Images of Youth:
A content Analysis of Adolescents
In Prime-Time Entertainment Programming

Prepared for the Frameworks Institute
By
Katharine E. Heintz-Knowles, Ph.D.
Children's Media Research and Sonsulting

April 2000

INTRODUCTION

Television is a cultural storyteller. It's programming both reflects the values and ideals of American society as well as shapes the attitudes and beliefs of those who watch it. Heavy TV viewers tend to believe that the representations on TV programming reflect the state of the world outside TV, and thus develop perceptions about our world based on TV information.   Through patterns of inclusion and exclusion, television content sends implicit messages about the relative cultural importance of different groups, behaviors, and ideologies (Clark, 1972; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1994).

Underrepresentation and negative portrayals of different groups on TV can influence the self-concepts and images of viewers from these groups. Further, such portrayals can influence the attitudes and belief about such groups among members of the general public. Even when viewers recognize that the content they are viewing is fictional, its messages and images gradually shape expectations and beliefs about the real world (Huston et. al., 1992).

Cultivation hypothesis, developed by Gerbner and his colleagues to explain the effect of violent content on audiences, provides a conceptual framework for the study of television content, and in this case, specifically content related to adolescent issues. The hypothesis posits that heavy viewers of television cultivate perceptions about the "real world" that are based on the television "world" they see. In other words, heavy viewers are more likely to believe that television content imitates and represents the world at large (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1981).

The crux of the cultivation hypothesis is that television is ubiquitous, and the types of messages are relatively similar and frequently repeated, regardless of program type. Similar stories and situations get played out over and over, and the repetition of these messages leads to accumulative effects in audiences. Cultivation effects do not occur immediately or with one television program; they are the result of long-term and heavy viewing. Jefferes (1997) explains: "Like the steady drip of a faucet, measurable effects at any one moment may be small, but they accumulate over time." (p. 87)

Since the introduction of the cultivation hypothesis to the field of mass media effects, modifications have been introduced to address the potential effects of long-term, heavy viewing of specific program types. For example, the cultivation hypothesis informed studies on the impact of adolescent viewing of talk shows (Davis and Mares, 1998) and soap operas (Buerkel-Rothfuss and Mayes, 1981). Cumulative effects of viewing were manifested in stereotypical views of gender roles, fear of violence, and overestimating adulterous affairs.

TV has also been shown to be a powerful source of behavioral models. *Cognitive social learning theory*, developed by psychologist Albert Bandura (1986), proposes that social behavior is determined by a combination of mental and physical abilities and desires. We learn new behaviors through observing others perform them. The consequences we observe others receiving influence our willingness to perform the behavior ourselves. Television characters - and the actors who play them - are often taken as role models by viewers, young and old alike. Numerous studies document the influence of television viewing on the aggressive behavior of children and adolescents (see Josephson, 1996 for a review). Conversely, there is substantial evidence that television characters are effective models of prosocial behavior (see Johnston & Ettema, 1986 for a review). Television characters who are attractive, successful, and of high status are more likely to be imitated than those who are unattractive, unsuccessful, or ridiculed (Bandura, 1994).

Because of the dual role of TV as a reflection and an influence, it is critical to assess the messages sent incessantly into American homes. Prime-time broadcast entertainment programming reaches approximately 100 million Americans each night (Nielsen Media Research, 1998).

Television's Depiction of Adolescents
Little research has been conducted looking specifically at the representation of adolescents in television entertainment programming. However, prior research on the depiction of children (usually defined as up to age 18) on television offers some important insights. A study analyzing the representation of children and adolescents in television programming from 1969-1985 discovered that these characters were presented in limiting roles that often served to enhance adult roles rather than present children in a favorable way (Signorielli, 1987).   The author reported that adolescents were frequently shown as victims of violence and that adolescent males were often shown as perpetrators of violence. Younger adolescents were most often shown in the context of family life, while this was less common for older adolescents. Finally, the author noted that the rare instances of drug use in prime time programming was most likely to be committed by older adolescents than characters of any other age.

A 1995 study of children and teenagers in prime time and Saturday morning programming discovered that these characters were motivated most often by peer relationships and romance, and least often by school-related or religious issues (Heintz-Knowles, 1995). The study further reported that entertainment television almost never showed children grappling with important issues. On commercial broadcast networks, a majority of the child characters engaged in anti-social behaviors, and those behaviors often yielded positive results for the characters.

In a 1999 article for *TV Guide,* psychologist William Pollack wrote of the lack of positive male role models on TV. Two studies commissioned by Children Now (1997 and 1999) examined characters in media content popular with adolescents and found that males consistently outnumber females, that non-whites are underrepresented, and that both sexes are often shown in stereotypical roles (Signorielli, 1997; Heintz-Knowles, 1999).

