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Cultural Diversity in Television Narratives: Homophilization, Appropriation, and Implications for Media Advocacy

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This research explores the role of cultural diversity in the construction of consumer identity, and in particular, how cultural diversity is appropriated through television viewing. Data based on depth interviews and surveys of young adults who created brand collages centered on a television-based character reveal that viewers identify and engage with television narratives through a process of “homophilization”; that is, they actively envision various features of television narratives as similar to themselves and their own lived experiences. The data also show that homophilizing processes are enacted primarily by customizing the narrative, or textual poaching, in which the consumers insert themselves and their experiences into the narrative, and that consumption choices serve as primary mechanisms for poaching. Because media narratives are important in the formation and maintenance of consumer identity, the authors strongly recommend vigilance in the production and dissemination of socially conscious narratives that allow prosocial and realistic characters with whom consumers can actively engage.

Keywords: television influence, consumer culture theory, cultural diversity, narrative, homophily

Cultural diversity is a central trope in contemporary culture (Kymlicka and Norman 2000). Though almost universally regarded as ideal and socially desirable, cultural diversity is a polysemic text with highly contested meanings (Parekh 2000). Consumers must engage and reconcile these many meanings as they construct and communicate their own identity. This research explores how consumers engage and reconcile cultural diversity-related meanings received through television. Television’s central role in shaping understanding of diversity makes this a compelling issue for public policy.

The hallmark feature of the cultural diversity trope is an idealized interpersonal relationship (of varying depth and intimacy) with a person from a marginalized cultural group (e.g., Naisbitt 1988). However, despite their idealized status, culturally diverse relationships are rare in practice. They tend to dissolve quickly when they occur and are unlikely to develop after the early school years (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Media (e.g., television, Internet/

social media, cinema, music) allows many to experience virtually what they do not experience interpersonally. The juxtaposition of what occurs in daily life against what can be accessed through media raises the central question posed by this research: How do people appropriate cultural diversity through media consumption, particularly television?

Media scholars have long investigated related questions, and the scholarship provides the grounding assumptions that guide the current research. Prior research has identified a media culture that socializes and provides materials for constructing identity, social reproduction, and change, as a central feature of the postmodern condition (Hutcheon 2002; Kellner 1995). In addition, Friedberg (1994, p. 179) notes that “electronic media reorganizes social space, breaking down the boundaries between here and there, lived and mediated, personal and public.” Media consumption is active and always negotiated (Mayne 2000). People stake personal identities inside media narratives, using them to legitimate identity positions such as gender and ethnicity (Gauntlett 2008; Morley and Robins 1995). As Briley, Shrum, and Wyer (2013 [in this issue]) detail, media also offers access to other identity positions (e.g., gender, ethnicity, race, class, geography). It mitigates and translates experience into the corporeality of the consumer (Friedberg 1994).

In line with these insights from prior research, we posit that television is uniquely important for understanding how cultural diversity is appropriated through media. Television instantiates reigning cultural logics; viewers observe and adopt the cultural logics it depicts. Thus, television is a

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prime site for acculturation and enculturation. To paraphrase Raymond Williams' ([1974] 2003) famous insight, television blends narrative, information, and advertising into a virtually ceaseless flow of ideas. Television is also chiefly responsible for disseminating idealized narratives about culture that viewers (i.e., consumers) may actively seek out (as documented in Brumbaugh and Grier 2013 [in this issue]) and appropriate for use in their identity construction (e.g., Crockett 2008). Little is known about how viewers appropriate these narratives. This research addresses the oversight by exploring the following questions: How do viewers engage with cultural diversity experienced through television programs? What role is played by traditional markers of cultural diversity, such as gender and race, in connecting viewers with television narratives? In turn, how are viewers influenced by the consumption lifestyles of culturally diverse characters and narratives on television?

We treat the intersection of cultural diversity and media as a matter of social justice and welfare, and thus squarely within the scope of public policy. In the United States, issues pertaining to cultural diversity and media have long been investigated as matters of social justice and welfare, particularly role status and the depiction frequency of women and minorities. In 1968, for example, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (more commonly, the Kerner Commission) admonished media outlets for their portrayal of blacks (Hrach 2011). Although the commission stopped short of linking negative media portrayals directly to civil unrest, it legitimized treatment of minority role status and frequency of depiction on television as a social justice and welfare matter in public discourse—a pattern that has held since. In consumer research, Kassarian's (1969) almost simultaneously published analysis of blacks in advertising during the 20-year Baby Boom adopts a similar social justice and welfare stance, delivering a commentary to both business and civil rights groups about the state of race relations. Likewise, we offer our analysis and findings primarily to industry and advocacy groups rather than lawmakers and regulators.

Literature Review

Theories about how television narratives influence audiences abound in the fields of media communications and cultural studies, and they are also well represented within advertising and consumer research. Given the goal of understanding how viewers use television to understand diversity, we briefly review this expansive set of literature with an eye toward foregrounding the relevant constructs rather than exhaustive coverage.

