Researchers have employed different theoretical frameworks to predict patterns of television program choice. Despite varied theoretical origins, such efforts typically assume that program choice is systematically related to program content. A substantial body of marketing research, however, has provided evidence that choice is determined by scheduling—not content—factors, drawing into question the explanatory power of current theories. This article integrates disparate theoretical perspectives into a single model that is consistent with empirically documented patterns of choice.

A THEORY OF TELEVISION PROGRAM CHOICE

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Understanding and predicting television program choice has been a matter of concern to academics and industry practitioners alike. Despite the importance of this topic, few attempts have been made to integrate relevant theory and so provide a broad conceptual framework to guide empirical inquiry. In fact, much research on program choice seems to exist in a theoretical vacuum. This article seeks to improve that situation by drawing disparate theory and research together into a broad model of television program choice.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PROGRAM CHOICE

To the extent that audience researchers have adopted any theoretical framework for explaining program choice, two general perspectives have been predominant: (1) “uses and gratifications,” a view most evident in the work of social
psychologists with a functionalist orientation; and (2) "models of choice," the province of media economists and marketing researchers.

The evolution and complexities of the uses and gratifications paradigm have been adequately presented elsewhere (Blumler, 1979; Blumler, Katz and Gurevitch, 1974). In its most essential form, however, this approach assumes that program choice is a rational act motivated by an expectation of need gratification. Under this perspective, an individual's program choices should demonstrate some consistency of preference for those types of content which best gratify certain needs (McQuail et al., 1972).

Model builders have approached program choice somewhat differently. Steiner (1952), for example, likening programs to more conventional products, developed a model of program choice consistent with earlier models of product choice competition (Hotelling, 1929). The purpose of Steiner's model and many of its subsequent revisions (Noll et al., 1973; Owen et al., 1974; Wiles, 1963) has been to test the extent to which hypothetical industry structures maximize viewer satisfaction. Other researchers have devised models with the more pragmatic goal of predicting viewing patterns (Bowman and Farley, 1972; Lehmann, 1971). To accomplish either purpose, however, such models typically make two assumptions about the nature of program choice: First, that there exist certain content characteristics or program types "defined in terms of viewer preferences." Second, noting the "free good" nature of advertiser-supported television, such models assume—sometimes implicitly—that program choice is a function of individual preference operating within the bounds of available program content.¹

While these theoretical perspectives are, in part, unique, they share important attributes. Both approaches assume that viewers have program preferences that are systematically related to types of content. Both assume that individuals, acting as rational beings, will evidence such preferences in their program choices. In fact, the latter
assumption is congruent with the expectation of attitude-behavior consistency common in much behavioral theory.

Unfortunately, neither approach, as presently constructed, has proved capable of explaining specific program choice. McQuail et al. (1972: 162) have observed, "the relationship between content categories and audience needs is far less tidy and more complex than most commentators have appreciated." Similarly, an extensive program of research on viewing behavior in Great Britain has concluded that "there is no special tendency across the population for people who watch one program of a given type to also watch others of the same type." (Goodhart et al., 1975:48).

In short, the principal expectation of current theories—that observed patterns of program choice bear some systematic relationship to program content—has garnered little empirical support. At the same time, a generation of audience studies—much of which is the work of marketing researchers—has suggested a variety of explanatory variables which might now be formally integrated into a model of program choice.

A MODEL OF PROGRAM CHOICE

Figure 1 is a schematic representation of those factors which would appear to merit inclusion in a comprehensive theory of program choice. The full model is presented at the outset so that the reader might first see the overall framework proposed. It is, in essence, an attempt to build on the fundamental assumption that specific program preference is a cause of program choice.

Three preliminary observations about the model are in order. First, the model assumes that the structure of available program options (that is, the sequencing of content within channels and the juxtaposition of content across channels) is, in the short term, fixed. Second, it assumes that programs are a "free good." Hence, simultaneously
Figure 1  A Model of Television Program Choice
available programs have equivalent cost to the viewer. Third, the model is specific to an individual viewer at a single point in time. Aggregate audience behavior at a point in time, or behaviors across time, could be conceptualized by aggregating the model along the appropriate dimensions. The elements of the model, their interrelationships, and implications for future research are discussed below.

THE STRUCTURE OF PROGRAM OPTIONS

The structure of program options available to the viewer must, necessarily, circumscribe program choice. Marketing researchers seeking regularities in audience flow have focused much of their attention on the power of structural variables in explaining viewing behavior. In fact, program scheduling characteristics are among the few variables that have isolated clear patterns in program choice over time.