This study attempts to further the analysis of the representation of the world of prime-time entertainment by focusing specifically on the youth characters who inhabit that world. This report presents new information about the ways that adolescent characters are shown in prime-time entertainment programs viewed by both children and adults in the U.S. and around the globe.

METHODOLOGY

One episode of each prime-time [1] entertainment series[2] aired during Fall 1999 on the six broadcast networks[3] was examined for its representation of youth characters[4]. Three first-run episodes of each series were recorded between September 20 – November 21, 1999. One episode of each series was randomly selected for inclusion in the sample. All selected episodes were screened for inclusion of youth characters in primary, secondary, or background roles. Episodes containing youth characters were retained for further analysis. See Appendix A for a complete list of series containing adolescent characters.

Each episode containing youth characters was subject to two levels of analysis:

- *Macro-level analysis*: Coders examined program-level characteristics such as genre, network, racial diversity among the cast, and youth-oriented themes.

- *Micro-level analysis*: Coders identified all youth characters who played primary or secondary roles.[5] These characters were coded for such features as gender, race, role status, primary problem, activities, and opinions expressed about youth-oriented issues.

All content was coded by the author and two trained coders.[6] To ensure reliability among coders, a portion of the sample was coded by each of the coders independently. The percent of agreement between coders was calculated. All variables included in this analysis received a level of agreement of at least 90%.

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[1] Prime time is defined as: Monday – Saturday, 8p.m. – 11 p.m. P.S.T. and Sunday, 7 p.m. – 11 p.m. P.S.T.
[2] This study included only scripted, fictional entertainment programs in series format. The sample did not include any news or news magazine programs, reality programs, game shows, specials, made-for-TV movies, or sports.
[3] Broadcast networks: ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, WB, UPN.
[4] For the purposes of this study, youth was defined as approximately between the ages of 13 and 21.
[5] Both recurring (regular) and non-recurring (guest) characters were included for analysis.
[6] Thanks to Jennifer Henderson, M.A. and Meredith Li-Vollmer, M.A. for their assistance in coding and data entry for this project.

DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE

This sampling method yielded 92 total program episodes across the six networks. Just under half of those episodes contained youth characters (n=45, 49%). Table 1 shows the overall distribution of programs by network, and the distribution of episodes containing youth characters by network.

TABLE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF SAMPLE PROGRAMS BY NETWORK

Network	All programs sampled		Programs Containing Youth Characters	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
ABC	16	17	9	20
CBS	17	19	6	13
NBC	21	23	8	18
FOX	14	15	10	22
WB	14	15	9	20
UPN	10	11	3	7
Total	92	100	45	100

Overall, 163 youth characters were identified as playing either primary or secondary roles in the episodes examined.

KEY FINDINGS

- Youth characters appear in about ½ of all prime-time entertainment programs, and are featured characters in nearly 6 out of 10 of those.

- TV youth do not reflect the demographics of U.S. youth. TV youth are slightly more likely to be female, and are overwhelmingly white.

- TV youth are most often shown dealing with problems relating to romantic relationships, friendships/popularity, and family issues.

- In programs with a primarily youth cast, adolescents are often shown as capable of solving their own problems without adult help.

- In programs with a primarily adult cast, youth characters often act as catalysts creating problems adults must fix.

- TV parents are most often shown as absent or ineffective, although some programs feature supportive and effective parent characters.

- The most common activity identified for youth characters is socializing – at school and elsewhere.

- Drugs and alcohol were not shown as part of the everyday world of most of the youth characters.

- Youth-oriented issues discussed most frequently by youth and adult characters were: parent-teen relationships, romantic relationships, doing well in school, and social pressure/popularity.

- When discussing youth, adult characters most often use terminology that sets adolescents apart as young and childlike.

RESULTS

Youth characters are included in about one-half of all prime time network programs.
Of the ninety-two programs sampled, just under ½ (n=45, 49%) contained any depictions of youth. However, in programs with youth representation, nearly six in ten featured youth characters in primary recurring roles (n=26).

Over ½ of the programs with youth characters featured high school aged youth (n=24, 53%). Ten programs (22%) featured college aged youth characters. Less than one-fifth featured middle school aged youth (n=7, 16%).

TABLE 2
ROLE STATUS OF YOUTH CHARACTERS[7]
IN PRIME-TIME ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMS

Character Role Status	Frequency	Percent of Youth Characters
Primary Recurring	92	56
Primary Non-Recurring	2	1
Secondary Recurring	34	21
Secondary Non-Recurring	35	22

One hundred sixty three youth characters were featured across the broadcast dial, with the highest concentration of primary youth characters on the WB and Fox networks. The WB aired eight programs featuring a total of 39 youth characters in primary recurring roles. Fox aired eight programs featuring 22 primary recurring youth characters.

