

IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION THROUGH THE CHANGING  
VIEWS, EXPECTATIONS, AND REPRESENTATIONS  
OF FAMILY ON TELEVISION

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## **ABSTRACT**

With a focus on the psychological process of identification with media characters, this thesis builds upon existing research about the various representations of familial structures in fictional television and their effect on audience members. Using survey data to inquire about how modern television's evolving definitions of family could impact viewer responses to accessible programming allows for further exploration of the role that the familial aspects and nuances which are portrayed on television may play in the way that viewers experience identification with these characters. After performing a quantitative and qualitative analysis of survey responses, given modest results it can be concluded that similarity between the viewer's family and the family of an on-screen character is a predictor of identification between the viewer and that character. We gain, through this research, a deeper understanding of trends in how participants experience identification with fictional families and individuals. Furthermore, we can better understand how audiences could be influenced by seeing (or not seeing) families that resemble one's own in entertainment media.

*Keywords:* Identification, Identity, Family, Television, Entertainment

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that the dynamics of television viewing have changed rapidly in the recent decades. With ever-multiplying cable channels and the advent of streaming services that supply a seemingly infinite amount of content, it is not likely that two consumers will view the same repertoire of television series. Newer variances in programming and audience expectations are causing an epic shift in the way that television is viewed, absorbed, and interpreted among audiences. One aspect of television remains the same, however, and that is the pervasiveness of the influence of family. Ongoing exposure to televised families continues to effect socialization among family members in real life, as our real-world family experiences effect our perceptions of the families that we see on screen.

Not even two decades ago, the way that different family structures were portrayed on television was a debated topic in the public sphere as the older and idealized television families were slowly being replaced by those that appeared more non-traditional and imperfect. Influential voices weighed in on portrayals of single parents on television (e.g. former Vice President Dan Quayle's 1992 comments on *Murphy Brown*) as glorifying "anti-family" values (Albada, 2000, p.79), and conservative media advocacy groups emerged to counter prime time portrayals that went against their classic definition of family (Perlman, 2016, pp. 124 – 125). Individuals grew concerned about the influence that these programs would have on young viewers and society as a whole. As decades passed, television has changed drastically. With an increase in the number of media producers and providers, and a constantly growing variety of programming, there is a wider representation of families, each one less "traditional" than the last. As a whole,

fictional families continue to remain a focal point in the development of our collective culture and understanding of the world in which we live.

Oftentimes in entertainment programming the family is either central to an entire series, or in some way the protagonists' family life and family dynamic, or how family members interact and relate to one-another, inevitably affects the storyline and character development in some significant way. While off-screen individuals' identities and sense of self are largely influenced by the family and their own place within it, the same can often be said for their favorite characters on the small screen. This thesis explores how these familial aspects of television entertainment and individual characters impact the way viewers become absorbed in the text through identification with these characters.

The focus of my research is on gaining a better understanding of what factors cause viewers to experience the psychological process of identification with television characters, and what role the family plays in this. The research allows us to dive deeper into the role that family identity plays in individual identity, and the extent to which this changes or enhances viewer perceptions of individual characters.

By better understanding how viewers experience identification with characters on television, and the factors that cause and predict the occurrence of this psychological process, we will be better informed of how viewers process messages in television programming on a larger scale, particularly prosocial or persuasive messages embedded within the stories, plotlines, and structure of these programs. A viewer experiencing stronger identification with a character while viewing a program is less likely to be resistant to messages that are communicated within the narrative, and more likely to experience changes in attitude or behavior after watching said program. Entertainment, in

purposeful programming as well as unintentional consequence, has messages constantly embedded into it—messages about how viewers should perceive the world around them and act within it. Learning more about which factors play a greater role in this process will contribute to the larger scope of research about the effects of entertainment media on audiences.

Additionally, representation of different communities, populations, and social groups in media and entertainment is a topic that has become more widely discussed and increasingly important in the public dialogue. It is my hope that this research will also aid us in better understanding audience perceptions of the way that families are represented on television today and contribute to the discussion of the importance and effects of inclusive and positive representation on a larger scale.

The main objective of this thesis is to build upon existing research about how the ongoing portrayals and representations on television of different familial structures and dynamics effects the viewing experience of audience members, and how it continues to affect them after the television is turned off. Using survey data I view this through the lens of character identification and inquire about how modern and evolving portrayals of family may impact this process. This thesis observes various elements of the family dynamic and what the impacts of these elements look like in today's mediascape. I intend to further build upon research about the effects of different family portrayals in fictional programming by looking for trends in how participants identify with and are drawn to fictional families and individuals, and the effects of seeing (or not seeing) families on television that resemble their own. This research ultimately seeks the answer to two main questions:

*R1: How do television audiences identify and experience identification with characters on television programs in the context of family and in relation to their own families?*

*R2: How do audiences perceive modern television's depictions and definitions of the family identity, particularly in relation to their own?*

In Chapter 2 I review the existing literature about representations of family on television, and the way that real-life families have perceived these representations throughout the years. I will describe what existing research has posited about the ways in which viewers use television as a reference from which they can better understand and explain the experiences that they encounter within their own lives and families, as well as ways in which the real-life family and the television family have historically affected each other. I also discuss the continual changes in how television entertainment is produced and distributed among audiences, and the consequences that this continues to have on the way in which audiences consume said entertainment, as well as what this means for televised families and what these portrayals look like. This literature review also provides defense for the continued necessity of inclusive representation of varied familial portrayals, and how these portrayals inadvertently communicate messages to audiences of what is accepted and valid, and what is expected of them in society. Chapter 3 explores the theoretical concepts that drive this study, establishing what character identification is and what existing research on this psychological process has taught us thus far. Distinguishing identification from similar and related concepts and processes, this chapter explains why identification is of particular interest and value for this topic.

This chapter also explores the connection between this process and the desired effects and outcomes of educational entertainment, and further lays out the positive consequences that result when audiences experience stronger identification with such characters.

Based on the research, knowledge, and existing questions outlined in these chapters, I formulate the following hypotheses that will be tested in my own research:

*H1: Viewers are more likely to experience identification with characters who share a similar family identity.*

*H2: Similarity of family dynamic, or individual role within the family dynamic, will be a greater predictor of identification than similarity of family structure, or role in the family structure.*

Chapter 4 outlines the method of research that was conducted, as well as some challenges and obstacles that were encountered when recruiting participants and acquiring data for this research. This chapter will go into detail about the design and format of the survey as the primary source of data for my research. Chapters 5 and 6 present a summary and analysis of the data collected in this study. Data obtained through closed-ended questions are used to obtain statistical results largely based in calculations of correlation in order to assess the extent to which specific factors potentially affect and predict the process of identification with individual characters, as well as the family members of a featured character on a given television program. Chapter 5 also goes through an analysis of optional, open-ended questions through which participants were able to justify and elaborate on their closed ended, numerical responses. These analyses

allow us to observe trends in how viewers perceive present-day portrayals of family on television, particularly in relation to their own families and experiences.

This thesis explores role that the familial aspects and nuances which are portrayed on television may play in the way that viewers experience identification with these characters. With this research, I intend to contribute to existing research on what factors will contribute to increased likelihood of audience members experiencing identification, and how this could be a tool in educational entertainment and the potential spread of positive and inclusive messages among audiences. Ultimately this thesis will provide further insight into how seeing, or not seeing, one's own family within the structure and dynamic of televised families could impact audiences' viewing experience and the ongoing effects that they experience from continued exposure to what is currently accessible to them through the small screen.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Origins of the Field

#### *Researching Family and Television*

It was realized early on that media, television programs in particular, have a significant effect on aspects of how consumers of these programs move through the world. A particular point of interest is how such mass media inform the way that people move through their social circles. Lull (1990) points out that these broadcasts can be viewed as “uniquely employed social resources for interpersonal communication systems” (p. 29). He also notes that while there was a time that mass media were not noticed as forces in how interpersonal relationships and social environments are constructed, it has become very clear that these media play a central part in how social units, families in particular, interact and establish what is considered to be normative behavior within said social units (pp. 29-30). Televised entertainment, specifically that which is geared toward families serves more than an entertainment function and additionally influences, and potentially even changes, how the family itself functions.

Intriguing dramas and lighthearted sitcoms in fact serve a very practical purpose in the home setting. Lull (1990) lists relational and social uses of this type of media, including communication facilitation and social learning (p. 36). The idea of communication facilitation is of particular interest in regard to the importance of media in the family setting. Commonly children use television shows and characters as a reference when they discuss issues and experiences with others—often because these experiences are otherwise difficult for them to conceptualize or explain (Lull, 1990, p. 37). With this in mind, every choice made by writers and producers of television content is vitally important, particularly

in programming that features families. Often programming, sitcoms in particular, will center around a family when the program itself is geared toward families, made friendly for young children and entertaining enough for the entire household to watch together. The way that individual problems and challenges are portrayed within the context of a TV family has the potential to directly affect how viewers of all ages, particularly young viewers, conceptualize problems of their own and within their real-life family.

This idea can also be flipped. While television influences how viewers see and react to situations within their own families, the real-life family setting of the viewer can directly affect how they see and respond to television. Morley (1986) notes that it is important to gain a full understanding of how audience members react to context, and how individual reactions and choices in content are affected by their own social and cultural setting (pp. 16 – 17). So, one's own social setting, the family being the most foundational social setting, will not simply affect how the individual reacts to a television program, but potentially which programs they choose to begin with.

It could then be said that the TV environment and real-world environment fluidly exchange information between one-another, in some ways blurring the lines between reality and fiction. What happens in the real-world affects what is seen on screen, and what is seen on screen in many ways affects what will be said, done, and understood in the real world. Condry (1989) notes the importance of understanding how these two parts that make up the whole of a person's world will compare with one-another:

For psychologists, then, the most important questions about the content of television concerns the nature of the information presented, and how that information compares to similar kinds of information presented in the other environments to which human beings are exposed. For example, how does the information on television compare to that of everyday life? In portraying a community, a workplace, or a family (even when such portrayals are only

fictional), what distortions or biases occur in the television information when compared with the same phenomena in the real world? (p. 5)

This is applicable to many aspects of a person's life and environment on and off screen. Then, it is reasonable and even necessary to wonder how this applies to family life in particular. This inevitably becomes part of the public discourse, with varied ideas of what information should be represented about the family environment, and how.

In earlier research of family television viewing it was acknowledged that viewers will not always choose what to watch based on their actual viewing preferences—audience behavior is often influenced by others in and out of the group of people with whom they are viewing (Morley, 1986, pp. 18-19). In earlier contexts this could largely refer to the idea that most often families were watching television together, as a united activity, on one and likely the only household television set. Oftentimes viewers were at the mercy of whomever had the power of decision-making regarding what the family would watch (Morley, 1986, p. 36). While this restricted how often each viewer could exercise choice and preference in their TV consumption, it also was further justification for television programs to be aimed at the family. Networks strived to produce television shows that the entire family could watch together, and that viewers of all ages would be able to enjoy.

Additionally, Morley (1986) notes that in a behavioral context television was not always consumed because the viewer actively wanted to watch television, but also as a simple means to either connect or disconnect with others in the room (p. 20). In the days of one-television households, viewers could join their families in watching and laughing and engaging in further conversation about the program with each other. A viewer could also use the television as a way to escape—while being in the same room with their family

and spending family time, watching television would allow the viewer to spend time not interacting with the rest of the family.

When it comes to the act of watching television within the household, and how this effects the family dynamic, certain aspects have stayed the same even while the technology has evolved. Households nowadays typically have more than one television in the home, as well as laptops and cell phones which now, due to the nature of digital technology and the rise of streaming services, are effectively smaller and easily portable personal televisions. Families, whether watching together or on their separate devices, may still use a particular television show as a way to bond or relate to one another. Individuals in the household at the same time may use the fact that there are multiple televisions to go to, including the devices that they can fit into their pocket, as a means of escaping and disconnecting when they see fit. Of course the emerging technology is still causing significant changes in how we watch television, in and out of the household.

### *How We Watch and Why it Matters*

A family may not necessarily sit physically in one room together to watch television anymore, but television's other functions within the household in many ways remain the same. One significant change is the concept of choice. What is available to watch and when it is available to be watched makes a significant difference in viewer choice (Morley, 1986, p. 16), and with the number of devices and producers of content multiplying, what is available can no longer be summarized in a thin addition to the weekly newspaper.

In the early days of television there were fewer options for networks, some parts of the country having few more than one or two channels available to them, those not

living in an urban area often being at a disadvantage for choices. This led to vast majorities of the population all watching the same shows and having the same set of cultural references (Cummins & Gordon, 2006, p. 20), as opposed to present day which offers through hundreds of channels and streaming services a seemingly infinite amount of programs for audiences to choose from.

It can hardly be argued that there has been a significant increase in both platforms and programming in recent years. Not only are there more channels, allowing for more weekly programming to be aired, but numerous streaming services (e.g. Netflix and Hulu) provide an endless library of content for viewers to watch on their own schedule, independent of timeslots determined by ratings. While traditionally networks are limited to the amount of programming that can fit within a week-by-week schedule, today's technology allows to make a gargantuan number of programs available simultaneously. This is particularly true for television series as opposed to feature films. Business Insider published an article in early 2018 indicating that Netflix had taken thousands of movies off of its platform, but the number of television series (from other networks as well as Netflix originals) increased exponentially. While nearly a decade ago Netflix prioritized movies, it has made a clear shift in the interest of television programming (Clark, 2018).

On one hand, this structure of streaming services, which are ever growing in popularity and in industry power, theoretically allows room for more diverse programming. Not just in numbers alone, but in the potential freedom from network restrictions and conventions that seem to have been burned into the fabric of the industry—and we even see instances of these companies making sure to promote this aspect of their platform, even if it is primarily a marketing tactic. Recently Netflix

cancelled its own sitcom, *One Day at a Time*, releasing its final episode in early 2019, due to the viewership being too low in numbers for a fourth season (VanDerWerff, 2019). This series, inspired by a 1970's series of the same name, centered around a Cuban-American single-parent family and dealt openly with issues such as coming out and mental health; and when canceled Netflix publicly appealed to audiences through Twitter, "And to anyone who felt seen or represented – possibly for the first time – by ODAAT, please don't take this as an indication your story is not important. The outpouring of love for this show is a firm reminder to us that we must continue finding ways to tell these stories" (Netflix, 2019). Since then, a channel owned by the CBS corporation has picked up the series for a fourth season (Allyn, 2019). Of course the existence and marketing interests of streaming services is one small aspect of quality, diversified family programming. Likewise, diverse programming is only one aspect of how these emerging technologies change the way that we watch TV.

Since such platforms not only make thousands of series available at any given moment, but will often make every episode of one series (which can mean hundreds of episodes depending on how many seasons the show ran) available on demand. Often, these episodes are released an entire season at a time. This allows viewers to watch more frequently, and in marathon session, a behavior commonly referred to as "binge watching". This behavior is thought to involve psychological processes and behaviors, causing viewers to constantly crave more on-demand content (Tukachinsky & Eyal, 2018, p. 277). As this may cause some viewers to continue to engage in this behavior of rapid, binge-viewing, they are naturally increasing their exposure to the programming

available to them, increasing the potential that they will be influenced, knowingly or not, by the content and characters of these programs.

Tukachinsky and Eyal (2018) conducted a survey study which hypothesized that extensive marathon viewing would be positively correlated with character identification (p. 279) and ultimately found that this was in fact the case. It was found that for viewers who markedly participated in a higher level of character viewing, higher level of identification was experienced, and higher numbers of parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956) were formed—character involvement as a whole was enhanced (pp. 284-285). Emerging technologies are changing the television industry not only by creating increased opportunities to create programming that will resonate more deeply with audiences of all different backgrounds, views, and environments, but by directly effecting the way that we process and connect with the programming that is offered to us.

For those fortunate enough to have plentiful access to these platforms, this means more opportunities to find diverse and relatable depictions of family and family life. However, television is ultimately still “embedded in a social context and most are created for profit” (Krisky & Sargent, 2018, p. 171), and an industry’s embedded traditions won’t change easily overnight.

## **Media Content – the Nuclear Tradition**

### ***Terminology***

An important insight into the way that family structures have been viewed (in and out of the media) can be seen in simple vocabulary. Depending on the source and the voices behind it, we may hear families referred to as “nuclear”, “intact”, or “traditional,” the three

terms referring virtually to the same thing: two parents and children. For example, Oxford Dictionaries (2018) refers to an “intact” family as “a nuclear family in which membership has remained constant, in the absence of divorce or other divisive factors”; Merriam-Webster (2018), in terms of opposition, defines *nontraditional family* as “a family that is not made up of one mother, one father, and a child or children.” Numerous definitions for these words exist that all relay the same formula: two (often assumed heterosexual) parents (assumed to be in their first marriage), and children (often assumed to be two or more children as opposed to just one). Families that do not fit these qualifications are referred to with terms such as *nontraditional* and *non-intact*, as well as *unconventional*, but also terms like *alternative* and even *broken*, which no matter the context carry with them strikingly negative connotations. Many would see such word-choice to be insulting.

Such terms will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis, as they are used and quoted interchangeably throughout decades of research and commentary, and depending on the writer’s choice and environment. However, when referencing my own thoughts and ideas, and not directly quoting another researcher, I will use the terms *nuclear* and *non-nuclear*, or *traditional* and *non-traditional*, depending on the context, when I describe different structures of families.

