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Department of Communication

Who’s on the Screen and Who’s on the Couch?

A Study on Television Character, Audience, and Gender

By

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WHO’S ON THE SCREEN AND WHO’S ON THE COUCH
A STUDY OF TELEVISION CHARACTER, AUDIENCE, AND GENDER

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This study examines the role that gender of both viewer and character play in the selection of television programming. It also examines if young adult viewers prefer to watch shows with ensemble casts or single lead characters.

Research was conducted through survey on young adults ages 18 to 25. Questions asked participants to rate their agreement with a series of 18 statements related to attitudes about television on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Results were calculated using Excel to examine statistics and draw conclusions. It finds that while established trends wherein males prefer male led shows but females prefer both hold true, there is a growing trend toward a preference of mixed gender ensembles.
Who’s On The Screen and Who’s On The Couch

A Study of Television Character, Audience, and Gender

A golden age of television is upon us, and every time you turn on the television, there truly is something for everyone. With limitless channels, not to mention growing options for web-based television content, viewers can hone in on a specific type of show that appeals to them. Trends in television programming begin to emerge suggesting that certain types of shows are on the rise while others are on the outs.

Problem Statement

As more and more online and cable channels join broadcast networks in the original programming game, it is of interest to begin to target exactly which programs are appealing to viewers, and what kind of viewers will watch certain programs. Networks no longer need to be broad, but can instead find success in making programs which appeal to specific niche audiences. While this divided audience is an ever-growing phenomenon, appealing to a specific subset of the audience with a program is not. Television networks have long been categorizing their programming in a way that appealed to males and females differently.

With these factors considered, it is curious in what ways men and women differ in their decision making process to watch a television show. With all of the limitless options available in television today, does gender still play the role that it has in existing research over the past few decades? Additionally, with viewers potentially connection to these characters so closely, does it make a difference how many characters appear in the show? Answers to these questions pose many potential benefits. Researchers can gather a clearer picture about trends in young adult
audiences today, and use this information to potentially inform programming choices and marketing decisions on major networks and growing cable and online channels.

**Literature Review**

While the disparity was far higher in the earlier days of television, where many more women were at home in the daytime rather than in the workplace, research suggests that to this day still 60 percent of the television audience is women (Guthri & Rose, 2011). It has long been in the best interest of shows seeking appeal with their audience as well as advertisers seeking highly sought demographics to play into this with their marketing, emphasizing how certain shows might attract these audiences better. Action and adventure have long been promoted as male, while shows categorized as soap operas with a high emotional content have been presented to appeal to women, with many sitcoms in the past seeking a middle ground where the entire family could come together to watch. Though the modern world is far more progressive, knowing your audience is still crucial to success, for both programs and advertisers alike.

The business of television is very much a gender-based game. Network executives base their programming decisions upon what will find an audience and grow, and the shows that make it to the screen are there as much because of who will be in front of them watching as who is behind them creating. In an editorial by Goodwin (2005), developments in television are examined to determine to what extent gendered audiences play a role in the success of then-current network programs. Interviewed experts and network executives are in agreement that when it comes to the creation and production of television shows, the intent is largely to create a quality program with universal appeal. Stories about women, so long as they are good stories, are becoming both prominent and successful on television. Thanks to more and more females in positions of network power, as well as lasting effects of feminism, many shows featuring female
leads are making it to air, in a move that wouldn’t have happened even as recently as ten years earlier. The idea of programming specifically for women, as detailed previously, is an antiquated idea. The difference today lies often in marketing, where it is crucial to reach specific, gender-oriented target audiences. Many marketers capitalize on the large audiences of women, as research suggests they buy most of the common household’s goods, even including large ticket purchase items like cars. Vivi Zigler, an executive Vice President of current programs for NBC entertainment described the industry in this fashion, noting,

> We absolutely are a business supported by advertising, and women watch more television than men. Once we’ve purchased a show with broad appeal, we think, who is the core audience? We have to be cognizant of resonating with people we want to reach. *Medium* is a great example. We consciously targeted women [with promotions] in malls, movie theaters, on radio and cable. That’s not to say men wouldn’t watch it. (Goodwin, 10)