"Channel loyalty," the tendency of programs on the same channel to have a disproportionately large duplicated audience, is a routinely observed feature of viewing behavior (Bruno, 1973; Darmon, 1976; Goodhardt et al., 1975; Rao, 1975). Similarly, "inheritance effects"—a pronounced case of channel loyalty between adjacent programs (Goodhardt et al., 1975; Kirsch and Banks, 1962)—and "repeat viewing"—a predictable duplication of audience across a series of programs (Goodhardt et al., 1975)—are instances where structural factors seem to "predict" choice.

Typically, these patterns of audience flow are not explained by the content of the programs involved. Rather, they are interpreted as the results of a stochastic, or "as if random" process, affected only by program ratings and scheduling characteristics (Goodhardt et al., 1975).

Such empirical demonstrations that patterns of program choice are random with respect to program types have been particularly disquieting to uses and gratifications researchers. Indeed, this evidence of randomness in program choice has provided much of the impetus for the present exercise in theory building.
PROGRAM TYPE PREFERENCE

It is often assumed—by both uses and gratifications scholars and model builders alike—that individuals have relatively consistent preferences for content of a type (see Owen et al., 1974; Rosengren and Windahl, 1972), and that these general dispositions determine, at least in part, preference for specific programs (Bowman and Farley, 1972; Lehmann, 1971). The present model reflects that assumption by positing program type preference as one cause of specific program preference. The practical problem with this assumption lies in determining which of many possible schemes for categorizing content is, in fact, systematically related to viewer preference.³

One popular approach for discovering these elusive program types “defined in terms of viewer preferences” has involved the use of factor analytic techniques. Early efforts factor analyzed self-reports of program viewing (Kirsch and Banks, 1962; Swanson, 1967) or claimed program preference (Wells, 1969), on the assumption that these statistical manipulations would produce clusters of identifiable program types.

Ehrenberg (1968) was harshly critical of this approach, in part because it failed to account for prior knowledge of viewing behavior. Instead, he argues that

the existence of different TV channels, of different times of the day, of different days of the week, and of different weeks . . . are already known—in a general sort of way—to affect viewing habits (p. 58).

Failing to reckon with these dimensions, he asserted, resulted in little more than a “rediscovery” of the networks.

In the wake of Ehrenberg’s criticisms, a second generation of research on program viewing (Gensch and Ranganathan, 1974; Rao, 1975) and program preference (Frank et al., 1971) was conducted. Such studies statistically
controlled for variation attributed to program scheduling characteristics before factor analyzing residual scores.

The broad and perhaps unsurprising conclusion to be drawn from this succession of studies is that conventional, "common sense" program types (such as drama, situation comedies, and so on) bear some systematic relationship to program preference.

These studies, however, display a troubling lack of theoretical clarity. For example, they commonly fail to make a distinction between data on program preference and program choice. Such data—perhaps because of the compelling theoretical link between affect and behavior—are often used interchangeably. In the present context, this has resulted in applying theoretically questionable statistical controls for the impact of scheduling variables on viewer preferences. Further, removing variation attributed to scheduling from viewing behavior assumes that program types and structural factors can be considered independently. This is, of course, not the case. Programmers deliberately "block program" content of a type in a way that caters to perceived viewer preferences. In light of the known correlation between program types and scheduling factors (Darmon, 1976; Headen et al., 1979), and the absence of a theoretical preference for explaining choice in terms of content, these approaches leave much to be desired.

Identifying content characteristics or dimensions that can predict specific program preferences should remain an important avenue of inquiry. One which might test the utility of a priori typologies or adapt some of the more pragmatic techniques described here. Work in this area, however, would benefit from a clearer explication of theory and theoretically justified statistical methods. Finally, theorists should recognize that no matter what success is achieved in unraveling the determinants of program preference, this will not automatically explain the more complicated phenomenon of actual choice behavior.
VIEWER AVAILABILITY

Program choice is necessarily contingent upon an individual's availability to view television. Our model describes this relationship by positing viewer availability as a cause of program choice. Despite an obvious link between these factors, perhaps no single variable has produced greater confusion about program choice than availability.

Addressing the impact of availability on choice inevitably draws one into the long-standing debate often characterized as the “active” versus “passive” audience question. To avoid any confusion in our use of this popular terminology, an active audience is defined here as one whose viewing is motivated by a desire to access specific television content; a passive audience is one whose viewing is a function of viewer availability and not of specific content.

Steiner’s (1952) seminal model of program choice assumed a highly active audience in which individuals were persuaded to view only by the presence of a preferred type of content. The balance of empirical evidence, however, runs counter to that assumption and suggests that viewing is a “residual category of leisure activity” (McQuail et al., 1972: 41) that is largely determined by daily and seasonal patterns of availability (see Bower, 1973; Gensch and Shaman, 1980). Indeed, subsequent revisions of Steiner’s models have relaxed this assumption by recognizing the willingness of available viewers to watch some “common denominator” program (Owen et al., 1974) rather than not view at all. In short, most contemporary models of program choice assume that television viewing is passive, insofar as use of the medium is determined by exogeneous factors (such as work hours, household chores, and so on), not by the drawing power of specific content.