### ***Advocacy Groups and Oppositions of the “Non-Traditional”***

Current public discourse regarding representation on television tends to focus on the question of how often different groups of people are represented. We view how these groups that are considered minority or marginalized (i.e. people of color, members of the LGBTQA+ community, etc.) are represented in entertainment, and ask the question of

whether or not they are presented enough. A few decades ago, however, the conversation surrounded questions of whether or not certain groups and family structures should be represented *at all*. Public discourse also posed questions regarding the effect that the representation of individuals and families which were considered to be unconventional or undesirable by some would have on the public as opposed to representations of nuclear families, or those that were considered “intact”. The portrayal of the family institution was a driving force in how influential figures viewed popular media from an “us vs. them” mentality (Perlman, 2016, pp. 123 – 124), and became a highlighted and controversial issue. There was concern among some groups (e.g. The Parents Television Council) that portraying non-traditional, non-nuclear families in a favorable light would have a negative effect on the way that the public viewed the family institution, and the importance of what some considered an acceptable and expected family dynamic. Some extremely conservative discourse, Perlman (2016) notes, even refers to “broadcasting literally having become a ‘home invader,’ one that could corrupt the family within the confines of its own sanctum” (pp. 124 – 125).

In the early 1990’s, portions of the viewing population saw the steadily diversifying television programming of the time as a sign that the broadcast networks were almost completely discarding what they considered to be the principles of the American family in order to gain a “desirable demographic” (Perlman, 2016, p. 137). However, some evidence would suggest that the opposite was happening behind the scenes. In fact, much of television content was evaluated in the family context, and through the eyes of one family model. Even down to language, the PTC (Parents Television Council) evaluated content based on the “common sense barometer,”

essentially judging the severity of language by whether or not the phrases in question would be acceptable at the family dinner table, assuming one model of norms for how family members interact (Perlman, 2016, p. 137). This analogy and method of judgment drew on nostalgic images of what they considered to be a traditional, and essentially proper, family.

Still, public critics of the time claimed that there was an ongoing disrespect for family values related to the nuclear family, particularly on television. The “culture wars” and concerns about family television lead to what were known as family-values advocacy groups (such as the Parents Television Council) which claimed that broadcast networks had started favoring television shows that “assaulted American families” (Perlman, 2016, p. 124). They went so far as to say that the nuclear family was not only “mocked” in fictional television, but that television of the time endorsed the non-traditional family by portraying these families in an overly positive light, ignoring the negative aspects of these family dynamics that were considered by some to be non-traditional or even anti-family. One of the most memorable public criticisms of the non-traditional family was made by United States Vice President Dan Quayle in 1992, when he commented that on CBS’ *Murphy Brown*, the portrayal of the titular character’s single parenthood was a sign of the declining family values on the small screen (Albada, 2000, pp. 79 – 81). Of course many will also remember when the following season began with a two-part episode in response to the Vice President’s remarks, titled “You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato.” Addressing the issue throughout the episode, Candice Bergen’s *Murphy Brown* gives a strong but compassionate monologue toward the end of the episode stating, “Unfortunately, it seems that for him [VP Dan Quayle] the only acceptable definition of a family is a mother, a

father, and children. And in a country where millions of children grow up in non-traditional families, that definition seems painfully unfair” (Peterman, Dontzig, Siamis, & Bonerz, 1992). This response was in contrast the sentiments of others contributing to the public discourse of the early 1990’s, when initiatives such as the Family Hour campaign targeted programming that they considered to be anti-family, which included programming that gave visibility to LGBTQA+ characters (Perlman, 2016, pp. 137-138).

In a study that took place during the transition from the 1990’s into the new millennium, twenty-five parent-child pairs were interviewed about the families that were being portrayed on television at the time. It was noted that some interviewees saw “dysfunctional, broken, nontraditional, single-parented, remarried, fatherless, and ‘white trash’ as nonvalued” (Albada, 2000, p. 97). However, this study also does call to attention that when considering what has been deemed the public view, we must pay attention to which populations have been given a voice. In Albada’s study, a majority of participants were members of what would be considered intact, nuclear families. The majority were also identified as white, and members of the middle class. While this study provided valuable discourse on the matter, if we consider the pool of respondents and even the recruitment methods as somewhat representative of who in the general population is more likely to be handed the proverbial microphone, this provides even more insight into the nature of the public discourse that viewers were being inundated with at the time.

Further to the point of taking into account who in the population is given a voice in this discourse, those in the population who are larger stakeholders in the final product tend to have more power in deciding what is produced. Naturally, the money-making aims of the television industry have a hand in which types of families are shown and how

they are represented. As Krinsky and Sargent (2018) aptly state, “the intent of the industry is to generate profits, not cultural competency” (p. 165). These TV families that we are meant to know and love are, no matter how strongly we connect with them, a product.

A study published in 2011 compared responses to survey questions, obtained by the National Opinion Research Center, which focused on respondents’ opinions regarding what were considered “anti-family values” at the time (such as single-parenthood and the idea of an unwed couple having children). They did this through the lens of cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1969), looking for correlations between responses to these questions and responses to a question on the same survey regarding the amount of television viewed in an average day (Morgan, Leggett, & Shanahan, 2011, p. 53). Through negative correlation between amount of television viewing and the adoption of considerably traditional family values, they found evidence that, yes, in a way, Dan Quayle was right, that television viewing was contributing to “the fraying of traditional family values” (p. 58). But perhaps while Vice President Quayle was correct in his untrained assessment of media effects, to an extent, he was incorrect in his belief that this was an inherently bad thing. Ultimately these results tell us that television exposure has aided in viewers becoming more accepting of families and members of families that don’t fit the traditional nuclear standard, and acknowledging that families, as Candice Bergen’s Murphy Brown states, “whether by choice or circumstance...come in all shapes and sizes” (Peterman et al., 1992).

### *TV Families Through the Years*

The family sitcom is a foundational part of the television industry—the domestic setting was the first and most frequently used in the genre which became rapidly popular. And while this certainly is not the only format in which families can be portrayed on television, it is one of the most popular, and had become “one of television’s preferred modes for addressing the nation’s families” (Spigel, 1992, p. 154). Initially, however, when few homes had access to television, those audiences who were fortunate enough to have access to it were the ones primarily targeted in these shows. This meant that since the few TV owners primarily lived in major cities, shows would be “targeting specific ethnic audiences by presenting shows reflecting, or at least acknowledging, their respective cultures and urban lifestyles” (Bianculli, 2016, pp. 261 – 262), such as *The Goldbergs* which aired on CBS in 1949, a dramedy centered around a Jewish-American family living in New York City.

Few shows made non-white characters visible without appearing in “ethnic comedies” which kept portrayals confined to a certain standard. One famously successful show that happened to break this pattern was *I Love Lucy*, which aired in the 1950’s and featured a marriage between an American, Caucasian woman and a man who immigrated from Cuba and did not hide his heavy accent (Bianculli, 2016, p. 268). Even so, urban ethnic groups that were initially given focus would soon be overlooked as television access spread across the country, and a new standard would be developed in an attempt to appeal to broader audiences. Some of the humor of vaudevillian days and the backdrop of cities like New York would not capture the same interest among rural, midwestern audiences that it did for TV’s initial urban audience. In other words, as Spigel states, “the

erasure of ethnic urban roots became an industry prescription for success” (p. 147). It is this old “prescription” that plenty of audiences as well as producers of content are trying to fight back against today.

Representation of different racial and ethnic groups and communities across the media has become a subject of increasing interest—in terms of both quantity and quality. In a content analysis of most-viewed primetime television shows over a span of twenty seasons (1987 – 2008), Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi (2015) found that both categories, while improved, were overall lacking. In regard to quantity of representation they found that the prevalence of Black characters came in waves, while other ethnic groups (i.e. Latinx, Asian-American, and Native American groups) were barely present in programming at all. Ultimately minority characters have been largely left out of television. In regard to quality the overall representations of these characters were positive and there was variation in socio-economic status of the characters’ households, however the representations in the analyzed programs did have a potential to reinforce stereotypes among viewers (pp. 24 – 25).

Bianculli (2016) describes the standard for family sitcoms that started and solidified in the 1950’s (using *Ozzie & Harriet* as an example) which would in many ways set the fictional family standard for decades to come:

Dad was the head of the household, going off to work somewhere, doing something, but always returning home in time for family and to deal with problems at home. Mom was there, always, and usually with an apron and a pearl necklace, handing out bagged lunches for school. And there were kids, going to school, getting into minor trouble, but always returning to the reassuring protection of their loving family. Most shows were set in the suburbs, at a time when the suburbs themselves were a new and shiny possibility (p. 269).

It was a time when sitcom after sitcom portrayed what Bianculli (2016) refers to as “stable nuclear families in an unstable nuclear age.” What is additionally interesting

about this traditional image of the family is just how contradictory it was to what was actually happening in society. Regarding the role of women in the household, Spigel (1992) notes that “at a time when increasing numbers of married women were entering the labor force...representations of television neglect[ed] their roles in the public world” (p. 4). Additionally, there were single-parent households portrayed, as well as struggling working-class families, but they were in the minority, and only male single parents were portrayed until the 1960’s (Bianculli, 2016, p. 270). The “stable nuclear family” archetype described above was in fact not so much rooted in reality as it was in an ideal.

As constructions of the American family evolve and family structures other than the traditional nuclear family have become more visible, the types of families seen on the small screen have changed as well. Krisky and Sargent (2018) note that these non-traditional families being portrayed on screen can serve a variety of purposes, ranging from “mirroring a version of our everyday life experiences to illustrating an idealized fantasy of family life” (p. 165). Of course, in the 2000’s the nuclear family still prevails on-screen, even with the presence of shows that highlight the nontraditional. Samantha Wiscombe’s (2014) content analysis of fictional and family-focused television programming from 2004 to 2013 found that the traditional heterosexual nuclear family was the most commonly depicted (78 shows out of the 162 television families studied) (p. 51). Wiscombe’s analysis also acknowledged multiple representations of family within a single show, so that multi-family or extended family shows such as *Arrested Development*, *Brothers & Sisters*, *Army Wives*, *Modern Family*, and *Parenthood* represented three or more central television families in this study (i.e. *Modern Family* has three central family households: the Pritchett family, the Dunphy family, and the

Pritchett/Tucker family). Referring to all media including but not limited to television, Singer and Singer (2012) note that while many different examples of character types and behaviors are offered to viewers, they still largely exhibit patterns, conventions, and stereotypes that are “reflecting ideology and social power” (p. 304). Morgan, Leggett, and Shanahan (2011) note this point further in the analysis of their own study’s results. While they had observed that increased television exposure appeared to cultivate the acceptance of non-traditional family ideals, the representations of such non-traditional families held to certain racial and economic ideals that weren’t entirely representative or realistic:

The single-parent family on television, which is presumably what contributes to heavy viewers’ beliefs, bears little resemblance to the real-world, single parent family. Public criticism of single-parenthood and illegitimacy is often tinged with a veiled racism, with poor Black women as the target. Yet, on television, single parents are most often well-off men who enjoy full-time, live-in, domestic help...The very real problems faced by single parents and the feminization of poverty are ignored. That is, if heavy viewers are more accepting of the idea of single parenthood, it may not be the single parenthood of sobering reality...but the comfortably softened and luxurious fantasy of single parenthood as it exists on television. (p. 59)

In this assessment we see that even if single parents and other non-traditional families are getting screen time, inherent prejudices of race, sex, and class still play a role in determining what those on-screen families will look like, and perhaps even more so how they function.

Regardless of what televised families look like, how many of them reside together, who is related to who...most expectations and portrayals still refer back to the nuclear family function. Fogel (2012) remarks:

Even amidst a multitude of diverse sentiments and structures of families on television, the most successful images of family continue to be bound to a performance of familialism that reaffirms the values deeply rooted in the nuclear family. In many respects, this construction of an idealized nuclear family has driven our expectations in entertainment and in life. (p. 289)

In this regard, representations of fatherhood in particular have been observed and critiqued. A study published in 2016 that focused specifically on TV fathers asked people who lived consecutively with their dads between ages 15-18 to watch syndicated family television such as *The Cosby Show* and *George Lopez*, and provide their views comparing televised fathers with real-life fathers and fatherhood. Not only did many of the participants find that media fathers didn't have to deal with real-world problems, but the word "unfair" was used often to describe the way that they were portrayed in sitcoms and the sort of expectations that this sets for real fathers (Kelly, 2016, pp. 86 – 87). Further, this study of fathers displays how other social and cultural expectations have been embedded in this expectation as well, beyond the number of parents and children in the household. Regarding socio-economic status and expectation, Kelly notes that "of the 21 statements about media fathers, 16 indicated that media fathers were economically better off than actual fathers" (p. 86). Another important observation that came from three participants of this study is that these shows were an example of how entertainment media in general tends to present a "narrow view" of fathers that is largely based on the white perspective (p. 88).

### **Media Content – Changes in Depictions of the Average and Functional Family**

While many of the established structures and traditions of the American TV family still exist, there have been some notable changes. Networks and streaming services are not simply beginning to allow a wider scope of family images into their family of programming, but they are actively making a point to do so.

One of the often referenced hit shows of today is *Modern Family*. It is a prime example of how televised depictions of family have changed the way in which different family structures are presented. And the three featured households in this show are very, intentionally, different from one another, with only one of them (the Clair, Phil, and their three children) being the “nuclear family representatives” (Bianculli, 2016, p. 284). A striking characteristic of this show is how the stories of these multiple households are woven into one-another, reinforcing each other’s normalcy. This format reinforces the similarity and normality between all of these characters not only as parents, but as family units (Goldstein, 2016, p. 223). The ensemble performance allows the stories of Cam and Mitchell, two married men, and their adopted daughter, Lily, to be intertwined with the stories of two heteronormative households, as well as the stories of a blended family in which the family patriarch’s second wife brings both her Latinx background, a stepson, and a significant age difference. In the show’s portrayal, these two households are perceived to be valued no more or less than the third, more “traditional” household, a man and woman in their first marriage with their three children. Goldstein (2016) cites in particular the fact that the show normalizes the idea of gay fathers, but through the entire ensembles performance it appears to normalize many aspects of the family and the household that once would have been considered extremely out of the ordinary.

*Modern Family* is a prime example of a show that exhibited an open willingness to bring such social issues into the light. Others started to follow their innovation and “call for tolerance”, Bianculli (2016) notes, a strong example being *Transparent*, an Amazon Prime Video series focusing on the family patriarch who comes out as transgender (p. 285). While not suitable for young audiences due explicit content seen

within the lives of other characters on the show, *Transparent* still exhibits radical acceptance within a dialogue that still many in the industry are afraid to touch. Among these calls for tolerance and dialogue, Bianculli (2016) comments that we have come full circle in terms of what he considers an ethnic focus on television. He observes that somewhat like in the beginnings of television, family television and comedies are focusing intentionally on specific ethnic groups again (p. 285). Of course in the current media environment these families have room to break even more boundaries, and writers have a lot more to say.

A noted example of this is *Blackish*, which premiered in September 2014 and is currently wrapping up its fifth season on ABC. This show, often referenced as this decade's *The Cosby Show* and compared with the old favorite, has received praise for its take on modern life and society from the view of a Black, suburban family. Shows like *The Cosby Show* were praised for presenting a minority family as close, nuclear, upper-income, and successful, which in some ways was almost revolutionary for family television of years past. However, *The Cosby Show* and similar programs also garnered criticism as some believed they were ignoring circumstances and storylines that might make non-minority audiences uncomfortable. Krisky and Sargent (2018) argue that "care must be taken not to use these stories of success to ignore or dismiss the impact of systematic injustices, institutional racism, and the legacy of slavery" (p. 169). *Blackish* has been compared to *The Cosby Show* particularly in how they portray racial socialization within the family, giving the children in the family a positive sense of identity and preparing them for the world. Receiving similar levels of praise and criticism, Hill and Kelly (2016) note that while both shows make "upper-class family life

seem attainable for African American families,” they also “tacitly associate success, power, and privilege with middle class values” (pp. 203 – 204).

The idea of a single-parent household may be perceived to be well represented in television—at least it can be said that there certainly isn’t an absence of them. However, the quality of their representation could still be questioned. Krisky and Sargent (2018) observe this issue through the lens of programming that is geared toward children, noting in recent remarks that there is still little that represents single parenting—though what may be a truer statement is that when a parent is missing in a program, there is little background information given. In either case, they claim that “this can be difficult for single parents who are looking for models of developmentally appropriate explanations of parental absence” (p. 168). Even when different family structures are portrayed, the ideals of the traditional nuclear family still prevail. Regarding divorce and step-families in particular, Krisky and Sargent (2018) note that representations tend to be oversimplified in that only one family subsystem is portrayed, and it is portrayed largely with the same problems and lifestyle as a nuclear family. It would appear to be easier for writers to explain away the absent parent with a vague illness or accident, and a single cliched statement referencing the missing parent that is sprinkled into a particularly heartfelt moment of the occasional episode.

Furthermore, the generally adopted idea of what is acceptable family content can be seen in the way that we as a nation—and television entertainment as an industry—cater to young viewers in particular when crafting programs that are either meant for children, or meant to air during hours that children are most expected to be tuning in. Callister, Robinson, and Clark (2007) took a census of children’s programming and

family-targeted sitcoms aired during children's television programming hours in the U.S. during the 2005 – 2006 season, and examined the family-related messages that were targeted at young viewers. Sixty television families were analyzed, and not only were nearly three quarters of them two-parent nuclear families, but the percentage of single-parent households was far below that which was detailed in the most recent U.S. population census at the time (p. 151). This is contrary to claims by critics who believe that, at the expense of the nuclear family's authority and value, the single-parent family is used too often as the base concept for entertaining television shows.

