baby boomers" want programs that exhibit good old solid values like honesty and family.

What none of these studies has shown is the relationship between a viewer's age and his/her television viewing habits. This study is needed (a) to guide producers to develop quality programs that can be aimed at an identified audience, (b) to help programmers develop schedules appropriate to the viewing audience, and (c) as a

guide to educators, parents, and others concerned with improving the viewing patterns of their population.

Limitations of the Study

1. The sample was not randomly selected which makes generalization very difficult.
2. The interviewers were unskilled and had little training because of time constraints, making the uniformity of administering the survey instrument questionable.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Many studies have dealt with television viewing patterns and whether they are influenced by a viewer's age. Most respondents to TV surveys indicated that age is the one social category that influences their viewing habits. Younger children find many growth needs fulfilled by television. The content of some programming appears to provide friendship and social interaction for these children. Peak television viewing usually occurs between ages 10 and 13 and diminishes in the teen years. In recent years, however, teen viewing has increased. As children mature they become purposeful viewers, developing regular viewing times and favorite programs (Rubin, 1977).

A correlation between age and viewing habits appears to account for the success of target programming by the children's cable network, Nickelodeon. Nick at Night, as its evening programming is called, appeals to the "baby boomers," the 25-44 age group that grew up in the 50's and 60's. By rerunning classic situation comedies such as, *Mr. Ed*, *My Three Sons*, and others during prime time viewing hours, Nick pulls in a hefty share of young adult viewers. MTV Networks, which owns Nickelodeon, calls this "Programming for the TV generation," and depends on the baby boomers' desire to recapture the comfort, security and fond memories of their childhood indulgences (Edmondson, 1981).

Tim Robertson, President of the CBN Family Channel, suggests that the baby boomers generation has rediscovered traditional values which call for responsible television. Mr. Robertson states that CBN would address this realigning of values with programming targeted towards the 25 to 44 year age group (1988).

The 45 to 64 year age group has recently displayed increased TV viewing time. The parents of the baby boomers are better off than previous generations of their age. They are living longer and are more vital and health conscious in the 1980's. This mature group makes for a loyal viewing audience that networks are relying on to support programming targeted towards them. There is also increasing evidence that the older demographic groups have a lot of spending power that's overlooked. Advertisers are purchasing more time during the types of shows the elderly watch in an attempt to reach that particular market. The 50 plus viewer shows preference for certain types of shows. The documentary/news category ranks highest in the 1988 Simmons Study of Media and Markets, with older viewers spending 24% more time watching those programs than the average viewer. The study was able to place other show types, such as suspense, drama, etc. into a hierarchical order according to viewer preference (Jaffe, 1989).

Age can be a determining factor in character selection. Children often cannot distinguish between reality and fantasy while viewing television programs. Hefzallah (1987) states:

Faced with any situation, we bring in our past experience to help us interact with that situation. For a mature person, things which do not make sense in the light of past experience are viewed with a skeptical eye. For a

child with no related experience to television material, he/she tend to accept the unreal as real, at least for the duration of the program, children with limited experience can easily confuse fantasy with reality. (p. 68)

Some children can get totally absorbed in their television viewing and become oblivious to their surroundings. Television shows that reinforce this fantasy existence become favorites among these young viewers. Adults can also become confused with reality while viewing certain programs. Many ardent fans treat their favorite actors as if they were actually the characters that they portray on television. Not only entertainment programming, but evening police and crime programs become influential among frequent viewers.

Rubin (1977) feels that a large portion of television viewing time has no specific object or gratification-seeking behavior in mind; that viewing may occur just to pass time. Across the age groups he found that habit was the predominant reason for viewing television, appearing to fill neither social needs nor personal information seeking.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The Sample

In selecting subjects for this study, researchers tried to find participants from as many different age groups as possible. Beyond this attempt at wide age variance, subjects were selected based only upon convenience. Data were eventually collected for 138 subjects.

The Instrument

This study used standard data acquisition and analysis methods. A five question survey schedule was developed to record case data (See Appendix A). The variables recorded were: 1. Hours of television viewed on an average weekday. 2. Hours of television viewed yesterday. 3. Viewer's favorite television program. 4. Viewer's favorite television character. 5. Age of viewer.

Procedures

Questions were addressed verbally to the subject and recorded by the solicitor in the presence of the subject. Data were transferred to a coding sheet consisting of seven columns (See Appendix B). The seven columns represented subject number and the following six variables:

V1: Average day's viewing time recorded in hours.

V2: Yesterday's viewing time recorded in hours.

V3: Viewer's favorite program type, recorded nominally through the assignment of a numerical digit.

V4: Viewer's favorite character type recorded nominally; 1 = Real, 2 = Fantasy.

V5: Viewer's age recorded in years.

V6: Viewer's age bracket represented ordinally by standard bracketing.

Coding sheets were arranged numerically and subject numbers assigned from 1 through 138. Statistical calculations were accomplished using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS).

