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# The Role of Social Identity in Viewer Attitudes and Intentions

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## ABSTRACT

*The research project aims to identify a relationship between self-identification based on the social identity theory and feelings towards a particular show. Focusing the research on four fictitious shows with similar plot lines, but different casts of the same ethnic group, the research team has created a questionnaire that asked questions relating to the shows and participant social identity. The survey sample consists of 241 individuals between the ages of 18 and 28. The results show that there is a positive predictive relationship between feeling that your social group is represented in a show and attitudes towards that show, as well as intentions to watch the show. Understanding the participant's viewing attitudes and behaviors relating to their self-identification will provide insight to marketers that will aid in future development of media including television series and film that is more understanding of the new nuances that dictate viewership behavior.*

## INTRODUCTION

Television and visual media is an essential part of American culture. In 2009 Nielsen reported that on average, Americans were spending over “151 hours per month watching television and seven more watching recorded programs” (Damratoski, Field, Mizell, & Budden, 2011). In recent years this viewership has grown to include streamed media, with 71% of US adult consumers watching TV via an Internet streaming service (Snider, 2015).

Beginning as a delivery based video rental company; Netflix has grown to become one of the most popular streaming services on the market. Their video on demand streaming service was launched in 2007, placing 10,000 of their 90,000 movie titles online (Jenner, 2014). Since then, their library has grown to include video games and a mix of network and original television shows. Streaming on Netflix provides viewers with an experience that is unlike mainstream TV due to the lack of typical components of television such as: “news, game shows sporting events or other programs associated with TV’s live aesthetics (Jenner, 2014).” Additionally, Netflix offers the convenience to watch on demand, without commercials, which may not be provided by other sources.

Seeking to understand consumption patterns of millennials, researchers have conducted studies to measure their ability to self-identify with everything from food choices to environmentally conscious products. According to a recent study, Millennials are the largest adopter of streaming

services with more than 70% of those aged 18-29, using a streaming service (Snider, 2015). Understanding the relationship between media consumption and self-identification creates an opportunity for Netflix and other streaming services to advance their knowledge when targeting Millennials.

Through the use of fictitious shows, this study aims to see how the viewer preferences of Millennials are impacted by the ability to self-identify with the shows characters. This research hypothesizes that these social groups will positively correlate with attitudes and behaviors of individuals being tested.

The main objectives of this study include an analysis of viewership preferences based on attitudes of social identification. Secondly, this study aims to understand the relationship between identifying with a television show and attitudes and behaviors towards that show. In looking at social identity as the operational measurement to access other components of participant's involvement with the shows.

Investigating this topic is beneficial for marketers because it allows them to tailor their products even further to the specific preferences of a consumer. During market segmentation, which eventually leads to the creation of target markets, the goal is to divide the population into smaller subsets. Once these smaller groups are created, a marketer will hone in on the needs and wants of a target market (Kardes, F. R., Cronley, M. L., & Cline, 2011). Exploring the connection between self-identification and viewer preference creates the possibility to segment markets based on self-identification, furthering the ability of marketers to fulfill a target market's' wants and needs.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory is a social-psychological perspective developed by Tajfel and Turner that defines how people classify themselves and others into various social categories (Karjaluoto & Leppaniemi, 2011). Social identity captures the main aspects of the individual's identification with the group in the sense that the person comes to view himself or herself as a member of the community and feels that he/she belongs to it (Karjaluoto & Leppaniemi, 2011). An individual's sense of belonging to a community as it relates to their "self-identification" of a particular reference group is exactly what is being researched in this project through the framework of new technology in the form of a Netflix original series and fabricated shows that have a similar plot with homogenous ethnic groups. Another insight about social identity theory in social psychology was its contrast in meaning between European and American versions. Social identity theory from a European perspective aimed to look at more interpersonal and individualistic qualities of self while the American interpretations prior to Tajfel and Turner's formal establishment of the theory were more collectivist in their analysis (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). This individualistic model through a social psychological framework provides insight on participants group processes in relation to themselves.