Essentially, it is a great achievement for a network to craft a program with universal appeal, but the end game is to make advertising money, and to do so, programs have to be marketed to specific audiences in a gendered fashion. In a study by Kuipers (2011), European programmers in multiple nations described their process for choosing which American shows would be imported for airing in their countries. The findings revealed most have three main demographics in common: the housewife; a suburban, middle-aged woman home in the day, the “*Sex and the City* woman”; an urban, upper class woman, and the “*South Park* boy”; a young, humorous male audience. These broad targets describe the types of programming being produced and set to air, specifically along gender lines. This indicates that it is likely that viewers are to follow those set patterns and watch what is essentially being produced for them. Based upon this research, programs that pull in high numbers of young male viewers like the aforementioned *South Park*,
as well as programs like *Family Guy, American Dad,* and *Tosh.0* (Guthri & Rose) don’t attract as many female viewers even if the storylines or humor could be appealing to them too because they aren’t marketed that way. Networks market programs to audiences they think would enjoy the show and advertisers capitalize on these audiences to sell goods, which is the foundation of the television business model. When advertisers want to reach a large audience of women with disposable income or young men, they want to spend their money most effectively and place an ad within a show where the viewing audience and this target overlap. For this reason, networks benefit more from promoting their shows to one specific gendered target rather than appealing broadly, even if the show might appeal to more viewers than those to whom they are marketing. There is reason to believe that audiences are viewing programs where the gender of the subjects onscreen matches their own gender, because rather than craft universal stories, it has been profitable for networks to cater to these tried and proven niche targets.

While this strongly suggests that audience members will seek programs with like-gendered character leads, the figures of viewership tell other stories when they are compared to what actually appears on screen. As mentioned before, even in this day and age women watch more TV than men, though the margin between the two has lessened since the advent of television. Research by Glascock (2001), shows that this certainly doesn’t mean that women appear more on television to appeal to the audience. Overwhelmingly, the research indicated that in primetime offerings for one television season, men dominated in both overall appearances as well as in significant speaking time. This suggests women are watching, but they aren’t always watching a character that is just like them, because the numbers simply don’t match up. Goodwin details this same phenomenon, highlighting the success of *My Name is Earl* at NBC with women, in spite of its male leads and lowbrow comedy themes. The show managed to pull a 6.1
rating with women ages 18 to 49, higher than the 5.5 rating it had with men of the same age. There are simply so many more men leading the stories on television that both men and women will likely come to find these programs and engage in them, whereas shows with predominantly women might be seen as more niche and less palatable to both genders alike, particularly considering evidence they will likely be marketed as such.

This rationale is validated in the research of Kalviknes Bore (2010), where focus groups watched sketch comedy programming samples from shows lead by groups of mostly men and shows led by groups of mostly women. It was concluded in groups of both genders as well as mixed groups that the male shows were more universally enjoyable, and the female shows were less funny, “for women”, and might be more humorous to a female audience but were not as interesting to males. This reinforces the conclusion made by Kissell (2000), who states, “Simply put, while a drama or sitcom with an ensemble cast or male lead can attract an audience split fairly evenly along gender lines, a female-led show is almost guaranteed to pack in women and chase men away” (16). The universal appeal of shows of mixed genders and male leads to both men and women is an ideal mix for advertisers seeking the almighty dollar, as women will tune in regardless of if a show is led by a man or woman, but men will often seek men. Programs with male leads offer a chance to reach the purchase-driving female audience and the harder to reach young males, offering the opportunity for advertisers to more effectively reach more people in their target.

The idea that particular themes of a show make it a gendered program suitable for only women or men but not appealing to both is an interesting note of exception to this rule. In Meyer and Wood’s (2013) study on the recent Fox program Glee, young adult participants of both genders overwhelmingly classified the show as a female program, in spite of its mixed gender
ensemble. Female participants in the study described viewership as a communal experience with fellow girls, and described how they felt that male friends had to be convinced to watch the show even though they believed themes to be universal and some of the male characters to be figures that their friends could relate to. The male participants in the study conversely did not view watching the program as a social experience and in contrast to their female counterparts were more ashamed to publicly admit that they were part of the shows audience. Participants also note the perceived femininity of musical theater, which plays a strong role in the series. Subjects point out that even though some males are drawn to these shows, they are stereotypically homosexual, and deviate from cultural ideals of heteronormativity and masculinity, indicating a perception that even men who do engage in this show don’t represent men as a whole because they are less typically manly than their heterosexual counterparts. As this study, as well as that of Kalvinknes Bore indicates, the viewing audience constantly genders programs, and shows that get a female stigma are less likely to gain broad outward acceptance by both genders.