TABLE 3
NETWORK REPRESENTATION OF YOUTH CHARACTERS
IN PRIME-TIME ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMS

Network	Total Youth Characters		Primary Recurring Youth Characters	
	Number	Percent of All Youth Characters	Number	Percent of Primary Recurring Youth
ABC	27	17	17	19
CBS	4	2	1	1
NBC	23	14	7	8
FOX	41	25	22	24
WB	57	35	39	42
UPN	11	7	6	7
Total	163	100	92	100

Sixty percent of youth characters appeared in dramatic programming n=98); forty percent appeared in situation comedies (n=65).

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[7] Role Status Definitions:
Primary Recurring: Characters who are central to the story line, appear weekly, and are included in the opening cast credits
Primary Non-Recurring: Characters who are central to the story line but who do not appear weekly
Secondary Recurring: Characters who are peripheral to the main story line, appear weekly, and do not appear in the opening cast credits
Secondary Non-recurring: Characters who are peripheral to the main story line, do not appear weekly

TV Youth Don't Reflect the Demographics of the U.S. Youth Population.
While the teen population of the U.S. is slightly more male and much more ethnically diverse than the general population (Adgate, 1999), TV youth are evenly split on gender lines and overwhelmingly white. African Americans make up the second largest racial group on TV; other non-white groups make up just 5% of the sample. Despite their low frequency of representation, African American youths are as likely as white youths to play primary roles.

TABLE 4
RACE OF YOUTH CHARACTERS BY ROLE STATUS
IN PRIME-TIME ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMS

Race	Primary Recurring		Primary Non-Recurring		Secondary Recurring		Secondary Non-Recurring		Total	
	N	%*	N	%*	N	%*	N	%*	N	%**
White	78	57	1	1	28	21	29	21	136	83
African American	10	53	1	5	3	16	5	26	19	12
Asian American					2	100			2	1
Hispanic/ Latino	3	60			1	20	1	20	5	3
Other	1	100							1	1

*In these columns, figures indicate percent of each racial group
**In this column, figures indicate percent of total sample

Not surprisingly, more than half of the programs in the sample (n=23, 51%) contain all white youth casts. Just three programs (7%) were identified as having an even distribution of white and non-white youth characters (*Law and Order, Sabrina The Teenaged Witch, Steve Harvey*).

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

TV youth are most often shown dealing with problems relating to romantic relationships, friendships/popularity, and family issues.
Coders identified the major problem or conflict for each youth character in the sample. None of the characters were shown to be primarily concerned with issues outside of their immediate experience. In the sample, there was not a single instance of a youth character involved in a conflict or problem that was societal in nature (i.e. homelessness, poverty, environmental concerns).

Interpersonal relationships accounted for the primary problem areas for ½ of all youth characters, and for 55% of all primary recurring youth characters: romances, friendships, family relationships. There were no significant differences by gender in the experience of these types of problems.

For example:

> Romance/Dating as Problem: *Dawson's Creek (WB)*
> Pacey and Andie, both high school juniors, break off their
> romance after Andie reveals she lost her virginity while
> away during the summer.
>
> Friendship/Popularity as Problem: *Freaks and Geeks (NBC)*
> When her parents go out of town for the weekend, Lindsay,
> a high school junior, throws a keg party. She believes that
> the party will gain her acceptance into a group she wishes
> to join, but finds that she has to compromise many of her
> values to fit in with this group.
>
> Family Relationships as Problem: *Mission Hill (WB)*
> Kevin, a high school senior, moves in with his single older
> brother after their parents move out of state. The brothers'
> different life styles cause conflict, but they learn to find
> common ground.

TABLE 5
PRIMARY PROBLEM AREAS
FOR YOUTH CHARACTERS
IN PRIME-TIME ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMS

Problem Area	Total Youth Characters		Primary Youth Characters	
	Number	**Percent of All Youth Characters**	**Number**	**Percent of Primary Youth**
Friendships/ Popularity	36	22	23	25
Romance/Dating	27	17	15	16
Family	20	12	14	15
Violence	7	4	-	-
Sex	9	6	4	4
Education	5	3	3	3
Personal Safety	4	2	3	3
Work	3	2	3	3
Substance Use/Abuse	2	1	-	-
Personal Health	2	1	1	1
Other	18	11	1	16
No problem	30	18	13	14
Total	163	100	94	100

The other half of the youth characters dealt with a variety of problem areas, or had no problem at all. Interestingly, violence and drugs – two headline-making youth oriented issues – accounted for a very small percentage of the problems concerning the youth in this sample. Just four percent of youth characters (n=7) were involved in story lines where violence was their central conflict (two characters were featured as victims of violence, and five were shown as perpetrators) and only one percent (n=2) of the characters had primary problems involving drug or alcohol use or abuse. For example:

> Violence as Victim Primary Problem: *E.R. (NBC)*
> Reggie, a high school "punk," is treated at the E.R. for facial cuts received when he was beaten up at school. He tells the attending physicians about numerous beatings he has received because of how he looks.