Television Delivers Narratives

Television is a polysemic text that contains a virtually ceaseless flow of content (i.e., narrative, information, and advertising) within and across programs (Butler 2007). Television producers build narrative by managing flow and interruptions of content in ways that privilege their preferred meanings. Television narratives center on characters, which are textual signifiers that communicate essence. Basic demographic (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender) and/or physical signifiers (e.g., clothing, body type) often indicate essential fea-

tures of a protagonist (antagonist) or secondary story participant. Aspects of acting performances (e.g., voice, facial features, gestures) can further develop important features of the character in the narrative. In addition, some actors deliver meaning because they are stars. They have intertextuality; that is, audiences read their stardom across multiple texts—as characters in programming, as actors who are targets of professional criticism, as product endorsers, and as celebrities who are the subjects of intensive public scrutiny about their personal lives. Thus, the act of viewing is an open-ended engagement with the text filtered through personal and social discourses. Although television producers may have a preferred meaning, communicating it to an audience is always probabilistic rather than deterministic: viewers may or may not adapt the position of identification with the producer's preferred meaning (Hall 1997; Newcomb 1994).

Television Influences Through Referential Relationships

Theories have long established that influence stems from the structural relationship between agent and target. Thus, influences received from mediated agents in television narratives are driven by the referential relationship targets (viewers) develop with characters/sources, even if they are socially, geographically, or culturally distant (Cocanougher and Bruce 1971). We describe the basic relationship types.

Upward-Looking Relationships

Upward-looking relationships reflect a hierarchical structure in which viewers look up to media sources, a prevailing notion in traditional models of media influence. Television is often viewed as an aspirational world, especially the idealized images of advertising (Richins 1991) and television series (Hirschman and Thompson 1997). The basic research tenets of celebrities' credibility as advertising endorsers and agents of persuasion are that they ought to be perceived as attractive, powerful, and trustworthy (Kertz and Ohanian 1992; Ohanian 1990). These characteristics assume an upward-looking, mediated relationship to celebrities; viewers envy, admire, and want to emulate the consumption constellations and lifestyles displayed in the television series they watch (Festinger 1954; Hirschman and Thompson 1997). These hierarchical relationships are also central to McCracken's (1989, 1998) meaning transfer model, wherein celebrities and characters emanating from popular culture and mediated texts serve as opinion leaders and inspire the consumer and lifestyle habits of those who revere them. However, it is important to note that media audiences generally (and television viewers especially) may relate to characters and celebrities in additional ways that have been less commonly highlighted in the literature.

Lateral/Peer Relationships

Lateral/peer relationships reflect a horizontal relationship structure, in which media consumers are on par with the mediated characters with whom they interact. Because they commonly simulate real life, television-based characters often trigger parasocial relationships. Viewers think of recurring characters that seemingly evolve on a similar timescale as being real, even close friends and thus relate to

those characters on the same level (Russell, Norman, and Heckler 2004). Social media platforms further foster a semblance of interactive relationship and closeness, as audiences can communicate directly (or seemingly so) with mediated celebrities. Such lateral relationships are prone to establish trust, a central tenet of credibility models, as well as perceptions of similarity. Indeed, people often assume that their television “friends” (interpersonal or mediated) are like them, sharing similar beliefs and attitudes, even when this is inaccurate (Huckfedt and Sprague 1995; Jusim and Osgood 1989).

Such perceptions of similarity with close others are the underlying principles of homophily. Homophily broadly refers to the degree to which two or more people who interact are similar on certain attributes, such as beliefs, education, social status, and the like. Colloquially stated, “birds of a feather flock together” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). In their classic study on the subject, Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954) distinguish between “status” and “value homophily” as bases of similarity. Status homophily is based on membership in status categories (or behaviors associated with them), in which status may be ordered by ascribed characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, sex, age) or acquired characteristics (e.g., religion, education, occupation). Value homophily is based on adherence to values, attitudes, and beliefs, which are internal states that presumably shape orientation toward future behavior. Because these internal states are rarely observed directly, they are often inferred from behavior.

This distinction between status and value homophily implies multiple broad bases on which viewers might perceive similarity to mediated others. They might perceive a physical resemblance or a more subjective, elaborated, even imagined resemblance. Alternatively, they might use observable behaviors, such as consumption, to infer similarity of values, attitudes, and beliefs. For example, a recent study of Facebook friendship ties among college students indicates that ties were more likely to form as a function of propinquity based on co-residence and similarities on non-racial categories than on more traditional status homophily markers such as race (Wimmer and Lewis 2010). In these relationships, credibility is established through perceived homophily (Eyal and Rubin 2003; McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly 1975). Distinct from having close, mediated relationships with homophilous others, media audiences may even fully identify and live vicariously through these perceived relationships, in a type of merged relationship.