This gendered outlook on television becomes noticeable in the full range of television programming upon further analysis. Fox network’s Animation domination block of programs is a particularly notable area of television, featuring programs like *The Simpsons, The Cleveland Show, Family Guy, American Dad*, and *Bob’s Burgers*, which Guthrie and Rose note rank among the top non-sports broadcasts in ratings among men ages 18 to 24. These programs are inarguably successful, and worth top dollar to advertisers seeking to place media at a time when this covetable but rare target will tune in. It is also worth noting this successful appeal is in spite of the fact, or perhaps because the shows are all animated cartoons. Though they all are unified by their depiction of family life, they are able to take their storylines to more farfetched extremes that a real life human cast could not achieve. While this affords the writers ability to utilize the
medium for satire and subverted expectations, often the message within the shows serves to reinforce existing gender norms. In Raymond’s 2013 content analysis of *Family Guy* and *American Dad*, the programs are analyzed to determine how they approach representation of gender and sexuality. Noting that both in episodes where gender is a thematic highlight, as well as in one-off throwaway gags, “the show actively takes advantage of a gendered stereotype of interaction for comedic effect,” (207), the message is mixed as to the concluding point. While the extreme points of view can be take as satire meant to reflect upon the absurd standards of gender normativity that society holds men and women to, the show’s other characters criticize characters that step outside the norm of hegemonic masculinity and behave in ways that are atypical to their gender. The norm is also returned to by each episode’s end, showing that any changes to character are not lasting and won’t impact the misadventures the next episode will engage in. It is unclear in any given episode whether or not the creators are criticizing this gendered activity and challenging gender roles, or reinforcing them. The mixed message does affect its audience appeal. It allows the show to appeal to the wide male audience by engaging in their gender norms without completely subverting them, ensuring that the show is successful and doesn’t lose it’s audience by generating controversy.

Even program content wherein the subjects are real people and the stories aren’t scripted are edited and performed in a fashion that offers appeal to gender norms in an attempt to engage with audiences successfully. With the rampant popularity of reality programming for more than the past decade, studies have sought to find out how audiences perceive gender roles on these shows, and how playing into certain expectations of gender on the screen can contribute to a contestant’s success. Ganetz’s study of the Swedish *Fame Factory* (2011), and Davis’s research on the American *Survivor* (2008), found show participants playing up these roles and effectively
making themselves into gendered characters rather than real people, to ensure their success in televised competition. Ganetz found that audience perception of participant gender was crucial in the success of contestants in the voting competition. Viewers of the music competition preferred to see men engaging in serious technical work in music studios in their behind the scenes, pre-taped clips, and enjoyed watching them demonstrate skill on instruments, but were put off by excessive displays of emotion. Women were to put on a full performance, feminizing themselves and appearing more sexual to appeal to the audience.

These results are similar to those found by Davis where research subjects had to rank contestants on Survivor as more masculine or feminine. The systems that participants came up with to rank the males were complex and varied, but women all followed the same pattern, with the most conventionally attractive and overtly emotional being the most feminine, and the older, more athletic, and less conventionally attracted contestants being the masculine-rated females. These results show that viewers, consciously or not, are always looking at gender when they look at television. People judge what they are seeing based upon how it lines up with existing societal gender roles, and it is less appealing to see someone go against them. This affects the voting results of Fame Factory in the study, and it stands to reason ratings of a scripted show could be influenced similarly. Audiences are always subconsciously making judgments and might be less inclined to tune in to a show that doesn’t match up with the ideals they are used to viewing.