Another observation that has not entirely changed throughout the years is the way in which parents are portrayed—particularly the fathers. One of the complaints of the points being made in the early nineties to prove that fictional television “mocks” the traditional nuclear family was that children were portrayed as being smarter than the parents, and that fathers were often portrayed as “buffoons” who displayed characteristics that made them appear immature and gave them little authority (Albada, 2000, p. 81). More recent research and expressions of opinion have made similar observations. In a content analysis of film compared to prior analyses of television programs, Wadsworth (2015) found that fathers are portrayed in a significantly better light in movies than in television—meaning that significantly less so on the big screen than the small screen, fictional fathers are portrayed as unintelligent and often irresponsible. They often tend to display a variety of negative attributes while mothers tend to be the “gold standard” (p. 76). At the same time, some viewers see fathers as being portrayed too well. In Kelly's (2016) study of syndicated family television, participants pointed out that overall TV dads were more educated and had better employment (which for some would indicate a

certain level of responsibility) than real dads. Some of them also complained that comparison between TV dads and real dads was unfair because the amount of time that TV fathers were able to spend with their kids was unrealistic compared to the frequency of real life fathers struggling to find the time because of work and other life circumstances, also claiming that some TV fathers were “too perfect” (pp. 84 – 86).

When considering the family unit in modern portrayals it is also useful to think outside of the box—or outside of the household. Increasingly in modern television the concept of family has not only been taken outside of the home, but has been portrayed more strongly and fundamentally between characters who do not come from the same family tree. Not restricted by traditional definitions, the idea of family is portrayed more and more through the nature of the relationship, rather than through bonds determined by household or DNA (Fogel, 2012, p. 295). The family dynamic may be shown through groups of friends or co-workers who, through conscious relationship development or constant exposure due to circumstance, develop relationships which resemble that of a family unit. Viewers started to see this in sitcoms and similar television programming that appeared in the nineties, during a resurgence of the family sitcom (Bianculli, 2016, pp. 282 – 283). Prime examples of these are NBC’s *Friends* and *Will & Grace*. This formula continued to be replicated on a massive scale in the 2000’s and 2010’s with wildly successful shows like *How I Met Your Mother* and *The Big Bang Theory* (both CBS). A similar dynamic is more commonly seen in workplace comedies such as *Parks and Recreation* and *The Office* (both NBC). While in variations of this type of show some of the characters will be roommates or perhaps even marry, the show does not center around one household or what would be considered one traditional family unit, but rather

one central meeting place for the group of non-relatives to meet (e.g. the office in *The Office*, Central Perk in *Friends*) where viewers watch them develop close bonds and form what is widely perceived to be familial aspects of their intertwined lives.

## **Media Families and Media Audiences**

### ***Setting Standards***

Much of family-focused television tends to serve as a tool for real life families. This is regardless of whether or not the series, or a particular episode, is making an effort to create educational entertainment. In fact, it can be argued that many episodes and even series automatically fall into this category, the format aligning with the concept that has been used for centuries—embedding a moral, ideal, or call-to-action within the fun and engaging stories (Singhal & Rogers, 1999, p. 14). Even regardless of that particular element, many of these television series’ episodes, circumstances, stories, and problems can be used to facilitate real conversations among family members, and give them a context which will help them to discuss and understand their own problems (Krisky & Sargent, 2018; Lull, 1990).

What is seen on television can set the standard for many aspects of day-to-day life. When audiences view events and circumstances in entertainment television, they see it as a “reflection of what is ‘normal’ in society” (Alexandrin, 2009, p. 151). Television in many ways has provided an example for what viewers perceive as the way that we as a society can and should live. Cummins and Gordon (2006) note that from television’s beginnings what was seen on screen “provided examples of how people lived—how they furnished their homes, what they wore, what they said, how their families interacted, how they dealt

with life's tribulations, and what they valued" (p. 29). The industry set this up from the beginning with strong attempts to create a sense of intimacy and authenticity between viewing audiences and televised families. With real-life couples often starring in sitcoms together, husband-and-wife in both their real and fictional lives (Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz of *I Love Lucy* being a prime example), it became all too easy to make these televised families seem even more real. Combining real-life events, such as pregnancies, with the plot of the show, and perpetuating the image through magazines and other forms of publicity, the line between real-life and television would become blurred (Spigel, 1992, p. 158). Blurring this line early on in the life of the sitcom set a precedent for creating a sense of intimacy between the audience and the small-screen families, making them feel as if these are in fact real families and, therefore, a believable example (and achievable ideal).

The intense amount of continual exposure also can be considered as a driving factor. Cummins and Gordon (2006) note that television is more likely than any other medium to give viewers a distinct impression of the reality of the world—even while common sense tells them that what they see on TV is not quite the equivalent of reality, viewers are prone to “developing visceral assumptions about standards” (p. 27). It is important to note the influence that these programs have on children in particular, as the typical more vulnerable and influenceable members of their families. Of three major motivators for children watching television, one is “surveillance on behalf of social comparison” (Singer & Singer, 2012, p. 18). The role television cannot be downplayed. Its nuances can be vital in not only creating understanding, but expectation. This makes it all the more important to observe the influence of family television in particular.

Of all the types of programming that are broadcasted, streamed, and downloaded, family programming is potentially one of the most influential in shaping viewer identity, and furthermore how they perceive their own reality. Cummins and Gordon (2006) compare this genre with other programming, such as those featuring police and medical professionals (i.e. today's Grey's Anatomy or one of the many variations of Law & Order or CSI). While influential in their own right, viewers don't really associate these with their personal reality because (in most cases) they know that they are not living the same kind of lives as these doctors and officers and lawyers. Shows that are geared toward families and that feature families, however, "suggest a mode of behavior that may be 'normal' in some way, and we may well wonder from the lives we see each week whether TV reflects what is actually happening in our society" (Cummins & Gordon, 2006, p. 31)

This, of course, can be a blessing or a curse depending on the nature of the standards that are set. Regardless, "what the public sees day after day, for many hundreds of hours each year, becomes natural, a presentation of the way things are, even when those things were initially shocking to a majority and remain so for a minority of viewers..." (Cummins & Gordon, 2006, p. 27). This means that while networks and streaming services can broadcast fictional series which craft families that impose strict expectations on real-life families (and have already done so), the same powerhouses can also use these narrative tools that set a standard of normalizing, accepting, and even embracing that which may have once been unheard of or even inconceivable as part of the family institution.

### *Value of Representation in the Familial Context*

The family is an integral part of one's own story, and the need for representation of diverse family structures and circumstances goes beyond viewers simply wanting to be seen or even actively wanting to see and interact with characters that are like them. Krinsky and Sargent (2018) note that "if we cannot find depictions of our own families, it supports an assumption that our own stories do not matter" (p. 165). Trepte (2006) notes that underrepresentation of a social group could leave those who identify with that group feeling as if their status, identity, and social standing are "rather fixed" (p. 265). This is particularly significant if it is true that, as Cohen et al (2018) suggest, demographic similarity is a predictor of identification between an audience member and an on-screen character. This demographic similarity may be a factor in increasing an audience's "desire and ability" to identify with said character (p. 506). However, when a group is presented in a certain (positive) way entertainment media can improve perceptions of the group, giving group members the confidence in their group's potential and social identity (Trepte, 2006, p. 265).

Particularly in regard to television, Alexandrin (2009) points out that TV can inadvertently teach people about different groups, and about how to evaluate themselves and their own identity. In some cases, depending on the nature of the portrayal, this could mean teaching them incorrect ideas and validating stereotypes about members of different groups, or perhaps even one's own group (p. 150). A viewer may select a show that portrays their ingroup (e.g. single female, middle-class Latinx, teenage male, etc.) in a positive light. As a result, this would likely strengthen their social identity due to the positive portrayal of their group in the television program that they selected (Trepte,

2006, p. 261). Furthermore, in regards to families, seeing TV families similar to our own can be very validating, and at the same time seeing different family structures can “increase our empathy and understanding” (Krisky & Sargent, 2018, p. 165).

Further understanding the influence of the family on viewer experience and comprehension of narratives is essential to better understanding audience experiences as a whole. As Ien Ang (1985) noted in her study of viewers’ reactions to *Dallas*, there is not one simple reason why viewers will enjoy any particular program. Each viewer’s relationship with a program is affected by their individual life stories, and the social environment that they have grown and continue to grow within (p. 26). Therefore family, being a major part of a person’s identity in one way or another, will always play a significant role in the audience’s experience and level of connectedness with television. We benefit by understanding the role of both the family in a viewer’s real life, and the families that they spend time with through the small screen.

## **CHAPTER 3: THEORY**

### **Identity and Identification**

#### *Defining Identification*

The concept of character identification goes beyond the surface relationship between viewer and fictional character. Cohen (2001) notes that identification “is not defined as an attitude, an emotion, or perception but, rather, as a process that consists of increasing loss of self-awareness and its temporary replacement with heightened emotional and cognitive connections with a character” (p. 251). Identification goes beyond simply liking a character, feeling positively towards them, wanting to be like them (though these factors can influence it), or even going so far as to imitate them. These are misconceptions that have led to methods of experimentation and measurement that ultimately did not work (Cohen, 2001, pp. 245 – 255) and also have led to a misunderstanding of the concept. Identification, while it can potentially lead to behavioral effects, in itself is ultimately a psychological process that viewers experience with media characters.

The concept of identification, while certainly independent of it, is also related to Albert Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). Bandura notes that when viewers experience identification with role models, they develop new concepts of thought and behavior through observational learning (Bandura, 1986, 2002, as cited in de Graaf et al., 2012, p. 804). This relationship also makes sense as Bandura’s theory was tested with and focused on children. Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory addresses the way that children learn through observing others, including observation through media. Identification is largely seen as part of the psychological development process (Cohen,

2001, p. 253). There is also evidence that identification happens differently in children, that they are more likely to identify with someone who they wish to be like (Cohen, 2006, p. 187). This is a different form of identification termed as *wishful identification*. Similar to identification, wishful identification describes a psychological process where the viewer experiences identification, but with a strong emphasis on desiring to be more like the character with whom they are experiencing identification (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005, p. 327). Of course, identification itself is not limited to child or young-adult viewers. It is a psychological process that viewers of all ages are likely to experience. The main bond between identification and social cognitive theory is that they both describe ways in which the viewer has the potential to develop and grow in the way that they think and move through the world.

Cohen (2001) claims that when a viewer is identifying with a character he or she “imagines him- or herself being that character and replaces his or her personal identity and the role as audience member with the identity and role of the character within the text. While strongly identifying, the audience member ceases to be aware of his or her social role as an audience member and temporarily (but usually repeatedly) adopts the perspective of the character with whom he or she identifies (Cohen, 2001, pp. 250 – 251). At first glance it sounds like it is largely imaginative, but identification involves very real emotional and cognitive processes that will shape the audiences’ perceptions on and off screen. Cohen (2001) notes that the imagination experienced in identification is particularly important for shaping reality, as well as personal and social identities (p. 247).

It should also be noted that, while largely imaginative and immersive, an audience member experiencing identification does not completely lose touch with reality. Cohen notes that when experiencing identification with a character the viewer “brings some of, but not all of, him or herself into the experience and is able to mentally move in and out of identification” (p. 185). Cohen’s observation not only speaks to the fact that viewers experiencing identification can be absorbed in the character’s story and perspective while maintaining a grasp of reality, but it also speaks to how identification with a character can continue through multiple episodes of a television show, allowing the bond forged through identification to strengthen through multiple viewings or perhaps throughout a series. As a character moves through their story and experiences more detailed character development as one does in a multi-season, multi-year production, the viewer identifying with this character has the potential to further learn and grow through their journey into said character’s point of view.

Identification in a sense gives the viewer a way to be transported (though the concept of transportation in media narratives is another concept which will be addressed) into this other world. Ultimately identification is “a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of a text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them” (Cohen, 2001, p. 245). As this happens, the audience member is allowed an immersive and clearer view through other perspectives—perspectives that they otherwise may not understand on such a deep level. Through this process, “identifying with media others allows us to experience social reality from other perspectives and, thus, shapes the development of self-identity and social attitudes” (Erikson, 1968, as cited in Cohen, 2001, p. 246). As a viewer is exposed to these other

perspectives and points-of-view, they are better able to understand their real-world environment and their own identities and ideas of their self-image, personality, and beliefs. Identification, in a sense, can be seen as an opportunity to walk a mile in someone else's (fictional) shoes. The process of identifying with a character in a story "consists of a sense of affinity towards a character, an affinity characterized by empathetic feelings and understanding of the motives and adopting the goals of the character" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 507). It has also been stated that "in essence, to identify with a character means seeing the character's perspective as one's own, to share his or her existence" (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004, p. 319).

Identification is difficult to measure, but not impossible. While it is considered an "imaginative" process that alters a viewer's state of awareness, Cohen (2001) notes that audience members, while unaware in the moment that it is happening, may be able to recall after the fact the extent to which they felt "deeply absorbed in the text", as well as the degree to which they experienced connections such as empathy and a deeper, almost mutual understanding with the character (p. 255). When measuring and testing for identification, it is important to consider questions that focus on this deeper understanding of, and felt connection with, the character's perspective. According to Cohen, there are four central dimensions to take into account when measuring identification. One involves the degree to which an audience member loses self-awareness while being exposed to the program. The other three, which I direct more focus toward in this thesis, involve the degree to which the audience member believes they share certain things with the character: goals, perspective, and feelings (they have a sense of empathy) (p. 256). These are thought to not only be key factors in identification,

but also predictors for the success of persuasive and educational messages that are embedded in entertainment programming (Hoeken, Kolthoff, & Sanders, 2016; Moyer-Guse, 2008).

The idea of character identification deserves our attention not only as a subject of interest, but as a potential tool of persuasion. This is true for children, certainly, as they are at a critical stage of evaluating and constructing their own identity and can be more vulnerable to messages and influences projected to them through entertainment media (Singer & Singer, 2012, p. 304). Erickson argued that the link between identification and identity is most crucial during adolescence. This is when individuals begin building their identity by shifting from parents and looking to peers and other influences (such as media and entertainment) for influence (Erickson, 1968, as cited in Cohen, 2001). However, identification can be just as powerfully effective for viewers of all ages. According to Cohen, Wiemann-Saks, and Mazor-Tregerman (2018), narrative persuasion increases a bond between the character and the audience. This bond makes it easier for the viewer to be persuaded by that character since they already have a higher level of the viewer's attention (p. 507). Tal-Or (2016) adds that "...identification leads to the acceptance of the attitudes that are conveyed by or are in line with the perspective of the specific character with whom the viewer identifies" (p. 385). So, it becomes important to both distinguish identification from other similar processes, and better understand the detail and nuance that influence how identification takes place.

### *Distinctions from Parasocial Interaction and Parasocial Relationships*

Identification is in many ways similar to the idea of parasocial interaction. The two concepts are often lumped together and even get confused with one-another. While identification involves the viewer finding themselves seeing and understanding as if their perspective has merged with the character in question, in parasocial interaction the perspectives are kept separate. A parasocial relationship is “a sense of friendship or emotional attachment that develops between TV viewers and media personalities” (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 359). Essentially, a parasocial relationship is a one-sided interaction that, similar to a real relationship, becomes stronger over time. Parasocial interaction, as the name suggests, is more of an interactive experience. The viewer has a sense that they are interacting with the on-screen character, in that they perceive the character to be a friend that they are learning more about or, in some cases, that the character is talking directly to them. Identification, in contrast, is a more immersive process (Cohen, Oliver, & Bilandzic, 2018, pp. 1 – 2). Cohen (2001) also notes that the main difference between identification and parasocial interaction is that identification lacks the interactional component (with identification one lacks a certain amount of self-awareness, and therefore can’t distinguish between self and other to interact) (p. 253). A viewer experiencing a parasocial relationship does not experience the sensation of empathetically understanding events from a character’s point of view, but rather comes to feel that they know the character well, almost like a friend.

A recent study that further distinguished these two processes studied the effect that direct address has on viewer interaction with a program (meaning that the protagonist directly addresses the camera and speaks to the audience, such as seen in *House of Cards*).

Cohen, Oliver, and Bilandzic (2018) found that this sort of direct address had a noticeable effect on audience members' parasocial reaction with a television show that they watched, but direct address did not have an effect on identification (p. 4). The act of addressing the camera serves as a mechanism to make the viewer think that the character is talking to them directly, and divulging information to them as a friend or acquaintance might do. It allows the audience the sensation of interaction and makes them feel that they are getting to know the character better as a separate person. The effects of this are largely interactive, and consequentially do not play a strong role in allowing the audience to be more immersed in that fictional world and, more importantly, the mindset of that character.

It cannot be denied that both parasocial interaction and identification can trigger other media effects such as social learning and perhaps social comparison. It is this and the fact that both concepts have such a heavy focus on the character that cause these concepts to be often linked with one-another. This thesis focuses on identification rather than parasocial interaction because when inquiring about the relationship between one's family identity and their perception of television families, it makes sense to focus on the perception of the viewer, and what happens when they are more fully immersed in the narrative and the story of the character, rather than only interacting with it. Through the lens of parasocial interaction we can observe how viewers may, for lack of a better term, befriend a character—but befriend others with differing family structures and dynamics is not too uncommon. For the purposes of this thesis, viewing family on television through the lens of identification will better answer questions of how one's

personal identity and family experience affects the way that they experience and perceive portrayals of television families.

### ***Identification and Transportation within the Narrative***

The term *narrative persuasion* is a point of interest in multiple fields of study, including entertainment-education. It refers to the idea that narratives have a significant effect on readers' and viewers' beliefs and attitudes about the real world. An important part of this that needs to be continually questioned is which aspects and dimensions of the narrative have a stronger impact in audience persuasion, and how (de Graff et al., 2012, pp. 802 – 803). Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) link the concept of narrative engagement to Cohen's definition of identification, partly regarding three aspects of narrative engagement. They note that a viewer is experiencing narrative engagement when 1) seeing events from a character's point of view from within the story as opposed to an observer's point of view, 2) experiencing empathy and the ability to "relive" the character's emotions, and 3) being able to understand the emotions of the primary characters in the story (pp. 322 – 324).