### Social Identity in Consumer Behavior

There are many factors that influence consumer behavior and product consumption. These factors can include household products, technology, and media and television choices. The motivations behind consumption choices come from all sources, including one's sense of self. Past research has tied social identity to consumption behaviors, finding that in many instances, identifying with a brand or having a brand be a part of one's identity has significant effects on purchase and consumption behaviors. It has been found that identifying with a product, or even an attribute of the product, for example where the product was made, can increase attitudes toward and willingness to buy that product (Yu-An, Phau, & Lin, 2010; Zeugner-Roth, Zabkar, & Diamantopoulos, 2015). Research has found that ethnocentrism, evaluations from the perspective of the values and beliefs of one's own country, has a significant influence on attitudes and purchase intentions (Yu-An, Phau, & Lin, 2010), but even more so, national identity, the extent to which your nationality is a part of your sense of self, has a stronger effect on attitudes and willingness to buy (Zeugner-Roth, Zabkar, & Diamantopoulos, 2015). Similarly, cultural group identification has a positive relationship with attitudes and purchase intentions for a brand that emulates that culture (Chattaraman, Lennon, & Rudd, 2010).

A common marketing tactic for brands is to appeal to and associate with a certain lifestyle in order to develop consumer identification with that brand. This approach has been supported as experimental studies have found that when brands make social identity salient, by emphasizing their association with a social group, it tends to lead to more positive attitudes toward that brand. Further, that attitude formation is more likely to be impacted by evaluating from a social identity perspective, meaning attitudes are based on the evaluations made from feelings of identification (Reed, 2000). As an example of this finding, research on social identity and sustainability brands have found that identifying with an environmentally friendly group has a positive relationship with attitudes toward organic food brands and that brand attitudes have a significant influence on buying behaviors (Bartels & Hoogendam, 2011). As a brand begins to become a part of a person's self-identity, research shows that it can increase intentions to buy that brand again, and even influence actual purchase behaviors (Smith, Terry, Manstead, Louis & Kotterman, 2008). In that same vein, a study done by Marin, Ruiz, and Rubio (2009) supported the idea that identification satisfies the need for self-definition, and that identification with a brand then has a significant mediating effect on perceptions of the brand and brand loyalty.

### **Media Habits of Millennials**

Studies also suggest that there are generational nuances in consumption behaviors. Millennials far outpace older Americans in the use of Social Networking Site subscriptions (Barker, 2012). In 2007, 30 percent of social network members accessed sites at least once a day; by 2010 this grew to 67 percent (Botterill, 2015). Studies also reported that on average, young people stayed in touch with 300 Facebook friends and followed 79 Twitter accounts (Botterill, 2015). This suggests that millennials have larger networks than older age groups and appear to be influenced by the larger reference groups.

Although there exists differences in frequency of usage for these two age groups, other dynamics make millennials distinct in their media usage behaviors. Millennials compared to baby-boomers are more likely to own social networking profiles, to connect to the Internet wirelessly, and to post personal video online (Barker, 2012). The Pew Research Center described Millennials usage of their handheld gadgets as "body parts" (Barker, 2012).

There is also research to suggest that among millennials, women use media more frequently than men (Barker, 2012). According to the Pew Research Center, 69 percent of women in this age group report using Social Networking Sites compared to only 60 percent of men (Barker, 2012). Women are not only more present on those websites; they are also more active when they are on them. Women are also more active SNS users, 48% of female Internet users use SNSs daily, compared with 38% of males (Barker, 2012).

### **Racial Identity and TV Viewership Preferences**

The tendencies for television viewers to gravitate towards media choices that reflect the social groups with which they identify extend to include their racial and ethnic identities. In observing the audience activity of the popular show *American Idol*, researcher Jungmin Lee noticed contrast in importance of the race of the contestants among differing viewer demographics. In the study, African American viewers were more likely to tune in and vote if there were African Americans among the contestant pool, echoing the idea of social identity gratifications. However, these same-race preferences were not as pronounced among white viewers. This difference was attributed to a difference in the strength of racial identity between the races. Being that African Americans have historically fallen into the minority, they are more likely to place importance and derive gratifications from seeing themselves in positive media portrayals (Lee, 2009).