> Violence as Perpetrator Primary Problem: *The Practice (ABC)*
> Teen-aged Steven murdered a woman with whom his father was having an affair. His father is convicted of the crime. Steven becomes distraught when he is confronted by lawyers who suspect he was the murderer, and he hangs himself in the family garage.

> Substance Abuse as Primary Problem: *Third Watch (CBS)*
> Sunny, a teen-aged addict, is the victim of a drug overdose. The paramedics respond to her friends' call to 911 and take her to the hospital for treatment.

Nearly one in five youth characters (n=30, 18%) had no functional importance to the episodes' story lines, and were coded as having "no problem." These characters were most often in supporting roles, although nearly ½ of the characters identified as having no problem were primary recurring youth characters (n=13). The following examples illustrate how characters could be identified as having "no problem."

> Secondary Character with No Identifiable Problem:
> *Beverly Hills, 90210 (Fox)*
> Teen pop star Christina Aguilera, makes a cameo appearance, singing at the local hang-out. Her appearance is not integral to the plot.

> Primary Character with No Identifiable Problem:
> *The Practice (ABC)*
> Lucy, a teen-aged receptionist at a Boston law firm, is shown answering phones and filing papers but does not impact on the story line of the episode.

Problem Solving
Youth characters' primary problems were solved to their satisfaction about half of the time (n=85, 52%). The other half of the time, the problems were either solved in a manner counter to the character's desire (i.e. a relationship ends after the youth character worked to save it) or were unresolved at the end of the episode (i.e. episode ends with parent and child stuck in a stalemate over an issue).

In programs with a primarily youth cast, adolescents are often shown as capable of solving their own problems without adult help.

In nearly 80% of the cases when a youth character achieved a successful resolution to his/her problem, it was a result of a collective effort (n=66, 78%). In just 21% of cases, youth characters worked alone on problem solving (n=17). Who got enlisted for help in problem solving depended on the type of problem.

When youth characters work on a primary problem relating to friendships/popularity, they successfully solve the problem on their own nearly half the time (n=11, 46% of successful resolutions). When they enlist the help of others, it is ten times more likely to be a peer (n=10) than a parent (n=1), and five times more likely to be a peer than a teacher (n=2). For example:

> Friendship problem solved with help from peers: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (WB)*
> Xander's primary problem in this episode is helping his friend Buffy feel confident about her vampire slaying abilities. When Buffy is abducted by a pack of vampires, Xander enlists the help of friends Willow and Oz to find Buffy and help her slay the vampires.

When youth characters work on a primary problem relating to romance, however, they enlist help from a wider range of problem solvers. Youth characters solve their problems on their own in nearly 40% of the cases (n=5, 39%). When they do engage in collective problem solving, they are almost equally likely to enlist the help of their parents (n=2), peers (n=3), other adults (n=2), or teachers (n=1). For example:

> Romance problem solved with help from adults:
> *Ally McBeal (Fox)*
> Kirby, a high school freshman, has a crush on Kimberly, a popular senior. He kisses Kimberly in the crowded cafeteria. Kimberly becomes so embarrassed by being kissed by "a geek" that she sues Kirby for sexual harassment. Kirby's lawyers convince Kimberly and her parents that Kirby meant no harm. The lawsuit against Kirby is dropped.

Not surprisingly, when youth characters experience conflict with family members (n=20), their successful resolutions often result when the youth and parents work together. Approximately 2/3 of family problems are solved to the youth's satisfaction, and more than half of those (n=7, 54%) are resolved with the parent and adolescent working together. Youth characters also enlist the help of peers (n=2) and other adults (n=2) when tackling family problems.
For example:

> Family problem solved with help from parents:
> *Ladies' Man (CBS)*
> Teen-aged Tara lives with her father and his new wife, who is pregnant. She feels unwanted, and shoplifts to get attention. Her mother, father, and stepmother all work together to assure her that she is loved and wanted.

Youth Concern with the Problems of Others

Although most of the youth characters in the sample were concerned solely with problems impacting on themselves, one in five (n=34, 21%) of the youth characters showed concern about the problems of others. These youth were shown as compassionate and willing to help out friends and family members.
For example:

> Youth characters showing concern about others:
> *Oh, Grow Up (ABC)*: Teen-aged Chloe visits her father at the house he shares with two other men. Norris, a roommate, tells Chloe about a lost love and she helps him locate a current phone number for the woman so he can make contact again.
>
> *Felicity (WB)*: College sophomore Ben is hurt by the break-up of his romance with Felicity. His former girlfriend, Julie, comforts him.