The process of identification relates to the narrative, and also to the concept of *transportation*. Identification is often paired with transportation as it is with parasocial interaction, but identification and transportation are arguably more alike. The idea of *transportation*, the experience of one's focus and attention being consumed by the story world or the narrative, is often related to narrative persuasion and identification. However, de Graff et al. (2012) note that while the two concepts are closely related, multiple definitions of transportation do not specify the involvement of characters,

whereas the characters of a story are central and essential to identification (p. 803). The involvement and absorption experienced in identification is focused not on the whole narrative, but on specific characters (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010, p. 404).

While identification is about the character, transportation is about the environment. For example, someone watching *Law and Order: SVU* (NBC) may feel transported into the action of a chase scene on the streets of New York City, or into the intensity of the court room during a trial scene, but may experience identification with Lt. Olivia Benson. Likewise, someone watching reruns of *Roseanne* (ABC) may experience transportation into the living room of the Connor family or into Lanford, IL, but may experience identification with the titular character, or another character on the show. In either case, in order for a viewer to be truly involved in the narrative, “his or her mental resources are focused on the text to a greater degree than a non-involved or non-absorbed person” (p. 402).

A viewer can experience transportation without experiencing identification. Tal-Or and Cohen (2010) explain that “a narrative that features a negative hero may create strong transportation because it enhances suspense, but a viewer/reader may resist identification with the negative character” (pp. 404 – 405). Another distinction that they found that separates transportation and identification is that transportation is slightly more effected by the manipulation of time, whereas identification is affected most by the emotional connection felt by the viewer (p. 413). Still, Green, Brock, and Kaufman (2004) note that transportation into the fictional world could very well be a “prerequisite” for identification with characters of the same story (p. 318). If this is true then it could support the idea that familial identity plays a role in how and when viewers identify and

experience identification with fictional characters—while family is part of one’s identity, it is also largely a part of their environment.

### *Factors that Influence Identification*

An important question that is continually asked is what factors can best predict when and how a viewer will experience identification with a character. Cohen (2006) calls for the development of “a more elaborate and precise theory of how, when, and why identification works and the role it plays in reception and media effects” (p. 194). Further connecting the process of identification to the narrative, Cohen, Weimann-Saks, and Mazor-Tregerman (2018) note that there are a few possibilities about which traits carry more weight when determining how strongly an audience member will identify with a character – it could be traits that are connected to one’s identity, but it could also be traits that are connected to the character’s story (p. 510). This would make sense - an individual, real or fictional, does not function or exist independently of the world around them. Identities and personalities and perspectives are shaped by the environment and experiences which the person has to face.

It could then be assumed that the predictors of identification are embedded and complicated—determined by something deeper than surface-level characteristics. Similarity is a predictor of identification, but not all types of similarity. It has been found, for example, that looking similar to a character is less likely to encourage identification than sharing similar attitudes and backgrounds with a character (Cohen, 2006, p. 187). Cohen (2006) also notes that psychological similarity is a stronger predictor of identification than demographic similarity (p. 188)—of course it could be argued that the

family or family dynamics of a character could fall into either category of similarity, depending on what aspects of family life are being observed or emphasized.

Beyond similarity, it is the emotional factor that drives identification. Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) conducted a study in which they surveyed college students after they were shown the premier episode of the HBO series *Rescue Me*, which centers around New York City firefighters who experience post-traumatic stress. After the participants were evaluated on eight dimensions of narrative engagement, it was determined that of the dimensions evaluated, emotional engagement had the greatest correlation with attitudinal effects, supporting existing ideas related to emotional connection as a driving factor in identification with characters (pp. 341 – 343).

Furthermore, Cohen et al (2018), after recent experiments, found that eco-relevant traits (such as age and location) alone were not important factors in creating stronger identification with viewers and the characters represented, noting that “...similarity that matters to responses in real social interactions...may lose its effect in a narrative context. Much like initial stereotypical responses toward strangers may be replaced with more individual responses as interactions become more meaningful, so similarity may matter at first but may become less important as narratives develop” (p. 523). While things like circumstance and basic demographic identifiers can and do play a role in the formation of identity, one’s identity is far more complex and involved, as are the driving factors in creating identification between character and audience. This sort of “simple similarity is one piece of the puzzle, but in reality, cannot be seen as a sole or central factor in determining how the audience and character connect. As this is not a reliable way of predicting or creating identification, Cohen et al (2018) state that “further research should

focus more on specific similarity, such as group identity similarity or attitude similarity” (pp. 524 – 525).

As mentioned above, behavioral effects can result from this psychological process of identification. Cohen (2006) notes that while they have different processes and psychological characteristics, there are other responses that are likely to follow or result from identification, such as social comparison or fandom (p. 186). However, responses that have gained greater attention are those related to persuasion and education in entertainment media, such as educational entertainment.

### **Identification’s Implications in Educational Entertainment**

Television has long been adapted and crafted for learning purposes, but entertainment programs are known to have educational effects on audiences even when not originally intended. The story and characters themselves become learning material. Hoeken, Kolthoff, and Sanders (2016) state that there is “ample evidence that people learn in the sense that they adapt their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors after reading or watching a story” (p. 292). This is the driving idea behind entertainment-education, which has been studied and applied for decades.

Seeing the persuasive power that exists across the mediascape, but particularly within television programming, it would only make sense to take advantage of this tool. Singhal and Rogers (1999) identify *entertainment-education* as “the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message both to entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members’ knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, and change overt behavior” (p. 9). The overall aim of entertainment-education

is to enact social change at the individual and/or community level. This strategy works to both influence audience members directly, which would cause individuals' attitudes and behaviors to change, and the external environment of audience members, to "help create the necessary conditions for social change at the group or system level" (Singhal & Rogers, 1999, p. 9).

Entertainment education (also referred to as edutainment) is possible and powerful because whether intended or not, we as an audience are constantly, in a sense, educated when we view entertainment media. Entertainment tells us how to go about living our lives, from how we visually express ourselves through fashion and grooming to the way that we walk, talk, and interact with one-another. So, naturally, entertainment media have great potential to educate the public on a number of social issues as well as public health issues. Of course, entertainment education initiatives continue to exist because of very clear and expansive evidence of their effects. Singhal and Rogers (1999) note that entertainment education was discovered somewhat accidentally in the late 1960's upon seeing the success and effects of a telenovela that was broadcast in Peru,

*Simplemente Maria:*

The main character, Maria, a migrant to the capital city, faced tragic setbacks, like becoming a single mother. Maria worked during the day and enrolled in adult literacy classes in the evening. She then climbed the socioeconomic ladder of success through her hard work, strong motivation, and her skills with a Singer sewing machine. *Simplemente Maria* attracted very high audience ratings, and the sale of Singer sewing machines boomed in Peru, as did the number of young girls enrolling in adult literacy and sewing classes. When *Simplemente Maria* was broadcast in other Latin American nations, similar effects were recorded. (p. 14)

Following the massive success of *Simplemente Maria* and the incredible effect that this program had on both the individual and community level, a methodology was developed

for this type of programming that could both deliver ratings to the networks that broadcast it, and be a catalyst for change within the communities that it was broadcast to.

Entertainment education was found to be a sustainable strategy for attempting to persuade the public on a variety of issues. Early conceptions of educational entertainment focused on developing countries and aimed to educate those communities on issues such as disease prevention and family planning, to “show individuals how they can live safer, healthier, and happier lives” (Singhal & Rogers, 1999, pp. 8 – 9). Moyer-Guse (2008) argues that entertainment education is likely more convincing than traditional persuasive messages where the intent is very clear and on the surface, as opposed to entertainment-education’s style of embedding the prosocial messages and ideas within the narrative (p. 408). While this strategy has been incorporated and studied largely within the context of developing countries, entertainment-education has also been adopted for programming, and a variety of public issues, within the United States. Such efforts vary greatly from one community to the next, depending on that community’s particular social, health, and economic needs.

Entertainment-education initiatives may look similar to *Simplemente Maria*, but they could also appear in the form of a politically and socially conservative man sitting in his familiar lounge chair and arguing with his liberal son-in-law. One may not initially associate Norman Lear’s *All in the Family* (originally aired on CBS in the 1970’s) with entertainment education, but through this popular family sitcom Lear actively “attacked racial and ethnic prejudice in the United States” using the patriarch Archie Bunker as a negative role model (Singhal & Rogers, 1999, p. 16). This was one of the first of many series that actively brought attention to social issues in this country, some of which were

notoriously difficult to talk about. Whether in a single episode or in a storyline that echoes throughout a season or even an entire series, Hollywood continues to use entertainment programs (both from a single episode and throughout a series) to address issues related to public health (*Star Trek: Enterprise*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Law & Order: SVU*), LGBTQA+ issues and rights (*Glee*, *Modern Family*, *Transparent*), addiction (*Shameless*, *Mom*, *This Is Us*), political issues (e.g. *Murphy Brown*, *Blackish*), mental health (*One Day at a Time* (2017)), and the like.

The way that entertainment education is defined has varied in some respects. It was originally seen as a wholly and intentionally designed method to teach viewers and encourage them to adopt certain pro-social behaviors. However, this idea has expanded. Moyer-Guse (2008) notes that a message does not necessarily have to be created with the intent to persuade in order to be considered entertainment education, but simply needs to have prosocial messages embedded in the content (pp. 408 – 409). It has been recognized that programming which was created purely for entertainment could have a storyline that, while it may last for as little as one episode, has an educational intent or effect that allows us to view it as educational entertainment. Typical educational entertainment programs, storylines, or episodes seen on television in the United States is largely of this variety—whether crafted intentionally as a way to educate the public, or simply a storyline that had a positive effect on its viewers, its home tends to be within programming that was originally crafted to be for entertainment (Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010, p. 27). This in part could explain why a large portion of existing research on entertainment education has focused on programming outside of the U.S. Entertainment education initiatives in other nations tend to be more intentional, based in entire programs rather than single episodes

or storylines, and consequentially more carefully created and assessed through theory, design, and research on behavior change among audiences. Additionally, while studies of entertainment education in the U.S. provide evidence that these programs have great potential to influence audiences, some of the evidence is unclear. Moyer-Guse and Nabi (2010) note the importance of “understand[ing] how entertainment messages might overcome resistance to persuasion—one presumed key to their success” (p. 26).

While according to Cohen’s early definitions of identification, it is a “temporary, imaginary process that takes place during exposure” (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010, p. 404), it can still have long lasting effects. Identification with characters has in fact increased the learning of displayed behaviors and the adoption of promoted messages (Cohen, 2001, p. 246). Audiences’ ability to experience identification with characters has played a significant role in changing attitudes about numerous social and health issues and it was found that this element is important even in short public service announcements and ads (Hoeken, Kolthoff, & Sanders, 2016, p. 293). In order for identification to take place, the viewer needs to have a strong level of engagement with the text. Busselle and Biladnizic (2009) also note that when a viewer is more engaged, they express stronger story-consistent beliefs and are less likely to counterargue attitudes and views portrayed in the story (p. 327). Given this, it would make sense that persuasive narratives tend to have a stronger impact on individual audience members than persuasive messages do (Cohen et al, 2018, p. 507). Conditions that promote strong identification with a character are also likely to make educational entertainment initiatives more successful, as viewers will be more likely to absorb and adapt the promoted attitudes and behaviors.

While results of some studies have indicated that “identification with a character that shows attitude consistency can make already existing attitudes stronger” (de Graaf et al., 2012, p. 817), Cohen (2001) also notes that “identification is useful as a persuasion tactic because it can overcome the natural tendency to limit one’s thoughts and feelings to a single perspective” (p. 260). So let’s take for example, a character in a television series who consistently displayed positive attitudes toward marriage equality. A viewer experiencing identification with this character who themselves already felt positively toward marriage equality, may strengthen this attitude. Another viewer also experiencing identification with this character, who may have originally been skeptical about marriage equality, is more likely to see from a new point of view and perhaps adopt new, more positive attitudes toward the idea that they hadn’t considered before.

When a viewer is presented with two opposing views between characters, the extent of identification with each character can play a significant role in which side the viewer will take or which opinions they will adopt, even if they didn’t originally agree with the view portrayed by the character they identified with the most. Additionally, viewers have shown a tendency to identify more with the character whose point of view was the storytelling vehicle, as evidenced in a study conducted by Hoeken, Kolthoff, and Sanders (2016). Their study added to existing evidence that identification is a significant factor in what impact a story will have on a viewers’ perspective of the issue or theme presented. However, they also found that while character similarity is still an important factor, what appeared a stronger influence was the story perspective—who was the protagonist, and whose story is being told in the first person (pp. 302 – 303). This could explain why *All in the Family*, the sitcom described above as a type of entertainment

education initiative on the part of Norman Lear, was perceived by some researchers to be, in many ways, unsuccessful in promoting the attitudes that Lear intended. Cohen (2006) explains:

...an additional or alternative explanation for the ideological failure of *All in the Family* involves the importance of viewers' identification with characters and the centrality of this identification to their understanding of the series. If identification involves the taking of a character's perspective, then the conflicts and resolutions of each episode are seen from that character's perspective, and the cognitive mechanisms and biases that are used to interpret reality and protect one's self from negative events are used to interpret the text. In *All in the Family*, Lear imbedded his liberal messages in plot lines in which Archie was revealed as narrow-minded and wrong-headed, but like all good writers, he wrote Archie as a lovable protagonist. What Lear seems to have overlooked is that this love for Archie drove viewers' understanding of the show and ultimately worked against its intended consequences...Ironically, it was probably the success of the main character that made the series such a popular and financial success and that undermined its intended social effects. If this alternative explanation is correct, prejudiced viewers did not avoid the parts of the message that challenged their views, but rather understood them in a manner that was diametrically opposed to the way they were intended. (p. 191)

So, while the messages that Lear embedded in his writing and in the show were made clear and were very strong, the level of identification that viewers experienced with Archie Bunker were stronger. Even though the perspectives of these viewers were challenged, it was the perspective of the protagonist, the perspective from which the story seemed to be told, that ultimately mattered most. This also contributes to the argument that it is not mere quantity, but also quality of representation that matters. It is about more than which faces are being seen and which attitudes are being heard—it is about who is telling the story.

De Graaf et al (2012) conducted a two-part experiment through which they observed respondents' attitudes to different versions of stories that were told from the perspective of a different character. This was replicated with multiple stories, and ultimately it was determined that when a participant experienced identification with a

story character, they would express attitudes about topics in the story that were consistent with attitudes of that character. They note that this “indicates a robust effect, as both experiments use stories in which attitudes were embedded differently” (p. 818). In one story, the two characters involved were quite different from one-another, and in the other story the only difference between the two characters was their opinion on a specific topic (pp. 817 – 818).

The aim of intentional entertainment education is to overcome viewers’ potential resistance to the ideas and values that are portrayed. Moyer-Guse (2008) outlines various processes that a viewer may experience during and after viewing (including but not limited to identification, parasocial interaction, and transportation), and how they each contribute to the reduction of resistance to prosocial messages, thus contributing to the adoption of story-consistent attitudes and behaviors. She notes four points about identification, saying that it 1) reduces counterarguing, 2) reduces selective avoidance, 3) increases perceived vulnerability, and 4) changes outcome expectancies (p. 415). Given the strong evidence that identification is an important and driving factor in successful entertainment education, it becomes all the more important to determine what factors of similarity and identity most impact the likelihood that a viewer will experience identification with a character, particularly the protagonists and those characters whose perspectives are made the most visible in the final product. Oftentimes educational and prosocial messages are connected, in some way, back to the home—to the family, to one’s immediate social circle. As it has been also suggested that identification should be researched further in terms of specific similarity and group identity, it is worth observing the effect that the family setting and family identity have on this process, and the role that

this has on the stories that are told and the way in which they are accepted and processed by viewers.

### **Family Identity's Role in Social and Individual Identity**

In her interviews with parents and children, Albada (2000) found that participants' responses to family portrayals showed how the parents believed that the portrayals would affect and determine their children's expectations for family life. The social learning model in particular was prevalent in their arguments (p. 79), however it is becoming clearer that there are other processes involved. The perspective from which the story is told, and the likelihood of identification occurring of course play a significant role, but so do the experiences that viewers have already had in their own lives and in the home.

As lives progress and change, so does identity. The formation of identity in individuals is a "dynamic, shifting, continuous, socio-cultural process" (Singer & Singer, p. 305). It is difficult to look at the identity of the individual without seriously taking into account all of the outside factors and the nuances of one's life that may influence his or her identity, and the way that one is able to identify with others whether they are meeting face-to-face or through the barrier of a television screen. Cohen et al. (2018) note, "audience members have complex identities that include many traits, and the trait that seems important at any given moment has to do with the context" (p. 510). As family plays a significant role in one's life and complex identity, this thesis seeks to answer:

*R1: How do television viewers identify and experience identification with characters on television programs in the context of family and in relation to their own families?*

While this by default largely involves programs that are mainly about the central family, it also applies to television programs where a character's family is a noticeable part of the program, but isn't necessarily a driving part of the plot.