This same desire for minority groups to see positive portrayals of themselves in mass media was noted by researcher Minelle Mahtani in her 2008 analysis of certain racial groups and their perceptions of English-language TV in Canada. In her analysis Mahtani interviewed numerous citizens who self-identified as either Chinese-Canadian or Iranian-Canadian, in order to better understand the direct effects of them being both under and misrepresented. Perhaps most important in her analysis was the differentiation the citizens made between the Canadian and American media outlets. While they felt that both misrepresented their communities at times, the preference was given to the Canadian media outlets over those in the U.S., the reason being that Canadian outlets were more open to attempting to rectify their shortcomings through soliciting the feedback of viewers.

### **Hypotheses**

In order to meet the research objectives of understanding the role social identity plays in television show viewing and analyzing the relationship between social identification and consumer behaviors and attitudes, this study predicts a few hypotheses based on the previous research. Based on past research about social identity in relation to consumer behaviors and attitudes the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Participants who feel as if their social group is represented in a television show will have more positive attitudes towards that show.

H2: Participants who feel as if their social group is represented in a television show will have greater intentions to watch that show.

To further investigate the role of social identity specifically, and to understand the theoretical application of social identity in consumer behavior, the following hypothesis was proposed:



H3: Participants that more strongly identify with their social group will have greater intentions to watch the show if it represents their social group.

## METHOD

This study is a quasi-experiment that applies a within-subjects design using an online questionnaire where each participant is exposed to four image stimuli containing four different homogenous race casts for fictitious television shows and answered question about social identity, attitudes, and behavior intentions.

### Participants

This experiment included 241 participants from Florida State University. Participants fit within the age group of interest ranging from 18 years to 28 years, with an average of 20.66 years old. The sample was overwhelmingly female (n=172, 71%) and Caucasian (n=203, 83.8%). As expected most of this sample had at least some college education or more (n=197, 82.7%). Participants were recruited through various communications classes at the large southeast university with an exchange of class credits as compensation for their participation.

### Procedure

To make the questionnaire as easily accessible and convenient as possible for participants, the survey was conducted online. The questionnaire starts with an informed consent form that the participant must read and agree to before being able to move on to the actual research questionnaire. They would then complete a short demographic questionnaire, followed by the social identity questionnaire. Next, each participant is exposed to four different television show image manipulations with the same set of attitude and viewing intentions. Each image showed a television show title poster of a fictitious show made up by the researchers. The shows were said to have similar plots but each were manipulated to clearly represent one homogeneous racial group in its cast, for each of the four racial social groups White/Caucasian, African American, Asian, and Hispanic. Participants are meant to indicate how much they feel the show represents their racial social group, and their attitudes and intentions about the show. At the close of the questionnaire a link is provided that would take them to the form to fill out for extra credit, if they are receiving class credit for participating.

### Variables

**Independent Variables.** The goal of this study is to find how social identity influences television viewing preferences and behaviors. There are two independent variables being measured: the degree to which the participant identifies with their racial social group, or degree of social identity, and feelings of representation in the show.

*Identification with the Social Group.* To measure extent of identification with the social group the survey first asked which racial social group the participant identified with, and then used seven selected items that assess membership with the group (e.g. I am a cooperative participant in the social group I belong to.), identity with the group (e.g. I feel good about the social group I belong to.), and private feelings about the group (e.g. This social group is an important reflection of who I am.) from the Collective Self-Esteem Scale developed by Luhtanen and Crocker (1992).

Each item was added together and divided by the seven items to create a Social Identity Index score (Cronbach's alpha = .79).

*Feelings of representation in the show.* This variable was simply measured by a single item asking if they feel their group is represented in the show with a seven point Likert-scale response from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

**Dependent Variables.** The dependent variables in this study measure consumer behavior and attitudes. The study had two dependent variables: attitudes about the show and intentions to watch the show.

*Attitudes.* The variable of attitudes were measured by three seven-point semantic differential scales measuring favorable to unfavorable, interesting to uninteresting, and exciting to boring (Chronbach's alpha = .98). This scale was adapted from Singh and Spears (2012) as a scale for measuring attitudes in consumer behavior research.