YOUTH AND THEIR PARENTS

TV parents are most often shown as absent or ineffective, although some programs feature supportive and effective parent characters.

Many TV youth characters exist in a world void of parental involvement. In some cases, the parental absence is a plot device. In other cases, parents are simply not shown. This occurs most often when the focus of action is outside the family arena (i.e. at school or work) or when youth are not the central characters.

In several programs, the parents take a trip, leaving the children behind. In some cases the youth are left with another relative or friend. In other cases, the youth are left unsupervised. For example:

<u>Youth left unsupervised in parents' absence:</u>
Freaks and Geeks (NBC)
High schoolers Lindsay and Sam are left alone when their parents go out of town for the weekend.

Beverly Hills, 90210 (Fox)
Lucy, a high school graduate, is left alone in a luxury hotel in Beverly Hills while her parents vacation in Europe.

Popular (WB)
Samantha and Brooke, both high school sophomores, are left alone in their respective homes while their parents go on a cruise.

<u>Youth left in the care of a relative or friend in parents' absence</u>:
Charmed (WB)
Teen-aged Jenny is left with her uncle in San Francisco for several months while her parents work out of the country.

Mission Hill (WB)
After their parents move to another state, Kevin moves in to his older brother's apartment to finish out his senior year of high school.

In some cases, the parents' absence is due to death or incarceration:

Party of Five (Fox)
The Salingers' parents died in a car accident, leaving the five children to take care of themselves.

Dawson's Creek (WB)
Joey, a high school senior, lives with her older sister. Joey's mother died long ago, and her father is serving a jail sentence for drug dealing.

In programs where youth are not the central characters, we often don't know about the family relationships of the youth characters. For example:

> *Veronica's Closet (NBC)*
> Olive volunteers to read to a Jason, a blind youth. The only times we see Jason are during the reading sessions at the Braille Institute office.

> *Steve Harvey (WB)*
> Steve is a high school teacher who interacts with a number of students during the school day. The students' home lives are neither shown nor discussed.

When parents are involved in their children's lives, they are about as likely to be shown as effective as ineffective. In some instances, parents are identified as the root of youth characters' problems. In other cases, while they may not be the cause of their children's problems, they are shown as ineffective or uninvolved in their children's lives.

> Parents Shown as Cause of Youth Problems:
> *Family Guy (Fox)*
> When their family inherits a mansion from a wealthy relative, Megan and Chris' father sells their belongings to afford a staff of servants. Megan, Chris, and their father become upper class snobs until their mother sells the mansion and buys back their old house.

> *Safe Harbor (WB)*
> Teen-aged Jamie runs away from her wealthy family because she fears sexual abuse from her father.

> *Family Law (CBS)*
> Recovering drug addict, Holly Reynolds, attempts to regain custody of her children. Her adolescent son doesn't believe his mother is better or that she loves him, and convinces his mom to give up her parental rights so he can stay with his foster parents.

<u>Parents Shown as Uninvolved or Ineffective</u>
Roswell (WB)
Liz, a high schooler, is shot when a fight breaks out in the
diner where she works. Although the incident is the subject
of a major investigation, her single father is shown only
once checking on her health, and is not present while she is
interviewed by the sheriff.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (WB)
Buffy starts college and feels overwhelmed by the new
pressures facing her. She goes to see her mother for
support, but her mother is busy making a storage area out
of Buffy's old room and isn't responsive to Buffy's needs.

Parents are also shown as effective and compassionate, although with much less
frequency than they are shown as absent, unavailable, or ineffective. For example:

Odd Man Out (ABC)
When teen-aged Andrew creates a romantic problem for
himself, his mother offers support and encouragement but
refuses to step in and fix the problem for him.

Seventh Heaven (WB)
While Rev. Camden recovers from a heart attack, his wife
is shown doing a variety of parenting duties: helping with
homework, discussing future career goals, and providing
moral support.

Once and Again (ABC)
When teen-aged Eli has concerns about sex, he asks his
father for advice. Eli's father listens and offers serious
advice.

YOUTH ACTIVITIES
Coders identified the frequency with which youth characters engaged in a predetermined
set of activities. For each character, coders determined whether the activity was a
primary activity (performed in more than ½ of the character's screen time), a secondary
activity (performed in less than ½ of the character's screen time), or not performed.
Table 6 shows the activity participation for youth characters by gender of character.