Merged Relationships

In merged relationships, self and mediated others overlap entirely. Identification with a mediated character, a central construct in media (Cohen 2001), can allow the projection of oneself onto the other, which promotes vicarious experiences. Identification with a television character is a major contributor to self-identity development because the viewer experiences the social reality presented therein from the inside (Erikson 1968). Identification can promote narrative transportation into a story and vicarious experience of its events, as well as greater belief in the events and what they represent (Green and Brock 2000). Identification with media characters can also trigger adoption of displayed

behaviors (Cohen 2001). A study of Elvis impersonators (Fraser and Brown 2002) provides a compelling, if rather extreme, illustration. Some fans have adopted Elvis’ perceived attributes, values, and behaviors and have integrated them into their own, even undergoing surgery to enhance the physical resemblance.

The literature suggests that homophily undergirds relationships that viewers form with television characters, actors, and celebrities that have a lateral/peer or merged (but not upward-looking) structure. The premise of this research is that these mediated others convey meanings about cultural diversity through television narratives. Viewers then appropriate meaning about cultural diversity through their relationships (structured as upward-looking, lateral/peer, or merged) with characters, actors, and celebrities to aid in constructing their own identities. Given the important role media plays in shaping meanings associated with cultural diversity and producing images of it, we investigate the processes by which television narratives influence viewers’ understanding of cultural diversity.

Methodology

In the spirit of discovery-oriented research (Wells 1993), we examine how consumers relate to television-based narratives and the characters therein. We began by theoretically sampling university students (aged 18–35 years) who self-identified as television fans. We asked 137 of them to create a digital brand collage centered on a character in a television narrative of their choice and to complete an online semistructured questionnaire about their collage. A subset of these collage creators (N = 22) also agreed to participate in a long interview about their collage. For details on the informant set, see Table 1.

Collage Task

Instructions for the collage task were (1) to select a character from a serial television program they watch and (2) to create a digital collage of products and services that they could envision the focal character using in a typical day. Collages should contain at least five products/services but could be of any length. Participants could take up to ten days to prepare and submit their collages electronically (for examples, see the Appendix). This task is in keeping with the visual nature of most social communication and, thus, most consumption expressions (Zaltman 1997). In the interviews, the collages served as a compelling projective technique to elicit product/service-, character-, and self-related thoughts without explicitly asking for them (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003). Collages of this nature provide a creative, unbounded, projective task that bypasses participants’ defense mechanisms, rationalization, and social desirability biases. This interpretive tool, similar to Zaltman’s (1997) metaphor elicitation technique, is useful to uncover deep insights into a specific phenomenon (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003) or to unearth consumption’s implications for self-identity (Chaplin and John 2005).

Semistructured Questionnaires

In an online questionnaire (link provided), participants responded to an open-ended prompt to describe their

Table 1. Informants

Name	Sex	Age	Ethnicity/ Race	Geographic Location	Show	Character	Length	Frequency
Yasmina	F	21	Persian	Southern California	<i>The OC</i>	Summer Roberts	1.5 years	1/week
Kai	M	28	Latino	Southern California	<i>Curb Your Enthusiasm</i>	Larry David	All episodes	1+ /week (+DVD)
Tandy	F	22	White	Southern California	<i>Sex and the City</i>	Carrie Bradshaw	6 years	1+ /week
Todd	M	22	White	Southern California	<i>The Simpsons</i>	Homer Simpson	14 years	1+ /week
Natalie	F	22	White	Southern California	<i>The Simpsons</i>	Homer Simpson	Sporadically	Not regularly
Wendy	F	21	White/ Jewish	Philadelphia	<i>Friends</i>	Phoebe Buffay	10 years	Every day or more
Van	M	22	Black	Philadelphia	<i>Bernie Mac</i>	Bernie Mac	1 year	1/week
Fred	M	22	Black	Philadelphia	<i>Chappelle's Show</i>	Dave Chappelle	1 year	1/week
Nandy	F	20	Latina	Philadelphia	<i>King of Queens</i>	Carrie Heffernan	6 years	1+ /week
Reshay	M	22	Black	Philadelphia	<i>The Philadelphia 76ers</i>	Allen Iverson	All life	1/week in season
Nate	M	21	White	Philadelphia	<i>The Apprentice</i>	Donald Trump	2 years	
Sam	M	20	White/ Jewish	Philadelphia	<i>ER</i>	Dr. Pratt	2–3 years	1/week
Elliott	M	21	White	Philadelphia	<i>The Apprentice</i>	Donald Trump	2 years	1+ /week
Vince	M	22	Latino	Philadelphia	<i>Til Death Do Us Part</i>	Carmen Electra	<1 year	Twice total
Nelly	F	21	White/ Jewish	Philadelphia	<i>Will and Grace</i>	Karen Walker	5 years	1+ /week
Laura	F	20	White	Philadelphia	<i>Family Guy</i>	Lois	1 year	2/months
Daeshona	F	20	Black	Philadelphia	<i>The Parkers</i>	Nikki Parker	4–5 years	3–5/week
Tameca	F	21	Black	Philadelphia	<i>The Sopranos</i>	Carmella Soprano	3 years	1+ /week
Nashawna	F	21	Black	Philadelphia	<i>My Wife and Kids</i>	Jay Kyle	4 years	1+ /week
Vashan	M	23	Black	Philadelphia	<i>The Fresh Prince of Bel Air</i>	Will Smith	All episodes	
Shakeera	F	34	Black	Philadelphia	<i>The Cosby Show</i>	Heathcliff Huxtable	17 years	4–5/week
Nelson	M	22	Black	Philadelphia	<i>All of Us</i>	Robert James	<1 year	1/week