Data Analysis

The first variable relationship analyzed through cross tabulation was viewing frequency and favorite program type. Viewing frequency was entered ordinally as either low (less than 2.5 hours), medium (2.5-3.5 hours) or high, (greater than 3.5 hours). Program type was entered nominally as a digit representing a program type. Cross tabulations were performed for four other variable sets. These variable sets were:

1. Character type and Viewing frequency.
2. Viewing frequency and Viewer age group.
3. Character type and Viewer age group.
4. Viewer age group and Favorite program type.

Chi square was used to determine significance levels for relationships found by cross tabulation.

Chapter 4

Findings

Viewing frequency was found to be significantly related to the viewer's age group as can be seen in Table 1, $\chi^2(8, N=138) = 15.42, p = .05$. In general, viewing frequency increased slightly from the 0-12 group to the 13-18 group, then decreased until the 55+ age group, which showed equal representation in the low and high frequency categories.

Table 1

Viewing Frequency by Percent of Age Group

Viewing Frequency	Age Group				
	0-12	13-18	19-24	25-54	55+
High	26	34	7	22	43
Medium	45	44	36	32	14
Low	29	22	58	46	43

Program preference was also found to be significantly related to the viewer's age group as can be seen in Table 2, $\chi^2(32, N=138) = 61.19, p = .00$. The most

notable finding was the high degree of preference shown for sitcoms by all age groups except the 55+ group, which preferred drama.

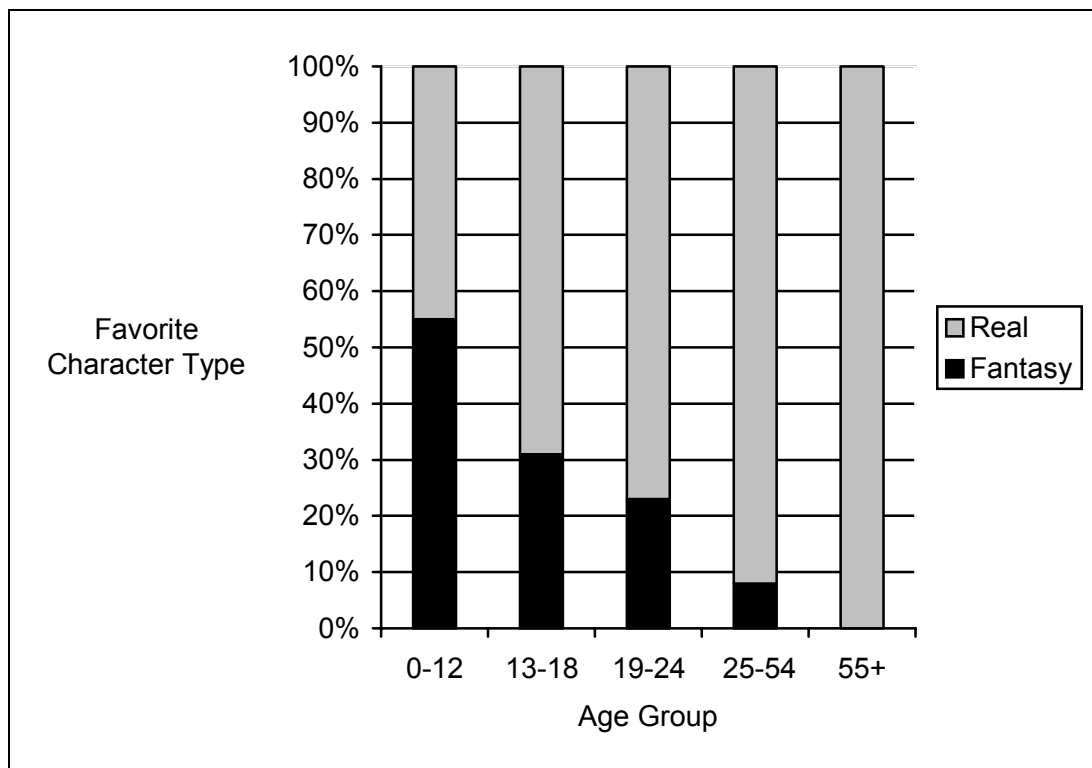
Table 2

Program Preferences by Percent of Age Group

Program Preference	Age Group				
	0-12	13-18	19-24	25-54	55+
Child Educational	3	0	0	0	0
Child Entertainment	29	16	0	0	0
Drama	10	16	39	24	43
Game Show	3	0	0	5	14
Music/Variety	0	3	0	11	0
News/Pub. Affairs	0	3	10	8	0
Sitcom	55	53	45	38	14
Soap Opera	0	6	7	11	14
Sports	0	3	0	3	14

The strongest relationship found was between favorite character type (real or fantasy) and the viewer's age group, $\chi^2(4, N=138) = 22.17, p = .00$. As can be seen in Figure 1, preference for fantasy characters drops rapidly after the age of 12.

Figure 1. Favorite character type by percent of age group.



Chapter 5

Discussion

This study examined various relationships between television viewers and their viewing habits. Findings indicated several significant relationships involving the viewer age group variable. This tends to support the industry standard practice of researching and presenting various viewing parameters relative to viewer age groups.