While aspects of the family structure and dynamic are clearly part of the narrative, it can be argued that these elements also play a significant role in character and character identity. While identification involves seeing through another person's point of view, the viewer is "necessarily doing so through the filters of one's own understanding and experience" (Cohen, 2001, p. 185). Much like in real life, where familial experiences and expectations are foundational and can be strongly determinant of how we behave as individuals (both in and out of the family setting), these details in a well-developed story often relate directly to character identity and character development in narrative—particularly on television, as a series often has numerous episodes, subplots, and years for its stories to develop. From this perspective, it is quite possible that a family setting in a program, or perhaps the family of a specific character, could play an active role in how the viewer experiences identification with a fictional character. Given this, I propose the following:

*H1: Viewers are more likely to experience identification with characters who share a similar family identity.*

In their evaluation of family television, Morgan, Leggett, and Shanahan (2011) considered two distinct aspects of how families are portrayed: structure (i.e. the number of children and parents, whether parents were divorced or widowed, etc.), and function (how family members are when they are around one-another, what they do for and with each other, whether the family is a source of love or pain for an individual character, and so on) (p. 50). Not only does this display multiple ways that we can observe and understand family portrayals, but this shows that the family falls into multiple categories of similarity. While not a perfect split, overall it could be considered that structural aspects of family portrayals align more with a type of simple, demographic similarity, while functional aspects of family portrayals are better linked with psychological, story-based, attitude-related similarities. Regardless, all aspects can be connected to the story of a character and affect the point-of-view from which a story is being told. Given this, another goal of this study is to test the role that similarity in both family structure and family dynamic (seeing dynamic as the way in which families relate and interact with one-another, effecting how the family will function) each play in predicting identification with a character, and the prediction that:

*H2: Similarity of family dynamic, or individual role within the family dynamic, will be a greater predictor of identification than similarity of family structure, or role in the family structure.*

Additionally, given the relevance and importance of the way in which families are portrayed and represented on television, it is worth better understanding viewer

perceptions of where we are now. While gaining a better understanding of the TV family's role in predicting character identification, this thesis also seeks an answer to:

*R2: How do audiences perceive modern television's depictions and definitions of the family identity, particularly in relation to their own?*

## **CHAPTER 4: METHOD**

### **Overview**

Participants were recruited for a fifty-question survey (see Appendix) which asked them to describe television shows and characters of their choosing, and answer questions related to identification and similarity with these characters and the families portrayed in the programs.

### **Recruitment Methods and Challenges**

#### ***Initial Recruitment Method***

The original goal for this survey was to have a minimum of 400 analyzable responses, and the original method of recruitment was to be through Facebook. The idea behind this method was to reach a more diverse respondent pool in a way that previous studies have not always been able to do. Earlier studies that inquired about audience views of families on television seem to more readily give a voice the views and preferences of a certain type or structure of family. For example, in Albada's (2000) study of how parents viewed television families, respondents were recruited through a school PTA (Parent Teacher Association), a university email address, and business consortia, in addition to a newspaper ad and referrals (p. 86). Such a recruitment method, while it proved successful in recruiting participants for the study, easily gained a specific type of respondent and excluded families who didn't fit into a certain mold—this happened particularly in the first three recruitment procedures. Albada admits that the recruited participants were not particularly diverse, as 80% of the families were Caucasian, 76% were considered “middle income,” and 88% were considered members

of “intact” families (p. 86). This is a distribution that I was seeking to avoid, so I believed that recruiting through a social network that is very widely accessed and used in 2019 would allow for more diversity not only in demographics, but in family structure and function.

The initial plan was to create an online version of this survey that could be distributed through Facebook groups and, upon clicking on the link, easily filled out and submitted. I would write a post with a link to the survey following a brief recruitment letter explaining the purpose of the survey and distribute it across the platform. I would target Facebook groups that focused on television (general interest or fan groups), as well as a variety of family-oriented groups that were representative of different communities and family structures (groups for moms, dads, single-parents, etc.). Knowing that this may still create a certain level of bias and similarity in the pool of participants, I still had reason to believe that the data would ultimately be relatively representative of the population as a whole and represent members of diverse family structures. Stipulations for this method in order to conduct the research ethically and within parameters approved by the Institutional Review Board were that I could only recruit through Facebook groups that were both open and public. This posed some unforeseen challenges.

In the semi-recent past it might have been significantly easier to find recruits this way, but in recent years more Facebook groups have become closed and private. It was increasingly difficult to find groups that were open and public that were within my target range. This requirement disqualified just about all groups that focused on family and parenting, and even many groups that focused on television viewing, critique, fandom, and nostalgia. When groups were not set to private they were very likely to be set as

closed. In the few television-focused groups that I found to be both open and public, I discovered that groups and online community leaders have become more strict and regimented with intragroup rules and policies. In most cases rules were listed in the group's description, relaying expectations in explicit detail. The kind of content that was allowed to be posted in these groups often had to meet specific requirements, and in most cases a post like my research recruitment would not make the cut. After spending an extraordinary length of time searching I had ultimately found only three groups in which I was able to post the recruitment, and after two weeks I had gained only twenty-six responses. The survey had to be re-launched with a new tactic.

### ***Re-launch and Secondary Recruitment Method***

The survey was re-launched and slightly reformatted for the SurveyMonkey platform. Data was collected for 1 week (May 15<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019). For this relaunch I obtained responses through SurveyMonkey's Audience service, which allows users to specify a target audience of their choosing. While some panelists are chosen from SurveyMonkey's other partners, the vast majority of respondents are targeted from their Contribute and Rewards panels, which reward participants with donations to charities of their choice and/or credits that can be redeemed for gift cards and sweepstakes entries.

For all options where I was able to specify what I wanted regarding the distribution of different demographics in my pool of respondents, I chose for distribution to closely resemble census data, as this is an option that SurveyMonkey makes available based on data that they have obtained. One downside of this is that the distribution of their outreach does not necessarily end up reflected in the distribution of responses that

come in, particularly once responses are discarded for quality control. A benefit was that the distribution of respondents was overall spread out in regards to household income as well as region within the United States (i.e. Pacific, Middle Atlantic, Midwest, etc.). Responses were also distributed relatively equally among age groups. However, once responses were eliminated and I had the final data set, the data for this study skewed very much toward Caucasian (81%) and female (67%) respondents.

## **Participants**

### ***Elimination Criteria***

The intent was to aim for a minimum of 400 respondents for an accurate and representative analysis. None of the 26 responses received from the initial survey launch on Facebook were used in the final analysis, which looks only at the data collected from the re-launch of this survey on SurveyMonkey. I had received a total of 754 responses from SurveyMonkey originally, but many of these responses had to be eliminated. For accuracy of analysis, I eliminated responses that met any one of the following four criteria:

- 1.) Respondents indicated that they watch an average of zero hours of television per day. This automatically disqualified participants from the survey.
- 2.) Respondents abandoned their survey early on (the vast majority of answers were blank).
- 3.) All multiple choice or likert scale responses read as “Neutral” or “N/A”. This is indicative that the respondent was not paying attention and rushed through the survey, making the data invalid.

4.) Respondents did not follow directions or did not pay attention. They may have named a network or genre where they were asked to name a specific television show, or named a show but did not name a character from that show where it was indicated, etc. There was also the occasional survey submitted in which answers were nonsensical or incoherent, clearly indicating that the respondent was not paying attention or just filling in anything in order to complete their survey.

The majority of responses that I eliminated were those that were abandoned early on and contained mostly incomplete answers. After going through this elimination process, I was left with a total of 394 legitimate responses, just under the goal of 400.

### *Participant Demographics*

Of the 394 evaluated respondents, 67.26% of them (n = 265) were female, 31.98% (n = 126) were male, and the remaining 0.76% (n = 3) defined as non-binary or preferred to not identify gender at all. This is not exactly representative of the population and skews toward female viewers. Participants' ages were categorized by decade, with the youngest category being ages 18-19 and the eldest category being age 70 and older. Age is overall represented equally in this study: late teens – 0.76% (n = 3), twenties - 14.97% (n = 59), thirties – 16.75% (n = 66), forties – 14.47% (n = 57), fifties – 16.50% (n = 65), sixties – 24.11% (n = 95), and over seventy – 12.44% (n = 49)).

The results were also very much skewed toward Caucasian viewers, as they were represented by (83%) (n = 326) of the respondents. For the remaining distribution for ethnicity each specified group represented under 10% of respondents (Black or African

American – 8% (n = 30), Hispanic or Latino – 5% (n = 19), Asian American – 3% (n = 13), American Indian or Alaska Native – 2% (n = 6), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander – 1% (n = 3)), and 2% of respondents (n = 6) preferred not to specify. This far from accurately represents the racial and ethnic population in the U.S., and unfortunately leads to a bias in responses that I was hoping to avoid. It should be acknowledged that the results of this study very well may not be representative of all communities and populations of television viewers.

### **Design and Procedure**

The survey, including consent and demographics questions, as well as optional open-ended questions, contained 50 questions. In the early pilot testing it was determined that, on average it should take participants no more than 10 – 20 minutes to complete the survey. Longer times could be attributed to deeper thinking, or to the extent to which participants chose to elaborate in the optional open-ended questions. These questions were mainly spaces where participants could elaborate on or explain their reasoning for answers to the preceding multiple choice questions, or to explain how they interpreted questions and terms that could mean something different from one participant to another, based on their individual backgrounds and understanding.

In the first section, in addition to basic demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and the like, participants were asked their role(s) in the household (i.e. parent, child, sibling, spouse, etc.) for the purpose of potentially gaining a more in-depth understanding of the participant's point of view. Participants were also asked about their television usage, including their most frequent method of accessing television (i.e. basic

cable, streaming service, etc.) which would provide insight into viewers' choices and options for viewing television.

In the second section, participants were asked to identify a favorite television show of their choice, and to answer all questions for that section with this show in mind. For the purposes of analysis, this will be considered Television Show #1. To measure identification, they were also asked to also identify a favorite character in that program. Participants were asked to select ways in which they felt that they could relate to and felt similar to that chosen favorite character, specifically in relation to their identity and role in their own family or household. Participants were also asked to select ways in which they felt that they could relate to the entire family of that same favorite character. Some response options reflected a more surface demographic or structural similarity, such as number of siblings or economic circumstance, while other options were more related to deeper levels of similarity and family function, such as similarity in family values and beliefs, or similarity in problems and challenges that the families may face. These are meant to be weighed against measures of identification, based on Cohen's (2001) suggested items for measuring identification—mainly the viewer's level of knowing and understanding, on an empathetic level, what the character was going through. Two disagree/agree questions of this nature were asked, as suggested, in regard to the selected individual favorite character: "During important moments/events in this show, I feel that I understand why this character does what (s)he does" and "During important moments/events in this show, I feel that I know what this character was going through". Deviating slightly from this original suggested method, a similar question was also asked in relation to the family as a whole: "I understand the events in this show from a

perspective very similar to that of one or more members of this family”. These questions were to be answered on a 5-point likert scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). These questions were answered in the interest of not only seeing if similarity in familial aspects potentially play a role in levels of identification with a specific character, but if there are potential components of identifying with the character’s family that relate back to identification with the individual.

The third section is similar to the one preceding it in that it asks the respondent to focus on an individual television series. However, this section and the selected series focus on the fictional family, rather than on one individual character in the show. For the purposes of analysis, this will be considered Television Show #2. The respondent is asked to identify a television series in which they feel that the family most resembles their own. They are asked to identify, on a scale of 1 to 5 from not similar at all to alike in almost every way, how similar they feel that this fictional family is to their own. Participants are also asked to identify some ways in which the two families are similar, in addition to the identification item, “I understand the events in this show from a perspective very similar to that of one or more members of this family”. Additionally, participants are asked to indicate on a 7-point likert scale the amount that they like (or dislike) this program, as well as the extent to which they are able to access the program. In this section I am looking to analyze such aspects further, particularly in regard to my second research question—how are viewers perceiving portrayals of families that are similar to their own? For example, when viewers see fictional families similar to their own, to what extent are they satisfied with these shows and representations? Or, do

viewers find that a show with a fictional family that they particularly identify with is actually more difficult to access due to programming, schedules, and the like?

The fourth also focuses mainly on my second research question, asking participants to rank on a Likert scale their agreement with a list of statements such as “I see families similar to my own being portrayed positively on television,” or “Generally, I believe that families portrayed on television today are ideal,” to further gauge perceptions of how they view families seen on television today in general, and in relation to their own. The purpose of these questions is not only to gauge the extent to which viewers feel that families like their own are portrayed on television, but also to better understand how they feel families are portrayed as a whole, and to what extent they value seeing families that are like their own, or that they perceive as realistic.

Much of the survey are multiple choice, with 27 of the 50 questions being Likert-scale questions, a closed-ended format. The numerical responses from these questions are used to generate calculations of distribution and correlation that will help to better establish the extent to which certain aspects of the televised family impact the experience of character identification among viewers. Participants are also provided with spaces in which they can describe why they selected certain closed-ended answers, providing further insight into how they understood the questions asked, as well as how they perceive the portrayals of families on television today. These answers are reviewed and used largely to answer RQ2, giving us a clearer image of how audiences relate these televised families to their own, and what impact this has on their experience.

## CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

### Overview

An analysis of data collected from the survey suggests that similarity between the viewer's real-life family and the on-screen family of the character with whom they experience identification is a predictor of identification. Correlation calculations provide statistically significant, but modest, evidence to support both hypotheses. This evidence also better informs RQ1 and increases our understanding of the impact that characters' families, and their own families, have on the identification process. A total of 154 shows were selected for Television Show #1 (the respondent's favorite television show) and 151 shows were selected for Television Show #2 (the show with an on-screen family that the respondent perceives to be most like their own family). Analyses of distribution of the data from Section 4 of the survey, in addition to open-ended responses, provide insight that allows us to answer RQ2, better understanding audiences' current perceptions of TV families. Beyond investigating the established hypotheses and research questions, additional analyses were conducted to note possible trends in the probable impact that an individual's primary method of accessing television will have on what they are exposed to and, consequentially, their perceptions of families that they see on television

### Hypothesis 1

#### *Television Show #1*

#### *Individual Identification and Similarity*

My first hypothesis predicted that television viewers are more likely to experience identification with a character who shares a similar family identity. To test this with

Television Show #1, I focused on the chosen favorite characters of the participants and ran tests of correlation between levels of identification and factors of similarity that the participants selected. Identification with the specific characters was calculated based on two main questions that measured identification, each on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating the lowest level of identification and 5 indicating the highest level of identification, in terms of empathetic understanding from the character's point of view. Participants were to indicate their agreement with the following statements, "During important moments/events in this show, I feel that I understand why this character does what (s)he does" (Question 12) and "During important moments/events in this show, I feel that I know what this character was going through" (Question 14). I calculated the total between these two questions for a score of identification between the participant and their chosen favorite character, making the possible range of scores 1 (lowest level of identification) to 10 (highest level of identification).

I computed a correlation between this level of identification, and the total of selected levels of similarity chosen for question 11, which asked "How do you feel that you relate to this character both as an individual and in relation to your role in the family/household?". Participants could select as many answers as they felt applied to them, and there were seven possible choices excluding "none of the above". The results (see Figure 1) passed as statistically significant ( $p = <.0001$ ) and showed a positive correlation with Pearson's correlation coefficient as  $r=.37$ , indicating a positive, but moderate, correlation between aspects of similarity between the viewer's and character's identity within the family, and level of identification with the character.

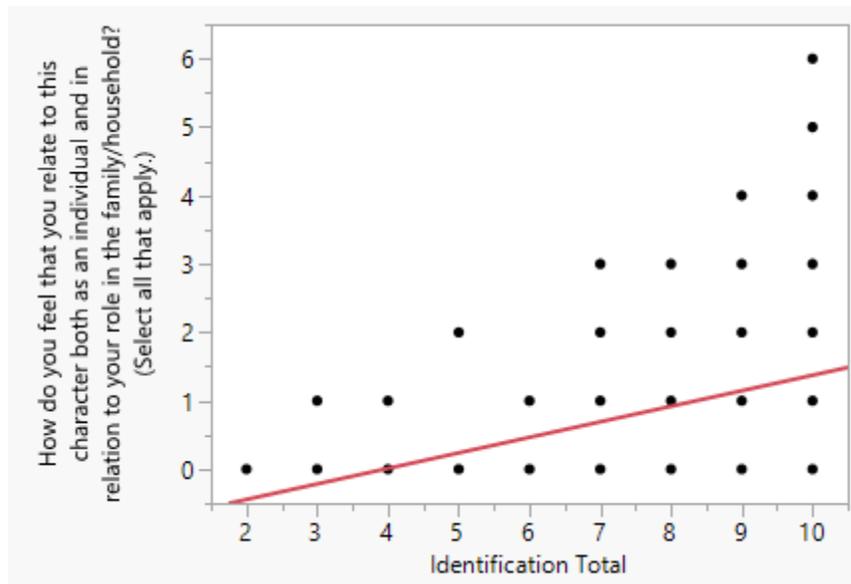


Figure 1. Character Identification and Factors of Familial Similarity. (n=394) (r=.37)

### ***Role of Primary Viewing Method and Individual Identification***

In an additional analysis beyond the original hypotheses, these same calculations were then performed in subsets based on participants' selections for their primary method of accessing television shows, in the interest of seeing how methods of accessing television may be a role. A distribution calculation for the "structure" score showed that distribution was largely the same between viewing methods, those who primarily use streaming services were slightly more likely to find structural similarities with a family on their favorite television show (Mean = 0.5625) than those who primarily use basic cable and satellite (Mean = 0.4727) or premium cable channels (Mean = 0.4729).

## ***Television Show #2***

Upon choosing a television show that they felt most resembles their own family, the participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt that the family closely resembles their own, on a Likert scale from 1="Not similar at all" to 5="Extremely similar in almost every way." This question was completely based on viewer perception of the families. Results showed a bell curve of normal distribution, with the mean being 3.18 (sd = 1.03). When this data was observed in subcategories based on respondents' primary platform for television viewing, a similar curve of distribution was displayed with little variation between platforms.

This measurement was also compared to responses for a measurement of identification with the family, the extent to which the participant agrees with the following statement: "I understand the events in this show from a perspective very similar to that of one or more members of this family". Not surprisingly, this resulted in a statistically significant ( $p = <.0001$ ) and more notable, but still moderate, positive correlation ( $r=0.51$ ) between a viewer feeling that the family was similar to one's own, and experiencing identification with the fictional family.