TABLE 6
ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION
BY GENDER OF YOUTH CHARACTER
IN PRIME-TIME ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMMING

Activity	Performed by Male Characters (n=82)		Performed by Female Characters (n=81)		Total
	Primary Activity	Secondary Activity	Primary Activity	Secondary Activity	
At School – Socializing	13	25	18	19	75
Doing School work	0	14	7	17	38
"Hanging Out"	22	12	14	16	64
Making Out	2	8	2	9	21
Involved in Extracurricular Activities	5	3	5	6	19
Fighting	2	10	2	2	16
Drinking Alcohol, Using Drugs	3	6	3	3	15
Doing Chores	0	7	0	8	15
Working at Low Wage Employment	2	3	3	7	15
Taking Care of Family Members	1	1	0	3	5
Working as Entrepreneur	0	1	2	1	4
Spending Time With Children (non-relatives)	1	0	0	0	1
Involved in Gang Activity	1	0	0	0	1

Given the emphasis on personal relationships of youth characters, it is not surprising that the most common activity identified for these characters is socializing – both at school and elsewhere.

Eighty-seven youth characters (53%) were shown at school, but they were twice as likely to be shown socializing than engaging in academic work there. Although more than half of the characters in the sample were shown at school, they appeared in just 40% (n=18) of the programs, and clustered in just a handful. More than ½ of all youth characters shown at school appear on just six programs (*Dawson's Creek, Freaks and Geeks, Get Real, Popular, Roswell, Seventh Heaven*), and depictions of youth doing schoolwork (either at home or school) are concentrated in just three programs (*Felicity, Freaks and Geeks, Popular*).

The second most common activity – "hanging out" – identifies socializing behavior off school grounds.   It is a more widely depicted activity, being shown in more than half of the programs in the sample (n=23, 51%). "Hanging out" most frequently took place at the homes of youth characters, although youth were also seen "hanging out" in a nightclub (*That 70s Show*), the local diner (*Roswell*), a fraternity house (*Ryan Caulfield: Year One*), and a dormitory room (*Moesha*).

Twelve percent of youth characters (10% of males, 14 % of females) participated in some form of school-oriented extracurricular activities. These activities included: practicing for a high school football game (*Popular, Dawson's Creek*), cheerleading (*Popular, Dawson's Creek*), working on the school newspaper (*Popular*) or yearbook (*Sabrina, The Teenaged Witch*), and performing with the school drama club (*Freaks and Geeks*).

Just under ten percent of youth characters (n=15, 9%) were shown doing chores at home or working at low wage employment. Four characters were shown working in entrepreneurial positions. Three of those were musicians and one was a party planner. Female youths were shown twice as often as male youths in low wage employment. Youth characters worked at a range of jobs, including waiter/waitress (*Two Guys and a Girl, Roswell*), receptionist (*Time of Your Life, The Practice*), go-fer (*Moesha*), and police officer (*Ryan Caulfield: Year One*).

Drugs and alcohol were not shown as part of the everyday world of most of the characters.

Although 15 of the characters (9%) were shown drinking alcohol or using illegal drugs, these depictions were concentrated in just five programs. In four of those programs (*Freaks and Geeks, Mission Hill, Ryan Caulfield: Year One, Time of Your Life*), youth characters attended parties and consumed alcohol. Three of the parties took place at the homes of one of the characters and one was held at a fraternity house. One character was shown alone in her hotel room abusing both drugs and alcohol (*Beverly Hills, 90210*).

Fifteen percent of male youth characters (n=12) and five percent of female youth characters (n=4) engaged in some form of fighting. These fights ranged from serious to science fiction to silly. On *Boy Meets World (ABC)*, two female youths fight two male youth characters in WWF fashion for the right to rent an apartment they all want. Buffy and her friends in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (WB)* fight a pack of vampires who terrorize their college campus. In two instances, alcohol-induced fighting erupts between male youths at parties (*Freaks and Geeks, Ryan Caulfield: Year One*). A bully punches a high school freshman in *Get Real (WB)*, and two sibling arguments become physical in *Safe Harbor (WB)* and *Mission Hill (WB)*.

YOUTH ORIENTED ISSUES

For each program, coders identified if any characters engaged in discussion of youth-oriented issues. For each of the issues discussed, coders identified if youth characters expressed an opinion on the importance of the issue. Coders determined from the discussion if the participating characters perceived the issue as important (eg. "I'm concerned about…") or unimportant (eg. "It's no big deal…"). When no opinion was expressed, characters were coded for their participation in the discussion only. The following examples should help illustrate how issue importance was coded:

> Discussion of Social Pressure/Popularity as Important Issue:
> *Popular (WB)*
> High school sophomores Nicole and Brooke discuss
> throwing a party at Brooke's house while her father is
> away. Brooke expresses reservations until Nicole reminds
> her of the importance of popularity by saying: "The first
> party of the year creates the social Siberia and I, for one, do
> not intend to be left out in the cold." Brooke responds:
> "You're so right."