process for selecting a television character and creating their collage. They similarly discussed five products/services in their collages and explained how the character is associated with each, how they personally relate to it, and what the product/service means to them. This semistructured online format provides an unobtrusive and confidential forum for the participants to express themselves, and their short narratives yield valuable insights across a range of self-character relationships as well as a variety of character-product and self-product connections.

Long Interviews

The goal of the long interview is methodological empathy (Singleton, Straits, and Straits 1993). Therefore, we care-

fully crafted an interview protocol flexible enough to reveal emic insights. A semistructured and open-ended interview format addresses a baseline set of similar issues across informants while maintaining sufficient flexibility to allow unanticipated themes to surface (Spradley 1979). The interviews were scheduled shortly after participants submitted collages and lasted between 38 and 81 minutes. In a manner analogous to Heisley and Levy's (1991) autodiving, participants walked the researcher through their collages, discussing the meanings they attributed to the products/services, the significance of their inclusion and placement within the collage, and the meaning of the constellation of consumption objects depicted in the collages. Participants routinely volunteered details about their feelings toward characters, what characters meant, and how characters

related (or do not relate) to their identities. Thus, the interviews tap into the three distinct categories of narrative: a collage narrative, a television narrative and its consumption images, and each participant's personal narrative, along with the relationships among the narrative categories.

Analysis

Data analysis was guided by grounded theory as advocated in Glaser and Strauss (1967) and elaborated by Strauss and Corbin (1998); interviews were coded and themes were distilled using the constant comparative method of analysis (Spiggle 1994). The initial interviews were analyzed separately and then reinterpreted comparatively. Subsequent interviews were analyzed in light of previous interviews and performed in an iterative style, or hermeneutic circle of understanding (Schwandt 1997). Because the interviews were guided by participant-created collages, participants could produce their own interpretations of their collages and influence researcher interpretations. This method brings the researcher a step closer to perceiving the signs consumers offer in the manner in which the consumers themselves do (Grayson 1998).

Findings

Our data reveal that consumers identify and engage with television narratives through a process of "homophilization"; that is, they actively envision various features of television narratives (e.g., settings, characters, actors) as similar to themselves or to their lived experience. The data also show that viewers enact homophilizing processes by first evaluating available narratives and then customizing them. In customizing narratives, often referred to as "textual poaching" (Jenkins 1992), viewers insert themselves and their experiences into the narrative. Consumption choices serve as primary mechanisms for poaching. We elaborate on homophilization and discuss its implications for cultural diversity from a social justice and welfare perspective.

Viewers Evaluate Available Narratives

A prominent pattern across informants is how readily and directly they describe and comment on the array of narratives available in the mediascape. This unprompted but explicit discussion of available narratives is a robust finding, reflective of the television audience as "active producers of perceived meaning" (Hirschman and Thompson 1997, p. 45). Shakeera describes what she views as a void in the mediascape and explains her choice of a classic television program, *The Cosby Show*, starring Bill Cosby as Dr. Cliff Huxtable:

I love the premise: a strong black upper middle class family talking about morals and ethics and music. I really like that blend. Bill Cosby as a man is quite impressive. The show is a legacy for the people to follow. We're not all thugs and hos [sic]. We're real people with real, normal problems. I'd say we're more like Bill Cosby's family than the felons we usually see on TV. It is an important show; one that really broke color barriers and one that made black people look good—like people anyone might meet or know. We're not just hired help. We're doctors and lawyers and accountants.

Shakeera uses what she considers prominent depictions of black criminality ("thugs," "hos," and "felons")—a percep-

tion that no doubt includes both news and entertainment programming—as a rhetorical foil to highlight what makes *The Cosby Show* an exceptional narrative. She articulates a story that actively foregrounds the importance of comparatively rare depictions of middle-class black families in high-status occupations on television. *The Cosby Show*'s matter-of-fact depiction of black middle-class family life actively counterbalances prevailing stereotypes in a way that had not been previously done (Downing 1988). Notably, because *The Cosby Show* is by definition exceptional, it need not mirror Shakeera's life to be compelling and useful for shaping her understanding of diversity.

Am I like [Bill Cosby]? Well, no. I'm a woman; a black woman; a 34-year-old black woman.... I'll never be a doctor like he was on the show, or a lawyer like Clair, his wife on the show. I'll just never be. My family was not middle-class. We lived paycheck to paycheck. We still do. It is what the show means to black people that makes it cool. It is the possibility that we can be doctors and lawyers; that some of us have made it and that we can too. When you see thugs and hos you think that's all there is, but the show was something else to do, something else to be. It kept me in school.