## **Hypothesis 2**

### ***Television Show #1***

#### ***Individual Identification and Similarity***

My second hypothesis predicted that similarity in family dynamic (and consequentially function) between the viewer's family and a character's on-screen family would be a greater predictor of identification with a character than similarity of family

structure. Participants were asked how they felt they could relate to the family portrayed in this program, and selected as many answers as applied to them. Three of those answers described more structural, demographic aspects of the family (number of parents and children, economic circumstances, and racial/ethnic background), while another three described aspects of the family that fit more in a category of behavior, attitude, and functionality (family values and beliefs, experiencing the same or similar problems and challenges as a family, and religious beliefs)<sup>1</sup>. The second hypothesis predicted that similarity in family dynamic (i.e. behavior and functionality) would be a greater predictor of identification than similarity than structural aspects. To test this I computed correlations between the score of identification with the individual character with the score of structural similarity (possible score of 0 – 3), functional similarity (possible score of 0 – 3), and total similarity (possible score of 0 – 6). Analyzing for structural factors (see Figure 2), results showed a statistically significant ( $p = .0025$ ) correlation of  $r = .15$  indicating a positive, but weak correlation between structural similarity of families and identification with the individual character. For functional similarity however (see Figure 3), there was a slightly stronger correlation of  $r = .31$  ( $p = <.0001$ ), indicating a slightly stronger, but still moderate, correlation between functional similarity and identification with the individual character. When calculating correlation for the total count of similar aspects between the viewer's family and the televised character's family, there was a statistically significant ( $p = <.0001$ ) correlation of  $r = 0.28$ . While these correlations are not particularly strong, they still support this hypothesis.

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<sup>1</sup> Another option for similarity was in the survey originally, similar political views, but upon further evaluation this response was excluded from the final analysis as it was difficult to make a clear defense for definitively associating this with either category.

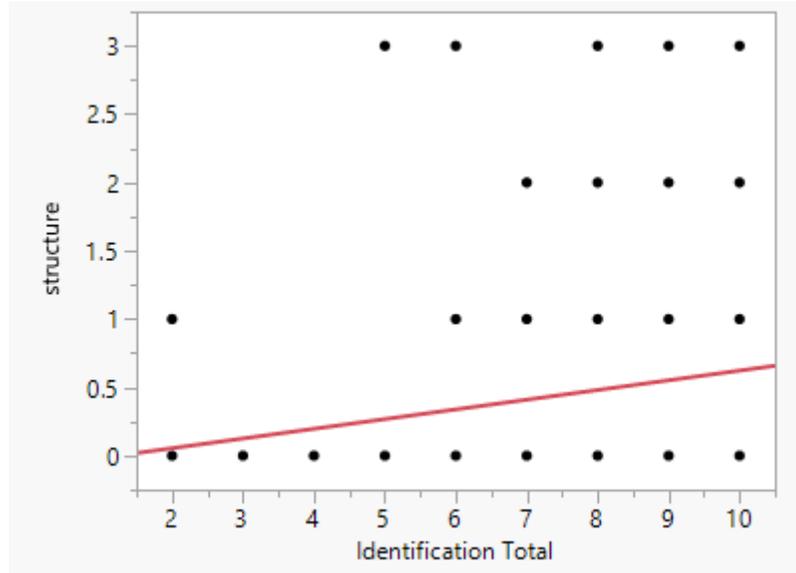


Figure 2. Identification and Structural Similarity. (n = 394) (r = .15)

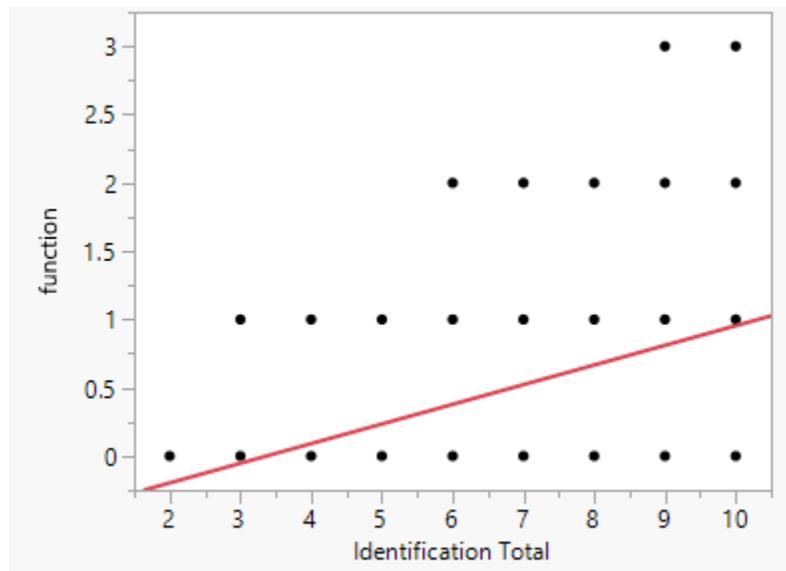


Figure 3. Identification and Functional Similarity. (n = 394) (r = .31)

### ***Role of Primary Viewing Method and Individual Identification***

For structural aspects of similarity between the viewer's family and their favorite character's family, calculations of correlation by viewing platform resulted in a higher correlation for those that primarily use streaming services ( $r = 0.28$ ) than those who use basic cable and satellite ( $r = 0.10$ ) or premium cable channels ( $r = 0.15$ ). When this calculation was performed for functional aspects of similarity, there was not as much of a difference. Correlations for streaming services ( $r = 0.296711$ ) and basic cable/satellite ( $r = 0.291294$ ) were largely the same, and that of those who primarily use premium cable channels was higher ( $r = 0.402256$ ). This may indicate more diverse family structures exist on streaming services than on premium cable channels and basic cable/satellite respectively.

### ***Family Identification and Similarity***

These factors were also compared to the level of identification indicated between the viewer and the family as a whole, as determined by agreement with the statement in Question 17, "I understand the events in this show from a perspective very similar to that of one or more members of this family," on a scale from 1 to 5. Here 1 indicates the least level of identification and 5 indicates the greatest level of identification. Results here were also similar to the correlation with individual character identification. For structural aspects (See Figure 4), there was a statistically significant ( $p = <.0001$ ) correlation of  $r=0.21$ , for functional aspects (See Figure 5) there was a statistically significant ( $p = <.0001$ ) correlation of  $r=0.35$ , and for the total of indicated similarity a statistically significant ( $p = <.0001$ ) correlation of  $r=0.34$ , indicating again a weak correlation for

structural aspects and a moderate correlation for functional aspects. While shown to be less striking than the correlation with individual character identification, these calculations also support the second hypothesis.

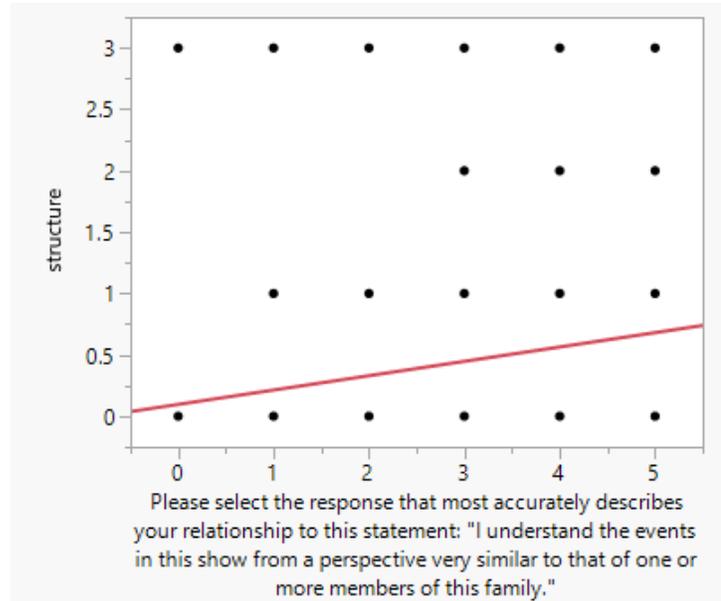


Figure 4. Identification with Family and Structural Similarity. (n = 394) (r = .21)

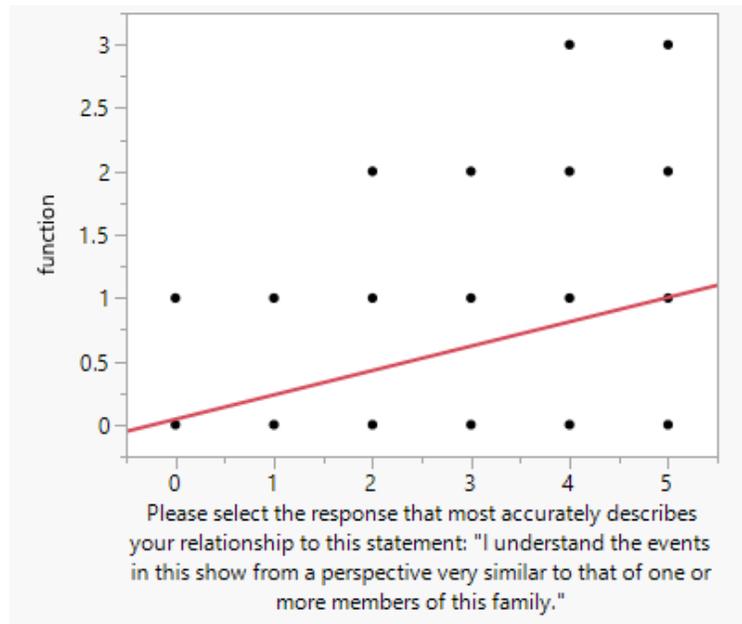


Figure 5. Identification with Family and Functional Similarity. (n = 394) (r = .35)

### ***Role of Primary Viewing Method and Family Identification***

These calculations were performed in subsets by primary method of accessing television, yielding similar results. Regarding structure, there was a significantly higher correlation between structural similarity and sentiments of identification with the favorite character's family with viewers who primarily use streaming services for television viewing ( $r = .33$ ). This is a moderate correlation, as opposed to the weak correlation of those who primarily use basic cable and satellite ( $r = .20$ ) and the slight negative correlation of those who primarily use premium cable channels ( $r = -.02$ ). This could indicate a greater diversity of family structures portrayed on streaming services than on traditional platforms for television viewing. Correlation between functional similarity and familial identification showed similar trends, with a much more noticeable result among those who primarily use streaming services ( $r = .44$ ) than basic cable and satellite ( $r = .29$ ) or premium cable channels ( $r = .37$ ).

A stronger correlation was shown when comparing the score of identification with the individual character, and the score of identification with the character's family as a whole (See Figure 6). Results showed a statistically significant ( $p = <.0001$ ) positive correlation of  $r=.42$ . While this correlation is stronger, it is still considered to be moderate overall.

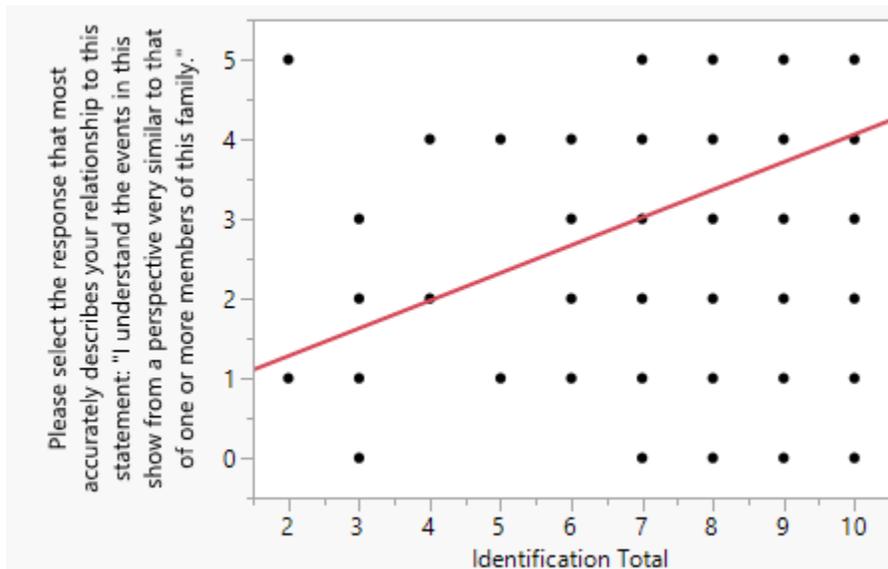


Figure 6. Identification with Individual Character and Character's Family. (n = 394) (r=.42)

When performing this same analysis by participants' selected primary method of accessing television, there was some variance. There is greater correlation between identification with the individual character and identification with the character's family among those who primarily use streaming services such as Netflix or Hulu (r=.48) and those who primarily use basic cable (r=.46) than for those who use premium cable channels (r=.36).

## Research Question 1

### *Television Show #1*

#### *Identification with a Character's Family*

The first and primary research question asks how audiences, in the context of family, experience identification with characters on television. When asked for a measure of identification with the character's family as a whole (Question 17), participants were also given the option to elaborate on why they chose the score that they did (Question 18). For those who chose higher scores of identifying with the character's family, there were few written responses that matched up with a demographic or structural level of similarity with the character's family. Of course, certain surface levels of circumstance and setting could be associated with higher levels of identification with the family:

“This show is set in the 80's and I can relate to this era” (Response 86, *The Goldbergs*)

“The family is trying to adapt to a crazy world” (Response 30, *Game of Thrones*)

In some instances, those who did not express a sense of empathetic understanding or identification with the character's family cited an interest in seeing structures and surface circumstances that are different from what they experience in daily life—the lack of being able to identify closely with the family actually contributed to their enjoyment of the show.

“I was an only child and overall we have a smallish family (relatives) so I enjoy watching a big extended family since I don't have one.” (Response 302)

Participants overwhelmingly found a connective link of dynamic and functionality between their family and the fictional character's family.

“Family values are the same” (Response 4, *Blue Bloods*)

“The kids have a very strained relationship with their parents who are often fighting” (Response 113, *Rick and Morty*)

“Family situations, problems and challenges can be similar.” (Response 357, *Madam Secretary*)

In a more in-depth way, in addition to providing insight into how audiences experience identification, these responses continue to provide evidence for the second hypothesis, that functional aspects of the family are a greater predictor of identification than those of structure or setting.

### ***Identification and Potential Gains***

Participants were also asked the extent to which they look to this show and its characters in particular for a list of items including: advice and guidance for their own behavior and choices, comfort, validation and the feeling of being understood, and empowerment. Participants were asked to answer for these items on a 5-point Likert scale, and these scores were compared to the extent to which participants indicated that they experience identification with both the individual character of their choice, and with the character’s family on the show.

Results for these measures were all statistically significant ( $p = <.0001$ ). When observing the extent to which participants feel that they look to this show and its characters for advice or guidance for how to behave in their own lives, results showed a moderate correlation ( $r=0.325976$ ) with the extent to which participants experience identification with their chosen favorite character. However, there is a stronger positive

correlation ( $r=0.432178$ ) with the extent to which they appear to experience identification with the character's family as a whole.

The correlation between experiencing identification and seeking comfort was positive, yet weaker than that for seeking advice and guidance. Still, there was again a stronger correlation for identification with the character's family ( $r=0.335824$ ) than there was with identification with the individual character ( $r=0.25987$ ). Still, results show the connection between identification and the seeking of comfort from the show to be slight.

Performing these calculations for the extent to which participants view their selected show seeking validation and the feeling of being understood from its characters, there was again a positive correlation. There was a moderate correlation for identification with both the individual character ( $r=.37$ ), and for identification with the character's family ( $r=.37$ ). In comparison with the other sought gains from the selected television series, it would seem that there is greater connection between levels of experiencing identification and seeking validation. However, this item is different from the others in that there is next to no difference between the level of correlation between identification with the individual and identification with the family as a whole.

For the seeking of empowerment from the show and its characters, there was a moderate positive correlation for identification with this individual character ( $r=0.37$ ). However, while the other factors each showed a stronger correlation for identifying with the family as a whole, for empowerment there was actually a weaker correlation for seeking empowerment from the television show and experiencing identification with its family ( $r=0.28$ ) as opposed to seeking identification with the individual character.

Addressing these four questions and sought gains from favorite shows, comfort had the weakest correlation with the viewer's identification with both the individual favorite character and the character's family. Comparatively, the seeking of validation and belonging, as well as that of feelings of empowerment, had stronger, but still very moderate correlations with the experiencing of identification. The greatest level of correlation was with the seeking of guidance and advice. Additionally, it is here that we see the greatest difference between correlation with individual character identification and identification with the character's family. There appears to be a significantly stronger connection between identification with the TV family and the viewer's seeking (and potential gain) of advice and guidance for behaviors and actions to apply to their own lives and decision-making processes.

When it comes to viewers seeking empowerment, there is certainly a more significant connection with individual character identification, and the television family here is not likely to play as significant a role. Similarly, there was a very slight difference between that of individual identification and identification with the family when it came to the seeking of validation. However, in terms of the seeking of comfort, as well as guidance and advice, it appears that experiencing identification and connection with the character's family potentially have a greater impact than experiencing identification with the individual character.

## *Television Show #2*

### *Families Perceived to Not Be Bound by Household*

For this section of the survey participants were not asked to select a television show based on preference, but rather based on which show they could think of in which the central family most resembles their own family. One notable finding in this section lies within the nature of the television shows that were selected. One subject covered in the review of literature was the increasing definitions of family that are more diverse in structure, more inclusive in functionality, and even separating from the family tree. More television shows, and consequently viewers, are seeing dynamics consistent to that of a related family unit appear within non-relative friend groups or workplace settings. Going through the list of television shows that participants identified, I categorized shows into two categories: one for shows featuring what would be considered more typical depictions of family—people who are related and/or living within the same household, and one for other depictions of the family structure where a group of friends or colleagues in a workplace setting are featured as the perceived family (e.g. *Friends* or *The Office*). When asked to identify a show in which the family resembled their own, 12% of participants chose a television series that fell into the latter category, identifying more closely with a family dynamic that exists outside of the traditional household or group of relatives.