From collected data, a noticeable trend was observed relating the viewer's frequency of television viewing to viewer age groups. The majority of child and adolescent viewers in the 0-12 and 13-18 age groups exhibited medium viewing frequency habits of 2.5 to 3.5 hours on an average viewing day. Older viewer age accompanied a reduction in the daily viewing frequency. Both the 19-24 and 25-54 age groups showed a majority of viewers in the low viewing frequency range. The 55+ age group exhibited the widest variance, showing an equal percentage in the low and high frequency range.

Children and adolescents tend to have more free time available, allowing for more opportunity to view television programs. As age increases, employment requirements and social demands limit the time available for viewing. This would explain the decrease in viewing frequency found in this study. The 55+ age group would be expected to exhibit an increase in viewing frequency over that of the 19 through 54 age range, however this study does not support that expectation.

There are several possible explanations for the findings of this study. First, the survey sample was noticeably small in the 55+ age group, accounting for only 5.1% of the total sample. The reliability of relating findings for this age group to the general population must be questioned. If the small sample size is ignored, a possible explanation for low viewing frequency may be attributed either to an increase in the number of 55+ viewers still within the employed population, or to a general trend among older viewers away from television viewing and towards other entertainment activities. High viewing frequencies may be directly attributed to increased time availability for television viewing among the 55+ age group.

The findings in the relationship between viewer age group and favorite program type show interesting differences from previous studies concerning child and adolescent viewers. Huston (1987) found preferences among male children for cartoons and action adventure. Female children showed preference for informational, comedy, and drama programs. Rubin's (1977) study of adolescent viewers indicated preferences for child entertainment among younger adolescents and musical variety, news and public affairs programming for older adolescents. With the exception of Huston's findings for female children, the results of this study contradict both those of Huston and Rubin. The child entertainment and child education program types ranked second and third in preference among 0-12 year old viewers, behind the much preferred situation comedy. The 13-18 age group also showed strong preference for the situation comedy followed by drama and child entertainment.

A general interpretation of these findings is that the situation comedy has displaced in popularity program types specifically targeted towards the younger audience. This may be attributed in part to a more rapid maturation of children and adolescents, but it can also be attributed to the increasing number of children starring in situation comedies and an increase in family-oriented situation comedies.

Situation comedies such as *The Cosby Show*, *Full House*, and *Charles in Charge* all feature characters in the child and adolescent age groups, providing potential role models for young viewers. Program content has also shifted from adult-oriented themes towards child and young-adult related issues. This makes the situation comedy, in the parents' eyes, acceptable for child viewing. Recent trends have shown an interweave of serious social concerns such as child abuse, drug addiction, and alcoholism, with the situation comedy's normal comic content. This allows the dual role of providing both entertainment and education, a factor which may increase the situation comedy's popularity with a parent or adult guardian.

The situation comedy was also found to be the most popular program type in the 19-24 and 25-54 age groups. This indicates that adults are looking for light entertainment and also, that programmers are successfully attracting the adult target audience with the situation comedy.

The only age group not selecting the situation comedy as the most popular program type is the 55+ age group. Drama was selected by 42.9% of age group respondents with game shows, situation comedies, soaps, and sports tying for second most preferred. Again, the significance of findings within this age group is

questionable due to the small sample size. The lack of popularity of the situation comedy among the 55+ age group is probably due to the previously mentioned concentration of character roles among younger age groups. Only a very few situation comedies, such as *Golden Girls*, feature characters who are older and more likely to appeal to the 55+ age group. The great majority of situation comedies feature characters more likely to appeal to adult and middle-aged viewers. It may benefit the television industry to examine this shortage of mature comedies as the 55+ age group population will increase dramatically within the next three decades.

The most significant relationship found in this study was that of viewer age group and favorite character type. The 0-12 child age group indicated preference for fantasy type characters over real characters. This preference for fantasy characters is directly related to the high percentage of child entertainment program popularity in that age group. Since there are few situation comedies featuring fantasy characters, it may be deduced that the characters portrayed in the age group's most popular program type, situation comedies, do not necessarily include the child's favorite character. The success of the no longer produced, but syndicated situation comedy, *Alf*, which featured a fantasy character, exemplifies how a program can appeal to the fantasy character preference of children while maintaining popularity among adults through universally appealing subject matter. Future consideration should be given to introducing fantasy characters into the situation comedy format as the findings of this study suggest this would result in increased program popularity among 0-12 year-old children.

All remaining age groups indicated a preference for real character types. The relationship between age and preference was proportional, as the viewer age increased the magnitude of preference for the real character increased. The percentage difference between fantasy and real preference increased with increasing age, peaking at the 55+ group. This indicates a definite trend away from fantasy character popularity with age increase and strongly suggests that the adult viewer prefers realism.

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Appendix A

Survey Sheet

TV Viewing Survey

Please ask a varied sample of people the questions below and record their answers on these forms. Please do **NOT** hand out the forms.

1. Approximately how many hours of TV do you view on an average weekday? _____
2. How many hours of TV did you view yesterday? _____
3. What is your favorite TV program? _____
(any series or special from any season, **NO** feature films)
4. Who is your favorite TV character? _____
(does **NOT** have to from 3)
5. How old are you? _____

Appendix B

Coding Sheet