Indeed in other genres of programming, gender differences do affect viewership notably. Kamhawi and Grabe’s 2008 research on news programming shows that differences in what appeals to men and to women even affects something so impartial as the news. They found that women preferred stories to be presented in a positive light, and would go so far as to not tune in to the news if programs didn’t appeal to them in this way. Men appreciate news that essentially
isn’t sugarcoated, admiring the truthfulness and emphasis on fact, and for these reasons they were shown to watch the news at a much higher rate. When gender-based choice of programming is so hard wired with our society that it even affects the way people receive something so unbiased and unscripted as their daily news, it becomes clear that gender is a tremendous driving factor in the way we choose what to watch and the shows we enjoy enough to come back to.

The role of gender is key in deciding how people receive programming across the board, and this is reinforced once more when the way that people engage with television is looked at closely. In a study by Hoffner and Buchanan (2005), researchers found that young adults often closely connect with the characters of the stories they watch on television; seeking desirable traits in those they deem their favorite to apply to their own lives. Overall, though males and females found many of the same elements desirable, such as intelligence or how well-liked a character was by their peers, they chose a favorite character who demonstrated those traits that was their own gender rather than the opposite more often than not. People are not only seeking programming that appeals to them based on gender and reflects their own gender on screen, but they’re also connecting to it on a personal level. This is an important aspect of gender and program choice, as this connection is likely a major part of what gets viewers to come back to a show again and again rather than just tune in every so often.

Finally, in any study on media it’s crucial to stay current and examine the present day trends in the area of study. The changing television landscape is established in many of the later studies in this review, and many of them rely on trends in Nielsen ratings, which vary throughout seasons and years to draw their conclusions, so it is worth looking at some Nielsen trends at the time of the study. In the year of 2013, CBS’s *The Big Bang Theory* was the top rated network
scripted program, beat only by Sunday Night Football broadcasts in terms of total viewers (Patten, 2013). The show is also noteworthy for the high ratings it achieves in syndicated reruns on cable networks like TBS, where it bests new network offerings in the same time slot in unprecedented numbers (Poggi, 2013).

This show and its success mark a trend in television in two different regards. First, along with offerings like *Modern Family*, *The Walking Dead*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, and *Once Upon a Time* among others in the top 25 rated series rankings, *The Big Bang Theory* is a show without one lead, but rather is an ensemble cast where many characters share the main focus and story time. This shows that these sorts of programs have growing prevalence, as noted previously in Kissell’s 2000 editorial. Audiences tend toward shows with many lead characters, rather than a single one, and in the case of many of these series, the characters are a mix of males and females rather than a group of just one. Expanding the scope further, the number 26 and 27 shows in the primetime series rankings were *Glee* and it’s fellow Fox network counterpart *New Girl*, which have been hailed in the past for their high ratings among adults 18-34 and with teens (Bibel, 2012). These two shows also fall in line with the trend of mixed gender ensemble popularity and reflect that it is particularly notable in younger audiences.

Secondly, the popularity of *The Big Bang Theory* in syndication reflects that this trend is evident in programming choice even in shows that are reruns. The re-airing of *The Big Bang Theory* has helped contribute to increased ratings of its live broadcasts and helped keep the program atop the ratings when shows of similar age have begun to decline. Other current shows pulling in big ratings in syndication include the aforementioned ensemble sitcom *Modern Family*, and ensemble animated hits from the previously mentioned Fox Animation Domination block including *Bob’s Burgers*, *Family Guy*, and *American Dad* (Poggi, Cable Reruns in
Primetime chart). Though these shows reflect this trend in recent programming, ensemble shows have always been worthy investments for cable networks, with over three quarters of the top ten most expensive syndication deals featuring ensemble casts, and many of those, such as *Friends* and *ER* featuring casts of mixed gender (Poggi, Major Cable Syndication Deals chart).

**Research Questions**

Based on this existing discourse, this study aims to achieve a current outlook on the status of the role gender plays in programming choice, as well as ask some new questions regarding the trend in ratings toward ensemble shows. From these conclusions, research questions were formed as detailed below:

RQ1: Will women ages 18 to 25 prefer watching programs that feature either a man or a woman as a lead character?

RQ2: Will men ages 18 to 25 prefer programs that feature a male lead character as they have in past research?

RQ3: Will males and females of this age group prefer ensemble based shows or shows with single leads?

