Soap Opera Heroines and Women Consumers: Images of Vulnerability

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Daytime soap operas exemplify an industrial art constructed according to genre “conventions that circulate between industry, text, and subject” or audience (Neale 1980, 20). The purpose of our study is to investigate the influence of textual images of vulnerable women characters on the female consumers who constitute the majority of viewers. The audience has remained consistent over the past generation: mostly low-income and less educated women, teens, and elderly (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli 1994). Among the most long-standing motivations are emotional release, personal gratification, companionship, and escape. However benign the motivations may appear, we suggest that they reveal a vulnerability loop in which industry profits flow from a genre that specializes in conveying images of damaged women living luxurious lives to accepting viewers who develop parasocial attachments to unrealistic and inappropriate role models.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Daytime soap operas exemplify an industrial art constructed according to genre “conventions that circulate between industry, text, and subject” or audience (Neale 1980, 20). The purpose of our study is to investigate the influence of textual images of vulnerable women characters on the female consumers who constitute the majority of viewers. The audience has continued to consist over the past generation: mostly low-income and less educated women, teens, and elderly (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorillii 1994). Among the most long-standing motivations are emotional release, personal gratification, companionship, and escape. However be

Prior research indicates that the audience is “vulnerable” in two related definitional senses (OEDO 2004, 3.b):

1: An audience inclined to perceive an “inner need” for emotional satisfaction able to be fulfilled by the fantasy relationships that soaps sustain—the definition itself taken from a late Victorian romance, Marcella (Mrs Humphrey Ward 1894).

2: An audience exposed to the possibility of being ‘emotionally harmed’ (NOAD 2001, 1894) by persistent viewing of the soaps’ ritual of gender subordination.

Our study of vulnerable women characters and audiences begins with the textual genre, which necessitates mining literary theory to ascertain stimulus attributes briefly defined as commonalities shared by a distinctive literary family of texts (Frye 1957, 1973]). Next, to link stimulus variables to response characteristics, it presents social science research drawn from diverse disciplines such as anthropology (Rofel 1994), sociology (Radway 1985), communications research (Rubin and Perse 1987), and consumer research (Diener 1993; Lavin 1995).

Qualitative data were obtained from 297 long-term viewers of four TV soap operas: Young and Restless (YR), General Hospital (GH), All My Children (AMC), and Days of Our Lives (DOL). Respondents were heavy TV viewers (O’Guinn and Shrum 1997) who had watched the selected soap program for over 20 years and tuned in an average of 4.74 days per week. This represents an astonishing total of over 5,000 episodes watched on average per respondent. They commented on the programs, characters, and five consumption categories based on prior research on TV series’ portrayals of consumption (Hirschman 1988; O’Guinn and Shrum 1997; Diener 1993): clothing, jewelry, home furnishings, beverages, and restaurants/bars.

Responses were categorized into five themes associated with vulnerability, here defined as an inner need for emotional satisfaction satisfied by parasocial attachments to the characters and the possibility of being emotionally harmed by viewing images of passively subordinate women characters. Three of the themes relate to the characters’ lifestyles: attention to details, acceptance as the norm, and aspiration; and two relate to viewer evaluations of their own lives in comparison: disappointment, and substitution of soap-watching for real relationships.

Attention to details reflects audience attachment to characters viewed as part of their lives, for viewers describe characters in as much detail as they would talk about real people. Perhaps the most directly harmful detail is the presence of alcohol across programs and settings in a world in which drinking is associated with successful characters, “looks attractive, and is a part of everyday life” (Diener 1993, 8). Soap life locales convey an impression of realism to TV viewers, who, like radio audiences before them, show “fierce acceptance of the reality of soaps” (La Guardia 1983, 6) as well as its normalcy (Churchill and Moschis 1979; Russell, Norman and Heckler 2004). Marriage is generally depicted as the means of achieving a life of luxury that viewers not only accept as realistic but also aspire to attain. As one viewer says about Alexia Davis (GH), “She doesn’t use the kitchen except to microwave popcorn and if it gets dirty or needs straightening she’ll call the maid service” (43, 35 yrs). However, aspirations are mostly expressed in terms of comparisons between a character’s moneyed life and a viewer’s more impoverished one. Sometimes, a viewer’s aspiration reflects a disjunction between her perception of the way that a newly rich soap character lives and her unrealistic opinion of what her life should be like.

The structural aspects of soaps—serialization, suspenseful stopping points, and daily showings—influence viewers’ post-show emotional responses to characters with whom they are emotionally involved. Viewers react to the end of an episode by expressing an intense sense of loss after it ends. Some viewers are so emotionally involved with soaps that their responses reflect a heightened level of need for the next episode characteristic of addiction to drugs, alcohol, food, and so forth (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 1996). Emotional loss suggests that viewers feel parasocially attached to characters viewed as surrogate companions whose departure leaves a gap in one’s life. By becoming friends with soap characters, viewers participate in fictional relationships that substitute for real ones.

Soaps occupy viewers on a daily basis, allowing them to satisfy emotional needs by engaging in parasocial relationships with mostly unwholesome characters. The relationships are unhealthy not only because the characters are poor role models, but also because the viewers can become addicted to soaps and substitute surrogate friends for real ones. The themes provide insight into vulnerable characters as an influence on vulnerable audiences, for, in accordance with our definitions, viewers are exposed to emotional harm by persistent viewing of subordinate and victimized women with whom viewers enter into emotionally satisfying relationships.

REFERENCES