### *Identification With the Family*

Participants were given the option to elaborate on why they chose the response that they did when evaluating the extent to which they experience empathetic

understanding and identification with members of this fictional family (Question 26). Similar to what was observed in answers for Television Show #1, responses indicating aspects of functionality, behavior, and family dynamic were more prevalent among participants who expressed higher levels of identification with the featured family of this television show. This is seen especially in how they observe attitudes and behaviors that mimic that of their own real-life family members:

“The mother and father parent the kids very similarly to mine growing up.”

(Response 18, *The Kids Are Alright*)

“I can see aspects of my mom in the mother on the show.” (Response 61, *The Middle*)

“I always want to explain things to my kids like she did. I wanted to be strict but still let things slide with humor.” (Response 187, *Roseanne*<sup>2</sup>)

More so than in the parallel evaluation for the first television show, within these answers there are indications that a higher level of identification with the family may be due to more structural aspects of the family.

“Single mom raising a child” (Response 78, *One Day at a Time*)

“Dawson is an only child with supportive parents.” (Response 272, *Dawson’s Creek*)

“The show came out when I was at a similar age to the main character, Ginger, and was a bit of a geek in school as well. I was also a middle schooler being raised by a single mom.” (Response 291, *As Told by Ginger*)

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<sup>2</sup> Participant did not specify whether they were referring to the original series that premiered in 1988 or the 2018 reboot)

However, based on some of the answers, it could also be interpreted that the structural aspects that the participants are referring to contribute to the way that the household functions and speak to a particular dynamic within the household:

“Opey is being raised by his father and Aunt Bea. I was raised by my grandmother. We both live in the same era.” (Response 86, *Andy Griffith Show*)

If we interpret that the structural elements indicated in the above responses, as well as any similar responses, are still largely indicative of the dynamics and functionality that exist within these households (real-life and televised), then these responses still contribute to the argument that aspects of functionality are greater predictors of identification than more basic aspects of family structure or demographic.

### ***Identification with Family and Program Enjoyment***

As participants chose the television show for this section purely based on similarity to their own family, they were also asked to best describe the extent to which they enjoy this show, on a 7-point scale ranging from lowest level of program enjoyment (I dislike watching this program more than most others) to highest level of program enjoyment (I like watching this program more than most others). As another way to test how familial aspects may relate to program enjoyment or choice, I also ran correlations between this question and how closely participants indicated that the family resembles their own, as well as the extent to which the participant claims to experience identification with the family. The correlation between familial similarity and program enjoyment was positive, but too weak ( $r=.06$ ) and failed to be statistically significant ( $p = .28$ ), whereas the correlation between identification with the television family and

program enjoyment (See Figure 7) was moderate but higher ( $r = .31$ ) and also passed as statistically significant ( $p = <.0001$ ). This contributes to an argument that similarity alone is less of a driving factor and likely less engaging than deeper aspects of the family and family members' interactions, which would cause a viewer to feel a sense of identification with members of a televised family unit.

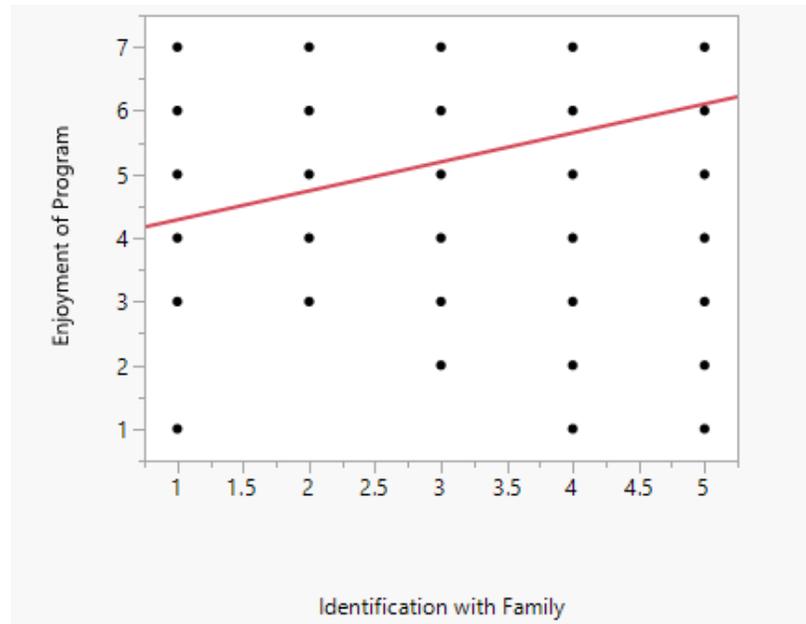


Figure 7. Identification with Family and Program Enjoyment. ( $n = 373$ ) ( $r = .31$ )

Again, similar to questions for Television Show #1, participants were asked the extent to which they look to this show and its characters in particular for advice and guidance for how they should behave or act in their own life, comfort, validation and to feel understood, and empowerment. While here results were not compared to identification with a specific character on the program, we were still able to assess correlation with the expressed sentiment of experiencing a form of empathetic identification with the selected television show's family. Results for each of these calculations were statistically significant ( $p = <.0001$ ).

For the seeking of advice and guidance, there was a moderate correlation ( $r=.35$ ). For comfort, there was a slightly greater correlation ( $r=.36$ ). For validation and the feeling of being understood, a greater but still moderate correlation ( $r=.37$ ). And for the seeking of empowerment, the lowest correlation of the four ( $r=.31$ ). All correlations appeared as low-level moderate correlations, with little difference between them. This could in part be explained by the fact that for this section the participants were instructed to choose a show that featured a family that they perceived to most resemble their own, rather than a favorite or most-watched program. Given this, the show that a given participant chooses for this section may or may not be one that he or she connects with on a deeper level in the first place. This could skew the results.

## **Research Question 2**

### ***TV Families Similar to One's Own***

The final section of the survey had questions aimed at answering the second research question to better understand how television audiences perceive today's representations of families, particularly in comparison to their own. Participants were asked to rate on a five-point scale the extent to which they feel that they see families similar to their own portrayed often on television. This distribution was on an overall normal bell curve, with a mean score of 2.9 ( $sd = 1.25$ ). When this distribution was calculated in subsets between preferred platforms for viewing television, there was very little variance in the distributions, making the difference between platforms almost nonexistent. For those who primarily use streaming services the mean score was 2.92 ( $sd$

= 1.31), for premium cable channels a mean score of 2.91 (sd = 1.21), and for basic cable and satellite a mean score of 2.92 (1.29).

We see a similar bell-curve distribution when participants were asked the degree to which they agree with the statement, “I see families similar to my own being stereotyped in television programming” (Question 37). Thirty-six percent of participants answered with an answer of “Strongly Agree” or “Agree Somewhat”, 31% of responses were neutral, and the remaining 34% of respondents overall do not observe television families similar to their own being stereotyped. There was no significant variance between primary viewing platform. Survey questions in the same format about the extent to which viewers see families like their own accurately (Question 38), positively (Question 39), and negatively (Question 40) on television garnered similar results.

### ***Opinions on Modern Portrayals, For Better or for Worse***

Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agree (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) with the statement, “Generally, I believe that families on television today are portrayed in a better way than they were in the past” (Question 41). As a whole, the results fall on a normal distribution, with a mean of 2.97 (sd = 1.25). Participants were also given the opportunity to give a more detailed explanation of why they chose the answer that they did. Reviewing these responses, there are a few emerging trends for participants’ positive responses to newer television programming, as well as some pervasively negative opinions of newer content.

One trend seen among participants who feel strongly that familial portrayals have improved is the acknowledgement of increased visibility of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds, and increased positive representation for often marginalized groups:

“America is a melting pot of so many cultures and I am proud of that” (Response 2)

“The families on TV today are much more inclusive” (Response 195)

“More racial diversity and more portrayed in accurate, positive ways...”  
(Response 279)

“In general, TV shows are more politically correct, especially with the way women and minorities are portrayed” (Response 30)

Furthermore, we see this sentiment regarding the portrayal of more diverse family structures:

“I believe that blended families and non-traditional situations are being highlighted.” (Response 189)

“I like the increased awareness of diverse family types more common today (i.e., single parent households) as opposed to the idealized white suburban family types previously more commonly displayed in the 60’s-70’s.” (Response 236)

“There’s more diversity in TV today than in the past. Being a white person from a ‘traditional’ family, TV is not catering exclusively to my audience like it did years ago (I feel it is important to note, that I recognize this is a good thing). More focus is put on racial diversity as well as a family structure which is ‘nontraditional’ including a divorce, remarriage, step families, widow/widower.” (Response 245)

It appears that increased diversity in many aspects of the family structure is a strong motivator for more positive views of modern television. With this, we can also reason that, while these more demographic and structural aspects of the family are not the strongest predictors of identification with a television family, it cannot be ignored that these aspects still have an impact on viewer experience as well as enjoyment, and do not go unnoticed. Of course, many positive responses to modern televised portrayals of the family reflect changes seen in more circumstantial and functional dynamics as well. More specifically, viewers who expressed stronger opinions that portrayals have improved have noticed that these portrayals are more realistic and accurate than portrayals of the past:

“If ‘better way’ means ‘more accurately’, then I mostly agree with this statement.” (Response 252)

“Newer shows portray families more realistic with real issues and circumstances.” (Response 255)

“There is a lot going on in the world and families can get messy. TV does a very good job of showing all kinds of families.” (Response 272)

“More shows are now showing what real life families go through...the challenges and the joy” (Response 315)

In some cases participants expressed this sentiment, particularly referencing a turn from the more classic, well-known and old-fashioned portrayals of family:

“Because now families are shown as real people with real problems. Not like the past as the Brady Bunch.” (Response 28)

“I think families are shown more accurately on TV these days. Life isn’t perfect, and that is shown on TV. In the past, families seemed to be largely portrayed as having ideal lives.” (Response 61)

Of course, it is this same separation from older television shows that has other participants on the opposite end of the spectrum, believing that modern television has lost some of the perceived quality that it used to have. Many of these opinions come from a mentality that old-fashioned and traditional views of the family unit are still the better representations, as well as a fear that these are getting lost in the shuffle of more modern and varied representations, and perhaps even less valued:

“Too much has changed that its never going to be the same again.” (Response 123)

“A wholesome family is often ostracized on TV now.” (Response 92)

“Family values are almost non existent on current family shows” (Response 323)

Participants of this view also expressed a perceived loss of the sense of morality that had formerly been portrayed more frequently in family television specifically:

“ ‘bad’ families is more a thing now...Arrested Development, Always Sunny in Philadelphia, etc” (Response 75)

“families in the 50 and 60’s were close knit families the families portrayed today are fighting and kids are disrespectful and rude” (Response 182).

“Family shows in the past had kids that mostly behaved, were polite, and did well in school. Parents were the type that would win ‘Mother [or] Father of the year’” (Response 293)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> These responses were consistently from men and women in their 40’s and 50’s.

Other responses are indicative of what the respondents potentially see in the typical family structure within their own communities. While many of those who claim that televised families have improved cited more realistic standards for normalcy and increased accuracy in representation, some of these respondents who find that TV families have not improved feel as they do because they perceive just the opposite:

“Most current families are dramatically dysfunctional, and offer pairings/couplings I never see among my extended family, friends and their families, and neighbors/casual acquaintances. I suspect the producers are trying to portray abnormal as the norm, in an attempt to suggest dysfunction and odd people are ok. Funny to watch from afar, but mostly not the norm in my opinion.”  
(Response 251)

“I can’t relate to most of the families on TV now and it seems like everything has a darker, more negative and dysfunctional air than such shows in the past...I feel like there are more things portrayed as normal now that really still aren’t and that becomes unhealthy.” (Response 97).

Not only do viewers see from this viewpoint based on the world around them, but things that other viewers perceive as honest or authentic tend to be perceived by these viewers in a negative or darker light.

### ***Perceptions of “Realistic” Families on Television***

Similar sentiments were observed in responses to other questions about perceived realism of television families. Viewers were asked to express the extent to which they perceive that television families today are generally realistic (Question 46), as well as the

extent to which they prefer families on television to be portrayed more realistically (Question 47) (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). For the opinions on whether or not these shows are generally realistic today, there was a normal distribution among respondents, with a Mean of 2.89 and a Median of 3. However, when measuring the extent to which viewers prefer to see realistic portrayals on television, the average was greater (Mean = 3.79) and the distribution skewed toward a greater desire among viewers for realistic family portrayals (Median = 4).

In participants' open-ended explanations for their responses for these questions, many of the same sentiments that were expressed in their answers regarding their opinion on the changes in television families were observed again. Some of the respondents expressed views that shows which portray more diverse and nontraditional families are also more realistic as a whole, while others expressed the view that in order for a TV family to be perceived as realistic, they would have to fit the traditional portrayal of the nuclear, heteronormative family household.

Additionally, those who expressed moderate or total disagreement with a preference of realistic families on television, tended to describe perceptions of "realistic" as being negative, dysfunctional, or depressing. Respondents of this opinion also expressed that for them, they do not feel a need to see realistic portrayals because they prefer to watch television strictly as a form of entertainment, displaying a preference to escape from things that they would consider to be more "real."

I noticed a similarity in the responses of participants who both perceive current televised portrayals to not be realistic, and additionally would prefer to see more realistic

families on television. In many of these answers there was a trend in expression of both a lack of and longing for socioeconomic realism in TV families:

“There are tons of different families, but not enough lower class, blue collar families are portrayed without stereotypes and gross generalizations taking over.”

(Response 12)

“Families that get up and go to work and pay their bills get the kids off to school. Not some fancy school where they are the stars or most popular, those that struggle...Show moms that raise kids on their own with barely any money that do good jobs even if they live in trailer parks or low income housing. It happens all the time...It is not all happy like you see on TV now.” (Response 8)

“A realistic TV family would live within their means. Have problems that are not necessarily solved in 30 minutes...” (Response 264)

“One where money doesn’t materialize from the [ether]” (Response 301).

### *Perceptions of “Ideal” Families on Television*

Statistically, results were similar to the above when measuring the extent to which viewers perceive television families to be ideal, and prefer that television families be ideal. Here, however, responses skewed further toward sentiments of disagreement, though overall a more centralized distribution. Responses indicating the extent to which viewers believe that televised families are ideal resulted in a mean of 2.60 (sd = 1.15), and for the extent to which viewers prefer that televised families are ideal, a mean of 2.94 (sd = 1.19).

No one particular trend was observed in participants' explanations for these responses, meaning that there is not an agreed upon definition of any one type of idea family. There was also a spread out distribution of responses that cited structural and demographic attributes, as well as those that cited more functional and dynamic attributes of the family unit. The one trend that existed within these open-ended answers is that many participants responded in a simple statement that, while varied slightly in sentence structure, all amounted to "There isn't one", showing that many viewers believe that there is no one type of perfect family, in the real world or on the small screen.

### ***What Viewers Want to See in Their TV Families***

When asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement, "I want to see more families like my own portrayed on television," responses leaned more toward agreement (mean = 3.44, sd = 1.08) than responses of agreement that respondents already see families like their own portrayed often (mean = 2.9, sd = 1.25). Only 14% of respondents expressed a level of disagreement (i.e. a 1 or a 2) with wanting to see families like their own on television.

When asked to elaborate, a few trends were observed among the 14% who do not wish to see families like their own portrayed more often, as well as some who responded that they feel neutral toward the statement. One was that these respondents believe that a family like their own would be too dysfunctional to make for enjoyable television viewing. Words like *dysfunctional* and *toxic* were used frequently in these responses. Another common reason was that these participants felt that their own families fit into a

category of more traditional portrayals, and they do not feel a need or desire to see more of this than already exists in entertainment:

“I am part of a traditional family and I think traditional families are frequently portrayed in the media.” (Response 9)

“White bread. Boring to the world of TV viewers.” (Response 212)

Still, this is not to say that viewers are tired of, or undervalue, these portrayals.

“A family like my own does not make for good TV. If a family of my own was on TV, it would be a pretty boring program, but if I have children I would want them to see a nuclear family also being considered ‘normal’.” (Response 245)

As a whole, those who do not wish to see more families like their own in entertainment justify this sentiment with a lack of perceived need for it, or a lack of absence of families that they are able to identify with to some extent.

Those who expressed a desire to see more families like their own on television cited a variety of explanations. A common theme was a desire to see families with similar socioeconomic circumstances, as well as families that are not as extraordinary or out-of-the-ordinary as those that tend to be portrayed on television:

“I’d like more regular families shown on TV, simple hardworking people.”