**Methods**

Research was conducted through the use of a survey in April of 2014 at the Rochester Institute of Technology on a convenience sample of 18 to 25 year old young adults. Participants were not explicitly limited to the institute but were found utilizing its connections and resources. It provided a large population of young adults who fell within the target age range. This age range was chosen for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, it reflects a significant overlap with the Nielsen target of 18-34 by which young adult television ratings are measured. By capping the sample at age 25 instead of extending it to 34, the sample was more evenly
distributed between ages, whereas the college setting would have made finding participants all the way through age 34 in relatively equal representation challenging. By ending at age 25, the sample also reflects an audience who are on the cutting edge of ratings trends and will remain in the same Nielsen target for the next 9 to 16 years, indicating more lasting results, as any trends reflected within them will likely have an impact on television audience culture for the better part of the next decade as this same audience continues to make programming choices. Participants who were not within this age range but provided answers were collected but were rejected from any calculation of results. Participants disclosed age via a demographic question on the survey implement which asked them to circle or select their age from listed options of Under 18, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, and over 25, to alleviate any discrepancy that might have arisen by having participants write their age in an open ended fashion.

Participants were also asked to identify their gender, selecting from options of Male, Female, and Other/Prefer not to answer. Subjects who selected nothing or who chose the latter option were rejected to limit focus to specifically males and females in an attempt to draw the necessary conclusions about the role that those genders play on programming choice. By including the “other” option as a choice, the survey sought to eliminate confusion that might come about if a transgender young adult or someone otherwise identifying outside of the hegemonic gender binary were to take the survey. Though their results would not have been included, it would have eliminated bias caused by forcing an individual who doesn’t typically label oneself as male or female to choose one or the other, possibly skewing the results. Ultimately, while 8 participants did not answer this question and thusly had their answers rejected from analysis, no one selected the other answer so it did not result in any further rejections. However, it would be in the best interest of anyone seeking to replicate the study to
continue to include this option in the event such an issue did arise to prevent skewed results and to be inclusive to all willing participants rather than single them out at the time of testing.

Each of the demographic questions of age and gender were placed toward the end of the survey, so people were less subconsciously inclined to bias their answers to the attitude related questions having already revealed their age and gender. There were no additional questions seeking information about race, sexuality, income level, or lifestyle in this section of the survey, as it simply sought to find out information about each of the two genders within the specific age range. This additional information, while enlightening, was ultimately unnecessary to drawing the conclusions that the research questions of this study sought to ask and would have asked the participants to provide a lot of personal information that wouldn’t have altered the results being sought. If further research questions were posed or hypotheses formed in a future study that more directly related to these characteristics and their impact on programming choice they could be included, but at this time they were outside the scope of the study.

Before reaching the question portion of the survey, the materials included some brief definitions and instructions to ensure that participants considered the proper type of program and understood terms that would appear in the questions. Instructions asked that participants limit their answers to scripted shows. This scope was selected to eliminate confusing divides between identifying real life figures as characters and the ways in which that might affect answers and results. The instructions further specified that participants not consider reality, talk, variety, news or informative documentary programming in answering the questions that would follow. The instructions also included a note that participants should feel free to include shows from non-tradition, but growing television platforms on the Internet such as the original series or syndicated catalogues of Amazon Prime streaming service, Hulu and Hulu Plus, and Netflix. In
addition to being on the rise overall, these platforms are often where tech-savvy young adults seek media content in this day and age, and eliminating them in favor of only traditional broadcast television would severely limit the results of the survey on this audience. Final operational instructions directed participants to circle or select their corresponding answer after reading each question, to ensure appropriate answers were clear when research was compiled and collected.

In addition to directions, the survey was also preceded by a set of definitions to clarify terms that would appear in the following questions. For the survey, a lead character was defined as character that gets the primary bulk of the storylines, screen time, and important development in the show. The action of the program revolves around them, or may be told from their point of view. An ensemble was defined as a group of characters that share the screen time evenly. They all have plots of equal importance, and it’s tough to define one single main character that stands out with greater role among them. All characters function as the protagonist of the story, leading the foremost plot of any given episode as a group or in altering dynamics in which any character is as likely as the next to lead the story. All of them become defined with realistic, three dimensional traits and characteristics, and have backstories and interactions that build up what the viewer knows about them, rather than appearing artificial or trope-like. They all appear in most or all episodes.