As Blumler (1979) has observed, there is an unfortunate tendency for scholars to view active-passive question as an either-or matter, when in fact it might be more aptly conceptualized as a factor which varies throughout the viewing process.\(^5\) We agree and would argue that while the
decision to use television is typically passive, once that commitment is made, viewers actively choose among the options before them. Such a formulation is implicit in most economic models and is consistent with the conventional wisdom embodied in Klein's (1971) notion of the "least objectionable program."

If the use of television is essentially a matter of availability, much of the curious randomness in program choice is comprehensible. British researchers have reported that during the evening and weekends, only about 70 percent of those available at one time are available at any other time (Aske, 1976). As a result, the composition of the aggregate audience changes in a way that is independent of program offerings.

Availability, then infuses choice behavior with considerable variation that has nothing to do with specific television content. If one finds there is no special tendency for viewers of one program to watch another of the same type, it is probably because there is no special tendency for the same people to be watching television when both programs are on. Conversely, Goodhardt et al. (1975) have demonstrated that structurally defined patterns of audience duplication (such as channel loyalty and repeat viewing) exist, to a large extent, because of the difference, in the amount of television people view. Variation in total television viewing might similarly be a result of differential availability and therefore random with respect to content. Availability, it would seem, is the single factor which is most responsible for the absence of content-based patterns of viewing, as well as the presence of structurally defined viewing patterns.

To argue that the use of television is exclusively a function of availability and thus unaffected by content offerings is, of course, an oversimplification. Clearly, there are instances in which "media events"—a major sports contest, a special program, or an important news story (see Besen and Mitchell, 1976)—attract otherwise unavailable viewers to the medium. Our model reflects this by identi-
fying viewer preferences, needs, and awareness as addi-
tional causes of availability. Nevertheless, audience re-
search that seeks to understand program choice as an 
expression of program preference must recognize that 
underlying patterns of availability typically constitute a 
source of error and need to be controlled.

VIEWER NEEDS

Explaining media consumption as a function of indi-
vidual needs has been the hallmark of uses and gratifications 
research. Despite the intuitive appeal of this approach, 
viewer needs alone seem inadequate for predicting specific 
program choice (McQuail et al., 1972). We would argue that 
needs are not a direct determinant of choice but rather 
operated through a number of intervening variables to 
affect choice behavior.

The model depicts viewer needs as a determinant of 
both program type and specific program preference. Given 
a history of exposure to television, viewers, it seems likely, 
develop clear expectations about the ability of established 
genres to perform certain functions. If a viewer’s needs are 
more or less constant over time, then they might manifest 
themselves as relatively enduring preferences for programs 
of a type. An assumption of such persistent gratifications-
based typology (see Frank and Greenberg, 1980; Gutman, 
1978). Needs which are more transitory, however, might 
affect specific program preference, irrespective of general-
ized program type preferences. Zillman et al. (1980) and 
Wakshlag et al. (1982), for example, have demonstrated that 
television program selections are affected by experimen-
tally induced mood states. In either event, viewer needs 
would seem to operate through expectations of content 
(that is, preferences) in affecting actual program choice.7

A number of researchers have also suggested that viewer 
needs might motivate media use independent of specific 
content (see, for example, Jeffres, 1978; Katz et al., 1974;
Lull, 1980). The use of television—perhaps by virtue of the medium’s attributes or the context of viewing—may gratify viewer needs in and of itself. As such, needs could affect an individual’s allocation of leisure time and thus help determine availability for viewing. This formulation is consistent with the argument that availability and the decision to view are typically independent of specific program content.

Finally, one should note that the model does not identify viewer demographic characteristics as a factor in program choice. Despite the widespread use of such variables in audience analysis and Elliot’s (1974 : 253) assertion that uses and gratifications variables may simply be “a more cumbersome way of tapping the original demographic variables,” viewer needs are a more flexible and useful concept for theory building. While demographics may correlate with needs and so help explain choice behavior, they are not explanatory variables in and of themselves.

VIEWING GROUP

The tendency of individuals to view in groups is well-documented feature of audience behavior (see Bower, 1973). Further, a number of studies have demonstrated that group viewing has the effect of mediating individual preference in the selection of television programs (see, for example, Lull, 1978; Lyle and Hoffman, 1973; Wand, 1968). Curiously, though, most formal models of choice ignore this factor and assume program choice is a function of unfettered individual preference (Bowman and Farley, 1972; Lehmann, 1971; Owen et al., 1974).