Shakeera notes her gender difference from Bill Cosby and the wide social class gap between her family and the fictional Huxtables. Nevertheless, she values *The Cosby Show* as an exceptional narrative about diversity because it articulates the possible. She credits the show's morality-laden emphasis on education with inspiring her to remain in college, even if only part-time.

Informants made regular note of their perceptions about the availability of television narratives that address multiple dimensions of social identity, particularly gender, social class, and our focus, ethno-racial identity. Their accounts are structured similarly to Shakeera's: a perpetually limited or narrow range of available narratives in the mediascape limits their identity projects, but a subset of exceptional narratives counterbalance the common by articulating or inspiring prosocial possibilities. Regardless of their empirical accuracy, evaluations of available narratives function to mark some as exceptional so that viewers can incorporate them into identity projects. Next, we turn to the way consumers incorporate exceptional television narratives about diversity into their identity projects.

Homophily and the Narrative–Self Connection

The most common way informants mark narratives as exceptional is to seek out aspects that are similar to their lives, a process researchers refer to as "homophily" (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954). We ask informants directly about their connection to television narratives to highlight how they actively create similarity rather than simply notice it. Informants appropriate diversity through television viewing by flocking together with like celebrities in an imagined social network based on the time they spend within the narrative. We note that homophily often occurs in relationships that are lateral/peer or merged and far less in upward-looking relationships. Drawing on McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001), we differentiate between status and value homophily and their roles in identity projects and understandings of cultural diversity.

Status Homophily

In status homophily, similarity is based on ascribed or achieved social status. Status homophily is composed of two main types: (1) perceived and acknowledged phenotype (phenotype status homophily) and (2) perceived and acknowledged behavioral attributes (behavioral status homophily). Phenotype status homophily inherently involves subjectively noting resemblance to actors' ascribed traits and is fairly pervasive. For example, Yasmina, a second-generation Persian immigrant, marked similarities between her own physical attributes and Summer, a character on the Fox drama, *The OC*. Phenotypically dissimilar to Summer in most respects, Yasmina latched on to hair color (not texture) and height to base resemblance claims.

Behavioral status homophily is more complex because it prevails on viewers' ability to navigate the intertextuality that commonly accompanies actors in television narratives. In this excerpt, Van established behavioral status homophily with the late Bernie Mac from the Fox sitcom *The Bernie Mac Show*:

Van: [Laughs.] OK. Everybody in the community knew [about the show's premiere], and was excited about the show.... We all knew it was coming.

Interviewer: What do you mean "in the community"? People on campus? In your neighborhood?

Van: Oh, I mean black people. The black community. We knew he was coming on the TV and we talked about it. It was in *Vibe* [magazine]. [Bernie Mac] is a well-known comedian in the community. We were hoping the show [would] be like an updated *Cosby Show*; some good examples of black folks not in jail or pimping. Something real.

In this instance, "something real" refers to the character's and the show's decidedly middle-class aesthetic and sensibility. In some crucial respects Bernie Mac, a renowned stand-up comedian who plays himself as a full-time parent on the show, updates Bill Cosby as the embodiment of black middle-class comportment. He is a self-employed professional with a professional spouse, a family man who lives comfortably though not lavishly. Mac's character comports with what Van presumes to be the black community's ideal. "We," which is to say the black community, hoped for an updated *Cosby Show* to counter that which is not real; inaccurate stereotypes of black masculinity thought to be abundant in television as noted by Van and by other informants. Van's comments also echo those in contemporary consumer culture theory research (see Thomas 2013 [in this issue]), in which African American male informants note that their consumption practices are constrained by long-standing stereotypes. When asked about his specific connection to Bernie Mac, however, Van articulates a less direct connection than did Shakeera to Bill Cosby:

Interviewer: Why exactly did you choose Bernie Mac?

Van: He's not trying to be white; not selling out to go mainstream. He's a black man.

Interviewer: So, you think there are a lot of people selling out?

Van: Most black people on TV or in the movies are definitely selling out. They are black people; B-I-S-O.

Interviewer: What does B-I-S-O mean?

Van: Black-in-Skin-Only. They aren't black any more culturally. I guess you could say they pass.

Interviewer: And you think a lot of black people pass?

Van: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Interviewer: OK, so what makes Bernie Mac... real?

Van: He's black. He talks black. He looks very black. He never pretends he's white or that he's same as white.

Interviewer: OK. So it is the way he talks—?

Van: And the way he looks. He dresses black. He has bold colored clothes and he's—ah—trendy. He knows what's stylin' now and he wears it.

Interviewer: And you like that about him?... Cool. I noticed you don't have clothing items in your collage.

Van: Well, he's not really that stylin', but I mean you wouldn't see a white dad on TV dress like that.... He's like me in a lot of ways. Fame and money didn't get to him yet.