Ensemble shows were defined for the survey as programs in which three or more characters that comprise an ensemble of leads and drive the action of the show. Each of these characters is defined in an involved way, and could be the lead of the episode and it’s most important plot for any given installation of the show. Although the program may have secondary or tertiary characters that build up the world the characters live in and interact with the ensemble
or have storylines on occasion, a larger group stands out as the main characters of the show. The show is defined more by the group than by one single character, and follows the lives of all members, rather than just one or two. Examples were provided to help clarify this definition for participants, and included *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004), *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-Present), *Happy Endings* (ABC, 2011-2013), *The Office* (NBC, 2005-2013), *Pretty Little Liars* (ABC Family, 2010-Present), *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-Present), *New Girl* (Fox, 2011-Present), and *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-Present).

Shows with a single lead were defined to include shows featuring one or two lead characters that drive the action of the plot and have the most screen time and storyline material within the show. These are programs from which the viewer sees the world from their point of view often, or at least in which the world revolves around their action. Single leads were defined within this research to include shows where this is true of two characters as well as one solo lead, wherein both characters operate as the lead and have substantially larger role and importance to the plot than any other characters that may occupy their world. Since each character occupied the role of a lead and had a more elevated role than the rest of the secondary players in the program, ultimately they represented the same type of show as far as this research was considered, typifying shows wherein an ensemble is not present. Examples of this type of program provided to participants included *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006-2013), *The Mindy Project* (Fox, 2012-Present), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-Present), *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-Present), *Bones* (FOX, 2005-Present), *Veep* (HBO, 2012-Present), and *Elementary* (CBS, 2012-Present).

The survey was also preceded by a consent document, which informed participants in the study of their right to elect not to take the survey and to opt out at any time. This document also informed them that their answers would be kept anonymous and confidential, with individual
surveys not being made publicly available and answers not identifiable to any particular subject that could lead to their identity being traced. The respondents were informed that the survey would include two demographic questions as detailed above. Finally, this document informed subjects that if at any time they had questions or concerns about the study they could contact the researcher or the Rochester Institute of Technology Human Subjects Review Office to get more information or voice issues, and the respective contact information was provided. To present this information, approval was obtained by the HSRO.

The first part, and bulk of the survey following these sections consisted of questions asking respondents to rate their agreement about statements regarding attitudes about television character gender and programming choice on a five point Likert scale, with responses for each including a range of strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree. The questions unofficially fell into a few categories: Questions regarding the participant’s relation to television characters, questions asking about the gender of characters, both as single leads and in ensembles on television shows that participants watched, and questions seeking to gauge if participants had a preference between single lead shows or ensemble shows. They were not divided categorically on paper and were presented without title to avoid skewing any perceptions the participants might have regarding these topics.

The first set of questions presented in the survey offered a general introduction into the attitudes of participants regarding television characters. They generally began asking things such as, “I like to relate to characters on shows I watch” and got more specific as the survey went along, bringing in the factor of gender, for example, “It’s easier to recognize things I like about television characters when they are my gender”. These questions drew inspiration from the study conducted by Hoffner and Buchanan in that they seek to see to what effect young
adult audiences relate to program characters and base their choice of program off of that relationship.

Next, questions began to specifically target character gender, asking participants to agree or disagree with statements including, “A majority of my favorite programs have female lead characters”, “A majority of my favorite programs have male lead characters”, “I watch a balanced mix of shows that have male and female leads” and “I’d rather watch a show about a group of boys and girls than a show where the group contains just one gender”. These questions target attitude and opinion about gender specifically, touching lightly upon single leads and ensembles but not directly asking participants to choose between the two. These types of questions also asked viewers their perceptions of their own gender on television, through statements like “I feel like my gender is well represented in the television shows I watch”.