(Response 2)

“Lower class. Blue collar. People struggling with disability, finances, not taking lavish vacations and getting every little thing they want all the time. Buying food in bulk because it stretches money further... Not everyone is rich. Even when they try to write poorer families they give them things that they’d never be able to

afford in real life, or if they did it would take away something else.” (Response 12)

Another sentiment expressed among these responses is the desire to feel that their own stories are made visible and matter—a feeling that seeing more families like their own would mean that in a sense they are not alone:

“It would mean that I don’t have to keep dreaming or wishing or thinking if only life would turn out like that for me...it would show me that there is really other people out there that truly struggle like I do...” (Response 8)

“It would give me a sense that I am not alone. Seeing someone like myself or similar to my own family going through the same struggles or having the same dreams and goals will bring comfort or motivation. It could provide a means for my own family to understand each other better seeing it played out in front of us.” (Response 110)

Responses like those above are examples that continue to build upon previous research on the fact that the importance of an individual’s story and experience is reinforced when they are better able to identify with a television family and experience identification with the story of a member of such a family. Additionally, it is more evidence that what viewers observe on television can be and often is used as a reference in not only understanding their own experiences, but being able to discuss them and identify elements of their own stories.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

### Identification and the TV Family

The main goal for this thesis is to build upon existing research about how varied portrayals of families on television affect audience members' viewing experience and continues to affect them after the television is turned off. This was done by using data from the survey to test two main hypotheses:

*H1: Viewers are more likely to experience identification with characters who share a similar family identity.*

*H2: Similarity of family dynamic, or individual role within the family dynamic, will be a greater predictor of identification than similarity of family structure, or role in the family structure.*

This would aid in our ability to answer the first research question:

*R1: How do television audiences identify and experience identification with characters on television programs in the context of family and in relation to their own families?*

Additionally, participant responses help us to better answer:

*R2: How do audiences perceive modern television's depictions and definitions of the family identity, particularly in relation to their own?*

While results from this research indicated weak to moderate levels of correlation, they still provide evidence that supports the hypotheses proposed, as well as previous research on factors that predict identification. It can be concluded that, to an extent, similarity between a viewer's family or household dynamic, and that of a character's on-

screen family, is a predictor of identification between the viewer and that individual character.

Data obtained from analysis of both television shows, but Television Show #1 in particular, supports both hypotheses. However, while this data does support H1, that familial similarity could be a predictor for identification with the individual character, it provides stronger support for H2—that while both structural and functional aspects of the family play a role in this, functional aspects are consistently a stronger predictor of identification than simple structural functions. This research supports the idea that one's family is a part of their core identity, and therefore will have an impact on the identification process, and the likelihood of a viewer experiencing identification with a given character in the first place. More importantly, we see through both quantitative and qualitative data that both structural and functional aspects of the family play a role in how audiences perceive these families and compare them to their own—structural aspects have a limited impact in comparison. It would be a mistake to believe that the importance of representation solely lies in the viewer seeing a character on screen that looks like them, or a family that looks like theirs and resides in a similar environment. When observing family portrayals we cannot ignore the more nuanced behaviors and actions that exist within the family—not just who they are, but how they are.

### **Viewer Perceptions of Modern Representation**

Through participants' detailed responses about how they perceive modern portrayals of families in entertainment television, we have learned that while subjective opinions of these portrayals vary greatly among viewers, as a whole they are noticing

similar changes and nuances in these modern portrayals. Participants overwhelmingly noticed an increased diversity among today's TV families not only in ethnicity and household structure, but in the types of circumstances, challenges, and experiences that these families face together, as well as the dynamic that exists among fictional family members. Where there was great variance, of course, is the extent to which viewers perceived these changes as positive or negative, as well as how realistic they perceived these newer representations to be. What a viewer perceives as normal will be greatly influenced by their own personal, real-world surroundings and what is more pervasive and visible within their own community. Of course, representations that some viewers may perceive to be unrealistic or even gimmicky will be perceived by viewers among different populations as accurate and perhaps even reinforce that their own story matters.

### **Significance of Platform**

When performing analyses based on the viewers' reported primary method of viewing television shows, there appeared to be a consistent difference between those who primarily use streaming services, and those who primarily use more traditional platforms like cable or satellite. There was a greater difference when observing Television Show #1, which was chosen based on viewer preference, than Television Show #2, which was chosen based on perceived familial similarity regardless of how much the viewer actually enjoys the show. However, while the difference is almost negligible, it is still suggested through the analysis of Television Show #2 that viewers primarily using streaming services are more likely to find a show with a family that is relatable to their own than

viewers who primarily use traditional methods of accessing television. These results warrant further research that may find stronger evidence of this.

This could be a result of the options given by each platform. It was discussed in the literature review that streaming services, apart from traditional networks, had potentially the space, time, resources, and motivation to provide more options for viewers and incorporate a more diverse set of familial representation into their offerings. However, this also could be indicative simply of the nature of how viewers use these streaming services—higher levels of viewing and frequency of viewing are likely to create higher levels of identification with characters. These findings, while modest, are meaningful because they provide us with a deeper look into how the viewing experience and familial representation have changed overtime alongside the newer, emerging platforms and the expanding entertainment mediascape.

### **What is Gained from Familial Identification**

For both Television Show #1 and Television Show #2, participants were asked the extent to which they look to characters and families within the shows that they selected for: advice and guidance, comfort, validation, and empowerment. These results were particularly informative for Television Show #1, where these measures could be calculated against both identification with the individual character, and identification with the character's family. These measurements provide insight into what potential gains are influenced more by familial aspects of identification. While overall the correlations proved to be moderate, and in some cases very weak, we can still learn from the subtle differences. It can be concluded that familial aspects had little to no impact on the

viewer's seeking of empowerment or validation. However, for both comfort and the seeking of guidance and advice, there is a difference worth paying attention to. It can be argued that aspects of a character's family, and the way that the viewer identifies with this on-screen family, will have a greater impact on the likelihood that a viewer will seek advice or guidance for how to behave in their own lives when viewing these characters. This also adds to the impact that identification can have in efforts to persuade and educate audiences.

### **Persuasion and Preventing Resistance to Messages**

Addressing gratifications that viewers say they seek from their selected television shows, and comparing them with identification with characters, helps us better understand the potential effects of character identification, and specifically aspects of their existing perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors that are effected by the character's family, and familial similarity and identification with the viewer.

Holistically, we see that a connection exists with the viewer experiencing identification and looking to that television program as a source of guidance and advice for how to behave in their own lives. This finding is significant in further supporting the argument that character identification plays a role in successfully overcoming the viewer's potential resistance to persuasion. Additionally, results from the analysis of responses to Television Show #1 provide particularly interesting insight into this. When comparing the impact of identification with the individual to identification with the character's family, there was a greater connection between identification with the family and the seeking of guidance and advice from the show, as opposed to identification with

the individual character. This provides stronger support for the idea that the family not only plays a significant role in predicting identification, but it is an aspect that should be considered as important when evaluating efforts to educate and persuade audiences through entertainment programming.

### **Limitations of this Study and Considerations for Future Research**

While a rich amount of data was obtained through this research, the survey also relies heavily on participants' self-awareness and ability to evaluate and report on their own viewing experiences. Methods applied in survey research tends to be difficult for respondents to answer, as they often don't completely fit with the options that are provided to them (Dhoest, 2014). While the survey often provided space for participants to explain themselves and elaborate on their responses in order to state aspects of their experience and point of view that multiple-choice options might not reflect, not all participants will have the same ability to articulate their response. Additionally, while an individual is best able to access information from within their own story and experience, my interpretation of participants' responses may not reflect what they were trying to convey.

This method of obtaining research participants ultimately lead to flawed sampling, more specifically a racial and ethnic bias that it was designed to avoid. Caucasian participants make up the vast majority of the respondent pool, making these results limited and ultimately leaving the voices of members of other communities and backgrounds unheard. While the results ultimately passed as statistically significant, it is difficult to defend that the results are truly so while the pool of respondents lacks representation. Future studies would benefit greatly from finding a more diverse pool of respondents—

populations that have been underrepresented in this study are also potentially more underrepresented in television, and it would be remiss to believe that these questions can be holistically and accurately researched and answered without ensuring that all populations are accurately represented.

The evaluation for Television Show #1 was more thorough than Television Show #2, and upon reflection it would have been more useful and informative to evaluate both programs with even more parallel questioning. For example, it would have been useful to evaluate the extent to which participants experience identification with an individual character for Television Show #2, rather than building questioning about that program specifically around the entire family unit featured on the show. While this, in theory, would allow me to focus more on how viewers interact with the family as a whole, it in fact limited the insight gained from this section. The impact of the family could not be properly assessed without being able to compare it to traditional identification with an individual character.

Another limitation of this study lies in how participants were asked to identify families similar to their own, in that it lacked a level of specificity. When participants were asked to choose a show in which they felt that the family was similar to theirs, or were asked to estimate how often they see families like their own on television, it should be understood that each respondent is likely to interpret this differently, depending on their own perceptions, life experiences, and priorities. Some when rationalizing their answers may interpret this to mean family structure and demographic, others may interpret this to mean racial or ethnic background, others may interpret this on another level of how the family members interact with one-another, and so on. Considering this, while this research

adds to the conversation and provides more evidence on how identification happens and its role in larger processes, in many ways the answers are vague. Future research would benefit from asking questions that are more direct and analyzing more specific aspects of viewer perception and experience.

While this research has its limitations, we can still learn plenty from these results. We have gained further evidence that similarity between the real-life and on-screen family will impact the viewing experience. Additionally, seeing the trends and differences in how aspects of family structure and aspects of family function/overall dynamic provides significant insight into the role that family plays in character identification. Finally, open-ended responses from participants have given us further insight about the way that audiences perceive today's television families, as well as factors within their own experience that will inform how they interpret these portrayals. Regarding applications to audience persuasion and edutainment initiatives, these insights can be used to better inform how we communicate with and target audiences, and how we intentionally embed messages within a character's story and the narrative of the television program as a whole. Ultimately, this research adds to existing discussions regarding the ongoing importance of family's place in television, on and off screen, and emphasizes the importance of the role that representation plays in audience experience, enjoyment, and influence.

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## APPENDIX

### SURVEY

1. Your clicking on this “I consent” button below documents your permission to take part in this research. It does not waive any of the legal rights that you otherwise would have as a participant in a research study.
  - a. I consent.

#### Section 1

2. Which category below includes your age?
  - a. 18 – 19
  - b. 20 – 29
  - c. 30 – 39
  - d. 40 – 49
  - e. 50 – 59
  - f. 60 – 69
  - g. 70 or older
3. Which option best describes your gender?
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Non-binary
  - d. Other
  - e. Prefer not to say
4. I identify my ethnicity as (select all that apply).
  - a. American Indian or Alaska Native

- b. Asian or Asian American
- c. Hispanic or Latino
- d. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- e. White or Caucasian
- f. Prefer not to say
- g. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

5. Which option best describes your marital status?

- a. Single, never married
- b. Married
- c. Widowed
- d. Divorced
- e. Separated
- f. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

6. Please choose the option(s) that best describes your role in your current household

- a. Spouse
- b. Significant Other
- c. Parent
- d. Grandparent
- e. Child
- f. Grandchild
- g. Roommate
- h. I live alone.
- i. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

7. Please select the PRIMARY way that you have accessed television programs within the last year.
- a. Basic cable / Satellite
  - b. Premium cable channels
  - c. An online streaming service (i.e. Netflix, Hulu, etc.)
  - d. None of the above
  - e. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
8. On average, how much time do you spend watching fictional television programming per day?
- a. 0 hours
  - b. Less than 1 hour
  - c. 1 – 2 hours
  - d. 2 – 3 hours
  - e. 3 – 4 hours
  - f. More than 4 hours

## Section 2

All of the questions in this section will be related to the television program that you select for Question 9.

9. What is your favorite fictional or scripted television program that features a family, is currently airing on television or available on a streaming service, and has released new episodes within the last year? (If you do not watch a program that fits this description, please write or select “N/A” for the remaining questions on this page.) \_\_\_\_\_

10. Who is your favorite character on this program? \_\_\_\_\_

11. How do you feel that you relate to this character both as an individual and in relation to your role in the family/household? (Select all that apply.)

- a. His/her siblings are similar to mine.
- b. We are both only children.
- c. His/her parents or guardians are similar to mine.
- d. This character reminds me of a member of my family.
- e. This character and I both have similar personalities.
- f. This character and I both like similar things.
- g. This character is someone that I would aspire to be.
- h. None of the above.
- i. N/A
- j. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

12. Please select the response that most accurately describes your relationship to this statement: "During important moments/events in this show, I feel that I understand why this character does what (s)he does."

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree somewhat
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree somewhat
- e. Strongly disagree
- f. N/A

13. (Optional) Please describe why you selected the answer above.

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14. Please select the response that most accurately describes your relationship to this statement: “During important moments/events in this show, I feel that I know what this character was going through.”

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree somewhat
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree somewhat
- e. Strongly disagree
- f. N/A

15. (Optional) Please describe why you selected the answer above.

---

16. How do you feel that you can relate to a central family portrayed in this program?

(Select all that apply.)

- a. Similar family structure (# of parents, # of children, etc.)
- b. Similar family values and beliefs
- c. Similar family circumstances (We go through some of the same family problems and challenges)
- d. Similar economic circumstances
- e. Similar race or ethnic background
- f. Similar religion/faith
- g. Similar political views

- h. None of the above.
- i. N/A
- j. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

17. Please select the response that most accurately describes your relationship to this statement: “I understand the events in this show from a perspective very similar to that of one or more members of this family.”

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree somewhat
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree somewhat
- e. Strongly disagree
- f. N/A

18. (Optional) Please describe why you selected this answer.

\_\_\_\_\_

19. Many times, people will look to television shows and characters for **advice or guidance for how they should behave or act in their own life**. Thinking of the television series that you selected above, does this apply to you?

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree somewhat
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree somewhat
- e. Strongly disagree
- f. N/A

20. Many times, people will look to television shows and characters for **comfort**.

Thinking of the television series that you selected above, does this apply to you?

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree somewhat
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree somewhat
- e. Strongly disagree
- f. N/A

21. Many times, people will look to television shows and characters for **validation**

and to **feel understood**. Thinking of the television series that you selected above, does this apply to you?

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree somewhat
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree somewhat
- e. Strongly disagree
- f. N/A

22. Many times, people will look to television shows and characters for

**empowerment**. Thinking of the television series that you selected above, does this apply to you?

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree somewhat
- c. Neither agree nor disagree

- d. Disagree somewhat
- e. Strongly disagree
- f. N/A

### Section 3

All of the questions in this section will be related to the television program that you select for Question 23.

23. Name a television program, past or present, where you feel that the family most resembles yours. (This can be the program that you already selected above, or a different one entirely.) \_\_\_\_\_

24. How closely do you feel that this family resembles your own?

- a. Extremely similar in almost every way
- b. Very similar in most ways
- c. Similar in some ways but not others
- d. Somewhat similar in a few ways
- e. Not similar at all

25. In what ways does this family resemble yours? (Please select all that apply.)

- a. One or both parents are similar to mine.
- b. One or both parents are similar to me and/or my spouse.
- c. The children/child are similar to my siblings and me.
- d. The children/child are similar to my children/child.
- e. The family structure (# of parents and children, etc.) is the same or similar.

- f. Their cultural background and practices are the same or similar to ours.
- g. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

26. Please select the response that most accurately describes your relationship to this statement: “I understand the events in this show from a perspective very similar to that of one or more members of this family.”

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree somewhat
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree somewhat
- e. Strongly disagree

27. (Optional) Please describe why you selected this answer.

\_\_\_\_\_

28. Which response most accurately describes your relationship to this program?

- a. I dislike watching this program more than most others
- b. I dislike this program very much.
- c. I dislike this program somewhat.
- d. I neither like nor dislike this program.
- e. I like this program somewhat.
- f. I like this program very much.
- g. I like watching this program more than most others.

29. (Optional) Please describe why you selected this answer.

\_\_\_\_\_

30. Please select the response that most accurately describes your viewing habits for this program when it is available to you.

- a. I never choose to watch this program or I only watch this program when someone else has control of the remote.
- b. I choose to watch this program very rarely.
- c. I choose to watch this program often.
- d. This program is my first choice when watching television.

31. Please select the response that most accurately describes your present ability to view this series (due to access, times and channels on which it is aired, etc.)

- a. I am rarely or never able to access this program.
- b. I am very occasionally able to access this program.
- c. I am sometimes able to watch this program.
- d. I am very often able to watch this program.
- e. I am able to access this program anytime.

32. Many times, people will look to television shows and characters for **advice or guidance for how they should behave or act in their own life**. Thinking of the television series that you selected above, does this apply to you?

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree somewhat
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree somewhat
- e. Strongly disagree

33. Many times, people will look to television shows and characters for **comfort**.

Thinking of the television series that you selected above, does this apply to you?

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree somewhat
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree somewhat
- e. Strongly disagree

34. Many times, people will look to television shows and characters for **validation**

and **to feel understood**. Thinking of the television series that you selected above, does this apply to you?

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree somewhat
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree somewhat
- e. Strongly disagree

35. Many times, people will look to television shows and characters for

**empowerment**. Thinking of the television series that you selected above, does this apply to you?

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree somewhat
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree somewhat
- e. Strongly disagree

#### Section 4

For the following statements, please select the response that most accurately applies to you on a scale of 1 to 5, **1** being strongly **disagree**, and **5** being strongly **agree**.

36. I see families similar to my own portrayed in television often.

37. I see families similar to my own being stereotyped in television programming.

38. I see families similar to my own being portrayed accurately on television.

39. I see families similar to my own being portrayed positively on television.

40. I see families similar to my own being portrayed negatively on television.

41. Generally, I believe that families on television today are portrayed in a better way than they were in the past.

42. (Optional) Briefly describe why you selected the answer above.

\_\_\_\_\_

43. Generally, I believe that families portrayed on television today are ideal.

44. Generally, I prefer to see ideal families portrayed on television.

45. Please briefly describe how you would identify an “ideal family”.

\_\_\_\_\_

46. Generally, I believe that families portrayed on television today are realistic.

47. Generally, I prefer to see realistic families portrayed on television.

48. Please briefly describe how you would identify a “realistic family”.

\_\_\_\_\_

49. I want to see more families like my own portrayed on television.

50. Thinking of the question that you just answered, please briefly describe what this means to you (how you would identify a “family like your own”).

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