Unlike Shakeera, for whom *The Cosby Show* counterbalances prevailing stereotypes and articulates the possible, we note that Van's connection to the Bernie Mac character and actor is woven together from essentialized notions of cultural and masculine identity. "Essentializing" involves drawing boundaries (typically narrow and fixed boundaries) around a category of representation, such as race or gender, and making hard distinctions between the authentic and inauthentic, in-groups and out-groups (Hall 1997). For Van, ways of being or acting (behaving) black (which include speech, general appearance, and dress) are clearly distinct from ways of being white, and they mark membership in black (masculine) culture. Van accuses some of "passing," spurning membership in a presumably low-status group to pursue mainstream success. Bernie Mac's fealty to presumably black cultural conventions, despite his popularity with white audiences, marks him as simultaneously an aspirant figure and a peer for Van. That is, Van rejects a simplistic phenotype homophily, built on uncritical ethnoracial solidarity, in favor of behavioral homophily built on adherence to cultural convention. He places Bernie Mac—both the character and the actor—in a particular milieu comprised of particular cultural and gendered practices, to which he also adheres. To clarify, Van does not mimic Bernie Mac's behavior. Mimicry is a hallmark of upward-looking relationships. Van sees Mac as a peer, even being mildly critical of his dress while noting its distinction from white television dads. Van creates behavioral status homophily by perceiving that he and Mac opt into the same milieu based on adherence to a set of distinguishing practices. Their practices are not identical. As such, this excerpt challenges the conventional wisdom that viewers only (or mostly) mimic celebrities such as Bernie Mac to establish behavioral status homophily (cf. Schor 1998).

Value Homophily

In value homophily, similarity is based on attitudinal and belief systems that are revealed only upon reflection (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Having established certain points of status homophily, informants con-

sider their connection to characters, actors, and narratives through values and beliefs. Van connects personally to Bernie Mac's ability to keep money and fame from "getting to him." Similarly, Tandy connects initially to the characters in *Sex and the City* but expands to other features of the narrative:

I'm in love with fashion, and that is what I want to do. I want to go to an art school for fashion design and stuff, so seeing the clothes and costume designs in *Sex and the City* is like the most unbelievable thing to me. I really enjoy looking at all the fashion.

Tandy articulates a connection to the fashions, a narrative feature for which the show gained notoriety. Value homophily often results from elaboration on the similarities between self and narrative that begin with status homophily but then extend to values, attitudes, and beliefs. In this instance, Nashawna relates to the character Janet (Jay), the matriarch in the situation comedy *My Wife and Kids*:

[T]hey don't act like they're perfect. In fact, the oldest son and his girlfriend are having a baby this season. So Michael and Jay are going to be grandparents! Very young ones. They didn't plan on that, and that is what I mean. They aren't perfect people, but they're good people trying to make good choices.

Nashawna revealed that she was born to an unwed teenage mother and that, like Jay, she became a grandparent in her thirties. Nashawna's experiences parallel the show's narrative plot, but importantly, she connects to the characters' efforts to do what she considers the right thing. Using the program as a guide, she navigates complicated family relationships.

Because value homophily is often based on unarticulated attitudes and beliefs, it is often established superficially through inferences about consumption that require an elaborate filling in of prodigious knowledge gaps. In this excerpt, Nandy elaborates on Pantene shampoo in her collage of Carrie Heffernan, the female lead on the sitcom *King of Queens*:

I thought Pantene because it's one of the best you can buy at the grocery, though maybe she'd buy it at the salon, like Sebastian. I don't know. I just think she's a Pantene girl. She wants great hair, but she'll save brand names for when it matters—when other people can see. No one knows what hair products you use, but your clothes—they need to be good brands, especially your shoes.

Consistent with prior research, a great deal of value homophily is inferred after status homophily is established (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Nandy assumes her tastes constitute dimensions of similarity with the character. She thinks that Carrie is like her and will make similar trade-offs.

Homophilization Processes

Our data demonstrate that informants contrive similarity to television narratives through a process we term "homophilization." Informants actively weave similarity together from traits associated with actors, characters, and various features of narratives. Building on Schau and Gilly's (2003) findings that brands are vehicles of self-definition and communication, our study shows that informants use them to establish connections to television narratives. We highlight

three specific practices by which informants contrive similarity to available television narratives: aspiration and imitation, legitimation, and opposition.

Aspiration and Imitation

Aspiration and imitation are the most consistent with common conceptions of homophily and views of mediated relationships as upward-looking. We characterize aspiration and imitation as practices that may exist (even prevail) in any mediated relationship. However, lateral/peer and merged relationships more often provide a basis for homophilization. Informants desire a consumption object, practice, or lifestyle highlighted in a television narrative, as Tandy explicitly states: "[Sarah Jessica Parker, the female lead in *Sex and the City*] is who I want to be when I finish school and move to New York City." Informants project themselves into television narratives and actively imitate some aspects (e.g., lifestyle, skills, phenotype, personality). Because the narratives and their intertextual connections are so rich in consumption images, consumption references abound and we find that brands are the most readily appropriate features of the mediated world. Many informants are highly receptive to product placements and official celebrity endorsements, at times embracing them unconditionally. In this way, at times, our informants embody the materialism-fueled over-consumers highlighted by numerous critics of media (Postman 1985; Schor 1998; Shrum, Burroughs, and Rindfleisch 2005).