*Intentions to watch.* In communication research and understanding reactions to media messages, viewing intentions often measure intentions and behaviors related to existing shows and the way people interact with those shows (Rubin, Perse & Taylor, 1988). However, this study is primarily interested in looking at consumer behavior and it was found that it would be best suited to instead measure viewing intentions as a modification of purchase intentions. Therefore, this study used theoretically grounded measures that look at purchase intentions in a consumer behavior context, and then adapted these scales to reflect intentions of consuming media rather than purchasing a product or service. Spears and Singh (2012) have developed a standard scale to measure purchase intentions and recommendation intentions that can directly relate to the present study. Intentions were measured on a seven-point Likert-scale of very unlikely to very likely (Chronbach's alpha = .95).

## RESULTS

To test the proposed hypotheses a simple linear regression analyses was used to find a predictive relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Regressions for each hypothesis were run for each of the shows and presented in one table.

The first hypothesis predicted that feelings of representation in a show will result in positive attitudes towards that show. A linear regression was calculated to predict attitudes based on feelings of representation for the "Caucasian" show. A significant regression equation was found ( $F(1, 237) = 24.132, p = .000$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .092. Participants predicted attitude equals  $2.740 + .242 * \text{feelings of representation}$ . Attitudes increased by .242 units for each unit of feelings of representation. For the "African American" show again a significant regression equation was found ( $F(1, 234) = 13.012, p = .000$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .053. Participants predicted attitude equals  $3.374 + .222 * \text{feelings of representation}$ , meaning attitudes increased by .222 units for every unit of feelings of representation. Next, looking at the "Asian" show, a significant regression equation was found ( $F(1, 234) = 15.657, p = .000$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .063. Participants predicted attitude equals  $3.248 + .251 * \text{feelings of representation}$ , indicating attitudes increased by .251 units for every unit of feelings of representation. And lastly, for the "Hispanic" show, a significant regression equation was found ( $F(1, 235) = 6.722, p = .010$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .028. Participants

predicted attitude equals  $3.318 + .171 * \text{feelings of representation}$ , meaning attitudes increased by .171 units for every unit of feelings of representation.

The results show that there is a significant relationship for all racial groups presented in the shows between feelings of representation and attitudes toward that show. As seen in Table 1, for all four shows the relationship was fairly weak, but still significant.

**Table 1**  
**Simple regression of attitudes towards the show predicted by feelings of representation for each show**

<u>Racial group in show</u>	<u>Unstandardized</u>		<u>Standardized</u>			<u>R<sup>2</sup></u>
	<u>B</u>	<u>Std. Error</u>	<u>β</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>Sig.</u>	
Caucasian	.242***	.049	.304	4.912	.000	.092
African American	.222***	.062	.230	3.607	.000	.053
Asian	.251***	.064	.250	3.957	.000	.063
Hispanic	.171***	.066	.167	2.539	.010	.028

*Note:* Four separate regression analyses were run, one for each show, and the relevant values for each are shown; significance \*\* =  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*\* =  $p \leq .01$ .

The second hypothesis proposed that feelings of representation for a show will affect intentions to watch that show. Four linear regression analyses were run, one for each show, to find the relationship between the two variables. Looking at the “Caucasian” show, a significant regression equation was found ( $F(1,239) = 27.246, p = .000$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .320. Participants predicted intention to watch the show equals  $2.041 + .292 * \text{feelings of representation}$ , meaning intention to watch increased by .292 units for every unit of feelings of representation. For the “African American” show, a significant regression equation was found ( $F(1,239) = 8.195, p = .005$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .033. Participants predicted intention to watch the show equals  $2.808 + .212 * \text{feelings of representation}$ , meaning intention to watch increased by .212 units for every one unit of feelings of representation. For the “Asian” show, a significant regression equation was found ( $F(1,237) = 18.351, p = .000$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .072. Participants predicted intention to watch the show equals  $2.362 + .333 * \text{feelings of representation}$ , meaning intention to watch increased by .333 units for every unit of feelings of representation. And then for the “Hispanic” show, a significant regression equation was found ( $F(1,239) = 11.942, p = .001$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .048. Participants predicted intention to watch the show equals  $2.393 + .261 * \text{feelings of representation}$ , meaning intention to watch increased by .261 units for every unit of feelings of representation. For this hypothesis, all of the relationships found for each show were significant, but they were all relatively weak, as shown in Table 2.