> Discussion of Sex as Unimportant Issue:
> *Get Real (WB)*
> Sixteen-year old Camron has a young woman spend the
> night with him in his family's home. When his mother
> objects the next morning, Camron demonstrates his
> perception of the lack of importance of this issue when he
> explains: "Mom, I know how hyper you get about kids and
> sex and stuff like that, so I had Gabby stay over… for you."

Table 7 presents the frequency of issue discussions among adult and youth characters in the sample.

TABLE 7
YOUTH ORIENTED ISSUE DISCUSSION
IN PRIME-TIME ENTERTAINMENT SERIES

Issue	Number of Programs Containing Discussion of the Issue*				
	Discussed by Parents	Discussed by Youth	Discussed by Teachers	Discussed by Other Adults	Total Programs
Family	13	15	1	10	24
Romance	4	17	2	3	18
School	5	7	1	1	11
Social Pressures	1	9	1	3	10
Sex	4	8	1	2	9
College	3	5	-	1	7
Lack of Money	2	4	-	3	6
Declining Morals	4	1	1	3	6
Jobs/Economic opportunity	1	5	1	3	6
Drugs	-	3	2	3	5
Crime	-	5	-	4	5
Personal Health	2	3	-	1	5
School Crime	1	-	1	-	2

* Some programs contained discussion by more than one character type

<u>Youth-oriented issues discussed most frequently by youth and adult characters were: parent-teen relationships, romantic relationships, doing well in school, and social pressure/popularity.</u>
Discussion of issues facing youth in modern society is heavily dependent upon the story lines of program episodes. With substantial emphasis on the immediate social environment of youth characters, it is not surprising that the issues that receive the most frequent and in-depth discussion by characters are those relating to youth romance, social pressures, school, and family.

Family issues were discussed in more than ½ of all programs (n=24, 53%), and were a focal discussion in ten of those episodes. Twenty youths participated in discussions of family issues. They most commonly talked about these issues with their peers (n=11), parents (n=10), siblings (n=7). When youth characters expressed an opinion on the issue, they were overwhelmingly likely to comment on its importance. Ten characters commented that family issues were important to them; just one mentioned the issue's lack of importance. Nine characters engaged in discussion about family issues without expressing an opinion.

Youth romance issues were discussed in 18 programs (40%) and were the topic of a focal discussion 11 times.   Thirty-four percent of youth characters (n=56) engaged in discussions of youth romance issues, and were overwhelmingly likely to express the opinion that this was an important issue.   Thirty-eight youth characters (68% of those who engaged in discussion of romance issues) opined that this issue was important. Just three characters commented on the issue's lack of importance to them.

Coders identified the characters with whom TV youth discussed personal issues, including romance. When youth characters were involved in discussions of personal issues, their discussion partners were far more likely to be other youth characters than any other type of confidant. Eighty-two percent of youth characters involved in discussions of personal issues spoke with peers (n=65). Just nine percent (n=7) spoke with their parents about these issues.

Youth characters are far more likely than any adult characters to discuss issues relating to youth romance, social pressures, and sex. Conversely, adult characters express more concern than youth characters over issues of declining youth morals and school crime. When youth characters discuss social pressures and sex, they are likely to express the belief that these issues are important to them. TV adolescents are eight times more likely to comment on the importance of the issue of social pressure/popularity (n=16) than to comment on the issue's lack of importance (n=2). Similarly, sexual issues are three times as likely to be described as important than unimportant by TV youth (14 say "important" vs. 5 say "unimportant").

DISCUSSION OF YOUTH
Discussion of adolescence and adolescents in general is relatively rare on entertainment television. Most programs featuring youth characters did not include discussion of a broader social context. Characters discussed particular youth, but rarely did the discussion get raised to a societal or developmental level. However, when youth in general were discussed, a variety of terms were used to refer to this population. Coders identified all instances of reference to youth, including words used to describe youth characters and phrases to describe the plight of youth.

When discussing youth, adult characters most often use terminology that sets adolescents apart as young and childlike.
The most common references used by adult characters identified youth as "kids" (n=12 references) or "girls/boys" (n=11 references), unless these adults were operating within the sphere of law enforcement. Police officers and attorneys referred to youth as "minors" (n=2) and "juveniles" (n=1).

When youth characters talk about youth in general, they use a variety of terms, seemingly recognizing the blurry status that youth assume in U.S. culture. Youth characters refer to other youth as "girls/boys," "kids," "teens," or "young people." The terms used to describe youth and the frequency of use by both adult and youth characters are shown in Table 8.