Legitimation

Informants also adopt media narratives that provide post hoc justifications for behavior. This is especially prevalent in establishing value homophily. For example, one interview respondent states, "Sure the fashion on *Sex and the City* is over the top, but that's OK. It sure makes my fashion addiction at [trendy clothing retailer] Forever 21 more acceptable." She favorably compares her "fashion addiction" to a discount retailer to the characters' fundamentally similar attitude toward shopping. Her similar attitude is nevertheless morally superior because she is not acquiring expensive luxury brands at high-end retailers. Informants find congruence between media narratives that substantiate (even excuse) their lived experience. Even cartoon characters like Homer Simpson serve as benchmarks for justifying consumption practices such as Todd's "Homerizing on the couch," which involves drinking beer and eating pizza or donuts while watching television and which many timidly admit is a guilty pleasure. The related assumption that everyone who watches the Simpsons does this legitimates the behavior. This legitimation process has troublesome implications for public health, given the abundance of illicit substances, portrayals of underage drinking, and generally unhealthy lifestyles depicted on television (Avery et al. 1997; Russell, Russell and Grube 2013; Story and Faulkner 1990).

Opposition

Perhaps less obvious is that informants sometimes disapprove of consumption objects and practices that characters perform or endorse. Informants distance themselves from particular media narratives, in some instances outright

defining their identity against them. This process is especially prevalent for informants contriving status homophily.

Sometimes opposition involves active resistance, in which the informants reject something they do not like. “Ke\$ha is a total ho [sic] but that is why I watch her. She’s not me. She’s nothing like me.” Note that rejection involves only a refusal to establish status or value homophily. It does not preclude watching or utilizing the narrative. As Calvin notes, “[Characters] say s— you could never say in public.... It’s like they say it for me so I don’t have to. I can relive their rude behavior while being civilized.” For some informants, rejected narratives remain useful objects of catharsis or displacement. Informants can relish a character or narrative they do not intend to mimic.

Opposition also includes more traditional notions of rejection. One young adult informant, Natalie, expressed strong negative views about media narratives that had “severely” affected her identity during adolescence and from which she had recently escaped:

The only time I ever watched TV was in my youth and I can see how severely it affected my life because I kind of took those images.... Growing up in Orange County, you have that infiltration from LA. It affected my youth a lot and I have a lot of animosity towards some of the shows that were projected towards me. Like [*Beverly Hills*] 90210. Girls look at that and think that is really how it is supposed to be. Then they see those images and mimic them, which I don’t think is portraying the right age group to the right people.

Natalie eventually concluded that watching television made her “very insecure” and opted to turn it off. A conscious distancing and separation from television is readily visible in her collage: it includes only fictional brands within the Simpsons’ world, because she considers it all fiction.

Building Diversity Narratives Through Appropriation

Informants relate to television narratives through an active process of homophilization. They appropriate what they see and build their own narratives, or stories, about diversity. Stories are the primary mechanism by which people share and attach meaning to experiences and objects (Labov 1972). They become part of communal mythology (Durkheim [1912] 1965). They situate the person’s identity within the broader context of community identity (Creed and Scully 2000) and allow people to grapple with identity issues. Open text stories leave room for fans to write themselves into them and locate resonant themes (Derecho 2006). These informants craft stories about available television narratives, mark some as exceptional, and establish upward-looking, lateral/peer, or merged relationships to actors and characters. They then appropriate key pieces of exceptional narratives through aspiration and imitation, legitimation, and opposition. They contrive homophily by revising exceptional narratives, interweaving their identities throughout.

Informants intertwine television narrative and characters with their own stories through what Jenkins (1992) calls “textual poaching.” It is a form of customization in which media consumers use elements of the primary text and their imagination to augment, modify, and reconstitute the text to

fit their specific needs. Media consumers fill in knowledge gaps, fix problems, and extend the text’s meaning. Some narratives, such as *The Simpsons*, a prevalent source of collages in this data set, constitute easy texts for poaching given their slate of oddly colored characters and fictional brands. However, homophilization practices allow viewers to contrive similarity, even when none is apparent. Therefore, any television narrative can be poached.

Discussion

Our findings are consistent with the widely held notion that television plays a critical role in the transmission of culture. Beyond this insight, we offer a more complete account of media consumers’ relationship to culture as instantiated in television than has been typical in consumer research. Because consumption markers (e.g., product placements, imagined consumption constellations) are especially useful to media consumers for ascertaining homophily, this research has implications for standard programming and for advertising practices embedded in television shows (Cain 2011). As such, this research contributes to discourse about the media and social justice/welfare that can inform public policy beyond regulation and censorship.

Our investigation highlights the myriad ways television narratives, homophily, and textual poaching operate to transmit culture and influence enculturation processes. If we consider McCracken’s (1998) insights about the movement of cultural meaning, metaphorically speaking, this research expounds on the “arrows” that connect cultural producers to individual consumers in the model. The findings generate nuanced (and we believe more useful) insights into such phenomena and their implications.