**Table 2**  
**Simple regression of intentions to watch the show predicted by feelings of representation for each show**

<u>Racial group in show</u>	<u>Unstandardized</u>		<u>Standardized</u>		<u>Sig.</u>	<u>R<sup>2</sup></u>
	<u>B</u>	<u>Std. Error</u>	<u>β</u>	<u>t</u>		
Caucasian	.292***	.056	.320	5.220	.000	.102
African American	.212***	.074	.182	2.863	.005	.033
Asian	.333***	.078	.268	4.284	.000	.072
Hispanic	.261***	.075	.218	3.456	.001	.048

*Note:* Four separate regression analyses were run, one for each show, and the relevant values for each are shown; significance \*\* =  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*\* =  $p \leq .01$ .

The final hypothesis predicts that, when controlled for feelings of representation, degree of social identity will have a predictive effect on intentions to watch the show. The first step is to control for whether or not the participant felt that the show represented their racial social group. A new variable was created that determined categorically if the participant identified with the show by categorizing them as identified if they responded with a five or higher on the Likert-scale item. Linear regressions were then run on each show, filtering for only those cases that indicate feeling represented by the show with the new variable. For the “Caucasian” show, a significant regression equation was found ( $F(1,88) = 4.226, p = .043$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .046. Participants predicted intention to watch the show equals  $2.140 + .337 * \text{degree of social identity}$ , meaning intention to watch increased by .261 units for every unit of social identity. Next, for the “African American” show, the regression equation found was not significant ( $F(1,14) = .295, p = .596$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .021. Similarly, for the “Asian” show, the regression equation found was not significant ( $F(1,29) = .275, p = .154$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .072. For the “Hispanic” show as well, the regression equation found was not significant ( $F(1,25) = 1.680, p = .207$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .063.

The relationship between degree of identity and intentions to watch the show, controlling for feelings of representation in the show, was not found to be significant for any of the racial groups in the shows, except for the “Caucasian” show which had a moderate relationship, as seen in Table 3.

**Table 3****Simple regression of intentions to watch the show predicted by degree of social identity**

<u>Racial group in show</u>	<u>Unstandardized</u>		<u>Standardized</u>			
	<u>B</u>	<u>Std. Error</u>	<u><math>\beta</math></u>	<u>t</u>	<u>Sig.</u>	<u>R<sup>2</sup></u>
Caucasian	.337**	.164	.214	2.056	.043	.046
African American	.277	.509	.144	.543	.596	.021
Asian	.911	.585	.460	1.556	.154	.072
Hispanic	.444	.342	.251	1.296	.207	.063

*Note:* Four separate regression analyses were run, one for each show, and the relevant values for each are shown; significance \*\* =  $p \leq 0.05$ .  
Regression found after being controlled for feelings represented in the show.

## DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis was supported by our data. Participants' feelings of their social group being represented in the show had a weak but significant predictive relationship with attitudes for all four shows. The strongest relationship was for the "Asian" show and weakest for the "Hispanic" show, indicating that those who identify with the Asian race social group and feel represented in a show will predictably have better attitudes toward the show. However, the "Caucasian" show had the highest standardized beta which shows a moderate correlation between the two variables and this relationship does only account for about 9% of the variance in attitudes towards the show. This is useful to know that identity has some weight on one's attitudes towards a show, for at least those who feel they are represented in a predominantly Caucasian cast.