The mediating influence of groups on the exercise of program preference appears to be another cause for the apparent randomness in individual program choice. For example, Webster and Wakshlag (1982) demonstrated that individuals who view alone or in constant groups generally evidence a greater tendency to watch programs of a type than those who view in groups of changing composition.
The present model describes a number of ways in which viewing groups may enter into the process of program choice. First, an individual's specific program preferences may have to operate through the viewing group to determine a program selection. Second, a program choice—perhaps the result of some intense viewer preference—may affect the composition of the group. Similarly, availability may affect the group composition. Finally, the nature of the group itself may be a cause of specific program preference. For instance, a parent wishing to view with children might prefer a program that is suitable for the group but that is otherwise unappealing.

**VIEWER AWARENESS**

Most models of choice assume that individuals are perfectly aware of the program options they have at any point in time. While this assumption may be adequate for testing the long-term viability of industry structures, it seems untenable in a more pragmatic short-term model of program choice.

McGuire (1974) has suggested that poor indexing of media content may contribute to haphazard use of a given medium. Certainly, if viewers are inadequately informed about the range of program options available to them, their viewing decisions will be less dependent on specific content than would otherwise be the case. Such a factor would account for a portion of the observed randomness in choice behavior. Consequently, we have posited awareness as an additional determinant of choice.

The model further identifies two causes of awareness: the structure of the available program options, and viewer availability. Bower (1973) has reported that viewers in markets with a large number of stations were more apt to use program listings to guide their viewing. Similarly, Jeffres (1978) has argued that cable television, with its abundance of channels, might facilitate greater selectivity in program choices. An increased number of program
options, then, would seem to provide some impetus for
greater viewer awareness. Additionally, viewer availability
should contribute to greater awareness. Though we know
of no empirical evidence to support this relationship, it
seems logical that availability to view would trigger some
increase in awareness when viewers make a commitment to
use television and actively engage in program decision
making.

A great many questions about the relationship between
awareness and choice remain to be answered. For example,
what precisely constitutes awareness—reading a brief
description in a program guide, seeing a few seconds of a
program during dial-turning or a telecast promotion, hear-
ing a word-of-mouth recommendation? Goodhardt et al.
(1975) have reported that a systematic dislike for programs
of a type is largely responsible for the emergence of
program type clusters in preference data. On what basis do
viewers decide that they dislike a program? Can viewers be
truly aware of what a program offers without first seeing it,³
or is more limited information sufficient to cause a kind of
selective avoidance?

While convetional broadcast delivery systems—those
offering a limited number of channels with regularly sched-
ule programs—may have minimized the importance of
viewer awareness in the past, the variety of options pro-
vided by newer technologies [like cable television (Webster,
1983) and direct broadcast satellites] may require a more
careful consideration of this factor's impact on program
choice.

CONCLUSIONS

We have attempted to integrate here a great deal of
theory and research into a single model of program choice.
Such an ambitious exercise in theory building obviously
runs the risk of oversimplifying both the literature it draws
upon and the behavior it seems to explain. Nevertheless, it is our belief that much progress toward understanding the complexities of viewing behavior can be made by reconciling the work of scholars in various disciplines, disciplines that are sometimes oblivious to one another.

We make no claims that this framework for examining program choice will predict specific program ratings or supplant the intuitive judgment of an experienced programmer. The model is, at best, a tentative guide for deciphering patterns of program choice. Certainly, the advent of new technologies that allow viewers to schedule their own programs or that charge a per program fee will force revisions in its structure. In fact, it is our hope that subsequent research will clarify many of the relationships that we have identified and contribute to a deeper understanding of how people use this pervasive medium.

NOTES

1. Owen et al. (1974:57) describe these assumptions in a model of choice under advertiser support. Defining a program as a "free good" assumes that "the cost of advertising paid through product prices is ignored, as is the opportunity cost of viewer time."

2. Headen, Klopkmaker, and Rust (1979) have demonstrated that program ratings and channel explain 72% of the variance in program audience duplication, while program type explains an additional 6%.

3. For a good review of literature dealing with the determinants of program preference, see Philport (1980).

4. Block programming is a common scheduling strategy in which programs of a type are presented in succession to facilitate inheritance effects. See Eastman et al. (1981).

5. Hirsch (1980:87) has proposed a typology of viewers which varies along an active-passive continuum, and posits the existence of individuals who (1) are indifferent to specific program content; (2) select least objectionable programs, or (3) view only favorite programs.

6. Recent studies of repeat-viewing (Barwise et al., 1982) lend empirical support to this formulation.

7. Palmgreen et al. (1981) have further suggested that discrepancies between gratifications sought from a type of program and gratifications obtained from a specific program predict program choice among competing programs of a type.
An interesting alternative to the assumption that preference precedes choice could be derived from Krugman (1965). If program selections are characterized by low involvement (Gans, 1980), then affective dispositions might occur only after a choice is made.

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