Finally, the last unofficial category of questions sought to prove the hypothesis regarding ensemble based shows and their growing popularity over single lead programs. These types of statements included, “Most shows I watch don’t have one main character but have an ensemble of featured characters instead” and “It’s easier to focus on a story about one or two people”. Asking the question from both sides of the issue would eliminate question bias by only asking about ensembles in an attempt to prove the hypothesis correct without adequate factual backup. The final question asked after the aforementioned demographic questions was an open ended question that asked participants to list any shows they regularly watch. This was included for insight further insight into what shows are the most popular with young adults, as many don’t live in Nielsen homes or watch television in a traditional fashion and therefore are not counted within ratings. Additionally, if results seemed to indicate a strong misunderstanding of the
previously detailed definitions, the list of shows could provide some clarification as to which
types of shows a respondent actually watches and what it’s characters are like.

The survey was administered over four days in a three-week time frame. It was delivered
to participants in one of two ways. First, the survey was given by the research in person in
communication department classes, to be filled out at that moment. Again, students could elect to
opt out. Due to low class turnout rates, this yielded fewer results than initially anticipated. The
distribution in person was also halted by the hesitation of the researcher to administer the survey
to participants who had recently engaged in many other surveys for other studies taking place
concurrently at the institute, seeking to avoid inconclusive or inaccurate results as a result of
survey fatigue.

Seeking fresh subjects, the back up method of distribution was employed. The survey
was generated using the website SurveyMonkey for online administration. This website was
selected due to preferable layout and easy access, since students were not required to log in or
sign up to reply. It included all of the same information and identical questions in an identical
order to the paper survey. This was delivered to potential young adult participants via email to
fellow RIT students and by the researcher on social media, with results anonymously
accumulated via SurveyMonkey. This yielded a much higher response rate, and allowed the
target goal for participants to be exceeded. In all, 31 responses were collected in the in-person
trials and an additional 113 responses online. With responses electing not to answer some of the
demographic questions, incomplete sets or ages outside of the target range excluded, the overall
participant sample totaled 120. This sample included 15 males and 105 females due to the
random nature of sample selection and response. Many of the classes utilized for contact
information were in the liberal arts, which did not reflect RIT’s typical gender divide in favor of
males but actually reflect the inverse. This combined with the contacts made via social media led to the overwhelming majority of female response. This did leave the study fairly imbalanced and would be a factor to improve upon in future research.

Results

To begin, after ordering answers so that male respondents and female respondents were ordered together, an average age was calculated to be 21.8. This falls close to halfway within the age range and indicates a fairly normal distribution of ages. Answers on the Likert scale were attributed a numeric value for identification upon data entry, with 1 indicating strongly disagree, 2 indicating disagree, 3 indicating neither agree nor disagree, 4 indicating agree, and 5 indicating strongly agree. The data was entered into an Excel spreadsheet for processing.

To begin, this ordinal data was examined for measures of central tendency, particularly the mode. This reflects the answer or answers that participants selected the most for each question and provides a good starting point for analysis of their standpoint on each of the issues the questions posed. Modes were calculated first for all participants, and then divided by male and female. Doing so allowed the genders to be looked at for their differences, and prevented the overall results from being skewed by how many more females participated. This offered a few interesting insights, noted in the table labeled Figure A below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Overall Mode (n=120)</th>
<th>Mode Among Females (n=105)</th>
<th>Mode Among Males (n=15)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like to relate to the characters on shows I watch</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A majority of my favorite programs have female lead characters</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A majority of my favorite programs have male lead characters</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I watch a balanced mix of shows with male and female leads</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a show seems like it’s made for the other gender I won’t watch it</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows with ensembles of all or mostly females seem like “girls’ shows” to me</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows with ensembles of all or mostly males seem like “boys’ shows” to me</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’d rather watch a show about a group of boys and girls than a show where the group contains just one gender</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t consider character gender when I choose what shows to watch</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most shows I watch don’t have one main character but have an ensemble of featured characters instead.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s easier to focus on a story about one or two people</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure A
These calculations are noteworthy for a few reasons. To begin, the results confirm that people are motivated to watch the shows that they do because they like to relate to the characters, with the modes for women and overall indicating that respondents agree with this statement. Men more frequently answered that they were neutral on this matter. Men and women answer in agreement that they watch shows with a balanced mix of males and females, though breaking that down into individual levels suggests otherwise for men. While women remain neutral in opinion asked if their favorite shows feature male leads or female leads, men most frequently disagree that their favorite programs are led by females and agree that they most commonly watch shows with male leads. Similar results held true for the questions that asked if shows featuring all of one gender seemed like they should be watched by that respective gender. While women disagreed that shows featuring all male casts were boys’ shows and shows featuring all female casts were girls’ shows, men were in agreement with the latter statement. Additionally, they were neutral in opinion with regard to male casts causing shows to be perceived as masculine.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from these statistics with regard to the questions highlighting preference between ensembles or single lead programs, which the last two statements highlighted in Figure A seek to answer. Overall, people agree that they watch mostly shows with ensembles. Additionally, they are neutral with regard to their preference of a show with a narrow focus on one or two leads. This seems to align with the trend in ratings toward ensemble based preference.
Discussion and Conclusions