The second hypothesis was also supported. Feelings of being represented in the show can significantly predict intentions to watch the show for all four racial groups. The relationship was once again strongest for the "Asian" show and weakest for the "Hispanic" show, but overall weak to moderate relationships were found for all the shows. Again, the "Caucasian" show had a higher standardized beta of .320 which is a moderate correlation between feeling represented and intending to watch the show, which accounts for about 10% of the variance in intentions to watch for the "Caucasian" show. Based on these findings, although strong relationships were not found, the researchers feel that the data shows that feeling as if your racial social group is represented in a show can positively affect attitudes and intentions to watch the show.

The third hypothesis was partially supported, with only one show finding a significant relationship. The degree to which participants identify with their social group did not definitively predict their intentions to watch the show. For the "Caucasian" show a statistically significant moderate relationship was found, meaning that of those that felt that their social group was represented in the "Caucasian" show, the strength of their identity with that group positively affects their intention to watch that show. However, none of the other shows found significant relationships. Based on the results, the findings could not be generalized. As later discussed in

the limitations, there was a significant portion of the sample that identified as Caucasian which can affect the strength and significance of the relationships in a way that the smaller proportions for other racial social groups may not. This relationship has implications for better understanding how much of a role social identity plays in television viewing choices. Knowing that those who strongly identify with their racial social group would be more likely to watch a show that represents that group supports the idea that media choices reflect our self and social identities.

This study is unique in that there is limited prior research examining the impact of self-identification on viewer preferences. While self-identification has been the focus of many studies in other genres, there is a gap in research examining the specific relationship between self-identification and viewer preferences.

Just as the other studies on self-identification are imperative, research in this area is critical, as the implications can lead to possible success or failure of a streaming media product or marketing campaign. This study gives marketers another aspect to consider when targeting Millennial digital media consumers across all social groups. While some results were stronger than others, overall the results present a need for marketers to be cognizant of the impact that self-identification plays in viewer preferences.

Market segmentation is an essential part of marketing already, but the results of this study reinforce the importance of understanding the demographics of a target market. Understanding the target markets' demographic, followed by how the market self-identified, allows for further refinement of the message marketers want to convey to consumers.

### **Limitations**

This study is limited in the demographics of the sample. The majority of the study participants are from the southeast. Specifically, a large portion of study participants are from two sections of an undergraduate speech class. While the results of this study may be representative of a specific population, it may not be representative of a larger population. Additionally, the survey results may also be biased based on the high response from Caucasian females. While the goal was to obtain as many varied respondents as possible, the highest group represented is those who self-identify as Caucasian. This is particularly important to this study, as self-identification is part of the variable measured.

Some respondents self-reported the survey was brief to complete, possibly noting they did not take the time to fully analyze the questions. Additionally, the results show some participants did not fully respond to survey questions, limiting the ability to collect full data. Also, some limitations occurred due to the nature of the stimuli. While a photograph shows limited information, if stimuli was presented in video form, participants would have the ability to observe character's personality traits, body language and tone inflection. The sound, movement and dynamic provided by characters in a video adds depth and additional information to the portrayed social groups.

Lastly, a pretest was not able to be run on the stimuli before the current study. Having the ability to pretest would allow the team to determine if additional variables were present in the images themselves. When comparing the TV posters, there are slight differences in the body language and facial expression of the characters, background layouts and created show names. The ability to pre-test would rule out the possibility of additional variables impacting participant responses.

## Suggestions for Future Research

As previously stated, this study, through the use of fictitious shows modeled after the Netflix series, *Orange is the New Black*, aims to see how the viewer preferences of undergraduate and graduate college students, ages 18-29, are impacted by the ability to self-identify with the shows characters. In order to gain a complete understanding of the effects of social identity on viewing preferences, it would be of benefit to offer the stimuli without a prescribed title. To maintain a high level of mundane realism, it is ill advised to label each show with the same title. However, participants' approval or disapproval of the title itself may serve to confound the data. To strengthen the generalizability of future findings, the study should be conducted using homogeneous samples. Due to the demographics of this study, the researchers were able to make definitive statements in regards to the attitudes of Caucasians but the findings could not be generalized to millennials as a whole. Lastly, it is imperative that future research seek to understand the degree to which participants identify with social groups other than their own as these identifications may lead them to have more positive attitudes towards shows deemed to be outside of their social group.

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