TABLE 8
TERMS USED BY PRIME-TIME ENTERTAINMENT TV CHARACTERS
TO DESCRIBE YOUTH

Term Used	Frequency of Use by Adult Characters	Frequent of Use by Youth Characters
Kid(s)	12	2
Girl/Boy(s)	11	3
Young People	5	1
Child(ren)	4	-
Teen(s)	3	1
Minor(s)	2	-
Juvenile(s)	1	-

CONCLUSIONS

Television images have been shown in prior research to play a role in the development of viewers' worldviews. The information gleaned from television – both news and entertainment content – is used to form attitudes and opinions about our world and the people in it. So what do the images of youth in entertainment television tell viewers?

First, the overwhelming whiteness of the youth population on television does not reflect the actual teen population, but can send a powerful message about the importance of different teens in society. While youth of color are often featured on news stories about crime (Woodruff, 1998), they are noticeably absent from the non-violent world of entertainment programming.

Youth in this sample of programming were overwhelmingly ordinary adolescents with concerns related to their immediate experiences – school, peers, romance, family. Romance, peer friendships, and family issues dominated the dialogue and actions of youth characters. Societal level problems were neither discussed nor acted upon by youth characters. Such an emphasis in television programming reinforces a common stereotype of teens as self-absorbed.

TV youth did, however, show concern for the problems of others, and often helped others resolve their own problems. TV youth are loyal to their friends and show compassion when friends face problems.

Youth characters frequently existed in a world devoid of parental or family involvement. For many of the characters, family situations were unknown. For those whose family situations were known, parent characters were often absent, uninvolved, or ineffective. This portrayal of youth as self-reliant sends an empowering message to youth viewers, but it can also convey the sense that youth do not need connections to their families or the larger community. This type of message can impact the way both adolescents and adults think about the needs of youth. The self-contained world of TV youth functions without intervention from social agencies, businesses, or government. With this type of image consistently repeated throughout different programs, it is not inconceivable that viewers will use such information when forming opinions about the needs of adolescents outside the TV world.

TV youth are talked about most often with terms that set them apart from adults. Youth and adult characters alike use words like "kids" and "girls" to describe adolescents. The use of terminology that implies immaturity seems in stark contrast to the images of youth as self-reliant problem solvers. This duality does seem consistent, however, with public opinion data showing that adults are not often sure how to define adolescents (Aubrun & Grady, 2000).

Popular television entertainment is a relatively conservative medium – it does not lead social change, but rather reflects it. The images of youth shown in prime-time entertainment TV reflect widely held assumptions about adolescents in U.S. culture. But just as these images are a *reflection* of currently held belief systems, these images are also *influences* on newly forming belief systems. Adolescent viewers use television entertainment for information about their current and future social roles. Adult viewers, too, learn from television, especially in areas with which they are unfamiliar. The images presented to viewers in the current season reinforce the idea that youth are independent, isolated, and concerned with a narrow range of issues.

For those concerned with youth in U.S. society, it is imperative to understand the nature of the information that contributes to the worldviews of decision-makers. Television is still the most ubiquitous medium in America, and entertainment programming reaches nearly every U.S. household. Analyzing the consistent imagery about youth contained in entertainment programming provides insight into the current state of cultural attitudes, and can point to areas where strategic communication can effectively work to change attitudes.

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APPENDIX A

Prime-time entertainment programs including youth characters:

1.   Ally McBeal (Fox)
2.   Beverly Hills, 90210 (Fox)
3.   Boy Meets World (ABC)
4.   Buffy the Vampire Slayer (WB)
5.   Charmed (WB)
6.   Dawson's Creek (WB)
7.   Diagnosis Murder (CBS)
8.   The Drew Carey Show (ABC)
9.   E.R. (NBC)
10. Family Guy (Fox)
11. Family Law (CBS)
12. Felicity (WB)
13. For Your Love (WB)
14. Freaks and Geeks (NBC)
15. Futurama (Fox)
16. Get Real (WB)
17. The Hughley's (ABC)
18. Judging Amy (CBS)
19. King of the Hill (Fox)
20. Ladies' Man (CBS)
21. Law and Order (NBC)
22. Mission Hill (WB)
23. Moesha (UPN)
24. Now and Again (CBS)
25. Odd Man Out (ABC)
26. Oh, Grow Up (ABC)
27. Once and Again (ABC)
28. Party of Five (Fox)
29. Popular (WB)
30. Profiler (NBC)
31. Roswell (WB)
32. Ryan Caulfield: Year One (Fox)
33. Sabrina, the Teenaged Witch (ABC)
34. Safe Harbor (WB)
35. Seventh Heaven (WB)
36. Steve Harvey (WB)
37. That 70's Show (Fox)
38. The Parkers (UPN)
39. The Practice (ABC)
40. The Pretender (NBC)
41. Third Rock from the Sun (NBC)
42. Third Watch (CBS)

43. Time of Your Life (Fox)
44. Two Guys and a Girl (ABC)
45. Veronica's Closet (NBC)
46. Walker, Texas Ranger (CBS)