Viewers have limited ability to directly influence the production of television narratives. In general, they can bestow (or withhold) legitimacy and/or loyalty on programming that is already network approved, filmed, and aired. Network executives and advertisers retain primary (if no longer exclusive) control over television narratives, including narratives about diversity. They wield effective veto power throughout the process of ideation, filming, and airing. Thus, television transmits culture through a fundamentally hegemonic relationship between network executives and advertisers, writers and producers, and viewers. An undergirding logic and language of business imperative naturalizes the relationship.

Despite their comparatively limited power, viewer agency remains evident in our data. They mark available television narratives—or parts of them—as exceptional and appropriate aspects of them through textual poaching to construct their own meaningful narratives about cultural diversity. Despite their agency, viewers are shackled to the hegemonic logic and language of business imperative that networks prefer. According to this logic, viewers are consumers whose choices are limited to the products (narratives) networks make available. It affords viewers little practical input into the production of television narratives about diversity (or any topic).¹

¹We readily acknowledge that networks are increasingly responsive to viewers, even to the point of cocreation efforts, and that viewers are increasingly creating their own content.

At times however, issue-oriented advocates have adopted a competing logic of social justice and welfare to exert direct influence on the production of narratives, particularly those related to cultural diversity. As we noted previously, the Kerner Commission legitimized this competing logic. Since then, advocacy organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting have incentivized and pressured producers to increase cultural diversity narratives in both entertainment and news media. The logic and language of social justice and welfare render the production of television narratives about cultural diversity a matter of public rather than exclusively private interest. Television's widely acknowledged role in transmitting cultural meaning drives such logic. Even so, narratives have typically remained part of an ongoing conversation between advocates, industry, and viewers rather than a matter for formal legislation or censorship (Levin 1980; O'Malley 2004)—with the notable exception of child-focused programming and indecency/obscenity. As such, the policy implications of this research are primarily for advocates, industry, and the public rather than regulators.

In the broadest sense, this research suggests that public discourse on television and culture should move beyond its simplistic "aspire and imitate" assumptions about viewers. Instead, public discourse is sorely in need of updating to reflect a nuanced understanding of how viewers actually build narratives about cultural diversity out of available narratives. Clearly, viewers at times aspire to what they see on television and imitate it, but they do not swallow network-generated narratives whole. Rather, they mark some as exceptional and find ways to make features of exceptional narratives similar to themselves (while holding obvious dissimilarities at arm's length, at times self-consciously so).

We direct our remaining discussion specifically to media advocacy, which includes research-focused organizations (e.g., Pew Center for Excellence in Journalism) as well as traditional advocacy ones (e.g., Berkeley Media Studies Group). Our findings suggest that organizations aiming to engage networks about cultural diversity narratives must first recognize the fundamental hegemony characterizing the relationship. Advocates seeking change must craft messages for the array of network executives and advertisers who hold veto power at multiple points in the narrative production process. For example, despite an array of successful examples, some network executives and advertisers still consider narratives that foreground cultural diversity to be too risky for general audiences. Not surprisingly, such narratives have historically faced significant barriers in the approval process, as *The Cosby Show's* initial rejection at ABC illustrates (Downing 1988). Even when approved, networks can remain hesitant to incorporate diversity into casting, relying instead on episodic minority characters to supply diversity. For example, a three-year study of the Los Angeles viewing market, which is nearly half Latino/Latina, reports a high percentage of episodic characters in local network television, which includes many syndicated shows (Chicano Studies Research Center 2004).

Sophisticated advocates seeking to influence the narrative production process must craft messages that address the interests of network executives and advertisers, who wield considerable power. We suggest that, in addition to docu-

menting the paucity of diversity narratives on television, media advocates also devote greater energy and resources to understanding how viewers create diversity narratives. We demonstrate that cultural diversity is important enough to some viewers that they use self-relevant narrative elements from all manners of programming, and make them similar, to appropriate it. Understanding viewers in this way provides a basis for crafting compelling messages to network executives and advertisers about their engagement with diversity, which is a perpetual network challenge. Our informants revealed connections to characters, storylines, actors, and consumption portrayals that go well beyond "aspire and imitate." They searched extensively for exceptional narratives and sought to engage them in deep, enduring, and complex ways. Advocates might also include insights on viewer engagement with existing diversity narratives to devise more compelling messages that build in space for episodic characters to recur or even spin off.

To be clear, we are in no way suggesting that advocacy organizations substitute the logic and language of business imperative for that of social justice and welfare—quite the opposite. Such a substitution would be self-defeating for advocates whose own public legitimacy is tied to the latter. Rather, we suggest that media advocacy sits at the intersection of the two. As such, it is uniquely well positioned to interject the logic of social justice and welfare into the narrative production process by crafting messages that can speak to the needs of networks and advertisers as well as to the interests of viewers.

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Appendix. Sample Collages



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