The preliminary means go a fair distance in coming to a conclusion regarding answers to the research questions posed in this study. While most participants were in agreement that they would prefer to watch a show with mixed gender leads, males still showed a slight preference for shows with male leads. They also were more likely to find shows featuring all males to not appear to be gendered as boy’s shows, suggesting an all male cast seems normal and out of the ordinary to this audience. In contrast, they did note that they more frequently agreed with the statement that shows of an all or mostly female cast would seem like a girls’ show, reinforcing existing discourse put forth by Kalviknes Bore and Meyer and Wood in their research into specific programs.

As research predicted, women are still more open to watching shows where the lead is unlike them. Though both men and women more frequently answered that they would agree they don’t consider gender of characters when they select shows to watch, and that they watch shows of mixed gender, the mode answers of women more commonly aligned with the mode overall, and tended toward a preference of this nature when questions were broken down and asked with specific regard to males and females. A considerable factor in this is, as mentioned, the overwhelming majority of women as participants, which skews overall results in their favor, but when compared with existing discourse, it does indicate that this trend in programming prevails. One thing worth noting is that while men’s responses indicate they behave differently than they would say they do when it comes to selecting programs, they do believe that they have a gender neutral perspective. This indicates a sense of goodwill on their part, that they are not intentionally choosing to watch shows with only men out of sexist desire to exclude the stories of women from their lives, but it does reflect conformity to hegemonic ideals of a patriarchal
society. It is considered normal and regular for men to watch a show featuring men, and not even notice that they are watching a program that is gender-skewed, but it is considered girly to watch a show similarly led by women. Women deviate from this, and are more willing overall to watch the opposite gender and positively view their own.

Additionally, it seems that although results don’t indicate a tremendous difference, there is preference between ensembles and single leads. More young people enjoy shows that feature a group of characters, particularly when that group is of a relatively even mix of genders. This indicates a step forward from existing research prior, and a move toward more gender-neutral television. While shows do exist where there are groups of mostly men or mostly women, young adult viewers would sooner watch shows where genders are mixed. This is reinforced by answers to the open-ended question on the survey instrument, where participants were asked to list their favorite shows. Many of the scripted programs that appeared again and again were ensemble shows of mixed gender casts, including *New Girl*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Community*, *Glee*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Office*, *Friends* and *Parenthood*. Of the shows listed most frequently that could be categorized as a show with a single lead by the constraints of this study, the show appearing most often was *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. While this does not fall in trend with the preference toward ensemble programming, the two leads are a male and a female, indicating that mixed gender storytelling is still preferable to a similar show where there were two leads of one gender, or one single lead of either.

This study could be improved and expanded upon in a variety of ways in future research. Gathering a sample that was more balanced toward men and women, to begin with, would be the first area for improvement. Another way that the research could be expanded upon would be to combine more qualitative, open-ended questions into the survey. The list of shows proved quite
interesting in the way it aligned with more data-oriented trends, and it would be interesting to expand upon that and ask participants the things they liked best about these shows to see if gender is as important as other, unexplored factors could be. Additional research could combine other demographic factors such as race or sexuality to see the role that those traits play in programming choice, and see if similar trends prevail wherein a viewer prefers a show where the characters are like them in these ways in the way that they prefer programs based upon gender. Additionally, it could be of interest to explore the dissonance between the ways some programs are marketed to one gender when they might appeal to both.
References


