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Assessing soap opera value themes

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ASSESSING SOAP OPERA VALUE THEMES

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Journalism
and Mass Communications
San Jose State University

In partial fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science

By

Beth Lynn Colbert

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

For fifty years the American public, particularly housewives, has been inextricably involved with one particular genre of television programming. These shows made their debut in the days of radio and successfully made the transition to television, where they prospered in spite of the decline of the daytime audience as more women joined the work force (Cantor & Pingree, 1983). They are now on five days a week, 52 weeks a year on each of the three networks, with virtually no exceptions.

They are, of course, daytime serials, more commonly known as soap operas. One cannot turn on a television in the afternoon, on a weekday, without encountering a soap opera on one of the three networks. Each of the three networks airs four soap operas. On any given day, 55 million households are tuned in: nearly 15 million men, 48 million women, 3.3 million teens (aged 12-17), and 4.8 million children (aged 2-11) (World Almanac, 1989, p. 356).

It seems strange that something as pervasive as soap operas has not been studied more extensively. However, because they are perceived as prime examples of "low standardized fiction" (Cantor & Pingree, 1983, p. 12), they

are not taken seriously. Still, as Cantor and Pingree (1983) write, "... it is not good research practice to ignore a genre in which so many participate each day and which the television networks consider so important to their profits" (p. 12). In fact, because of the relatively low production costs of soap operas, their profits help support more expensive prime time programming (Cantor & Pingree, 1983).

Natan Katzman's (1972) landmark article "Television Soap Operas: What's Been Going on Anyway?" charts the development of daytime serials from 1952 to 1970. In it he speculates that the large numbers of loyal fans and similarity of themes within the shows seem to "indicate that the daytime serial is potentially a major force in the transmission of values and lifestyles in this country" (Katzman, 1972, p. 200). In other words, soap operas can establish or reinforce values, suggesting how people might behave in certain situations.

This suggests that people might actively use soap operas, or television in general, to help them deal with their own interpersonal situations as well as for escape, entertainment, companionship, and surveillance (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973-74; Palmgreen, 1984; Rubin & Windahl, 1986; Donohew, Palmgreen, & Rayburn, 1987). The applicability of a uses and gratifications approach to the study of mass media has been well documented.

The following is an exploratory study designed to test a methodology which combines a content analysis with a confirmatory survey. Three specific questions will be explored:

1. Do soap opera scenes contain common value themes?
2. Do common value themes exist between soap operas?
3. Does the viewing audience perceive the value themes?

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Uses and Gratifications

The uses and gratifications perspective is a close cousin of the media effects perspective. It has grown out of the structural-functional school which is built on the premise that the media function in certain ways, based on their structures (Lasswell, 1948).

Harold D. Lasswell (1948) wrote the classic piece on structural-functionalism, "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society" (1948). In it he describes some of the clearly distinguishable functions of the media: (a) surveillance of the environment, (b) correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment, and (c) the transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next (p. 85).

Wright (1975) adds the function of entertainment to this list, pointing out one of the main reasons people watch television. Uses and gratifications developed from these early structural-functional studies, although the researchers make the distinction that they are using a completely different paradigm from the structural-functionalists.

Unlike the effects paradigm which explores what the media do to people, the uses and gratifications paradigm

concentrates on what people do with the media (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Lull, 1980; Palmgreen, 1984; McQuail, 1987). This perspective implies an active audience, choosing media based on audience needs in order to receive gratification of those needs.

Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973-74) state the uses and gratifications approach is concerned with

(1) social and psychological origins of (2) needs which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones. (p. 511)

Investigations usually take one of three routes: (a) specifying the needs and attempting to determine the extent to which they are gratified by the media; (b) observing the gratifications obtained and attempting to reconstruct the needs that are being gratified; and (c) focusing on the societal origins of audience expectations and gratifications (Katz et al., 1973-74).

The majority of studies done on the uses and gratifications of the media have been empirical in nature, relying on survey and statistical data to support the various hypotheses. However, there are studies of uses and gratifications that take a more critical-qualitative view. Lull (1980) writes about "The Social Uses of Television" from this perspective.

Lull (1980) takes an ethnographic approach to exploring the uses of television, employing a participant-observation methodology. He and other observers go into people's homes and observe the ways in which they make use of television. Lull (1980) feels this method yields valuable insights that cannot be obtained in the sterile, empirical studies.

From these studies, a list of some of the uses of television can be compiled. According to McQuail (1987) the media provide information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment (p. 73). Lull (1980) points out television provides background noise, punctuates time and activity, facilitates conversation, contributes to social learning, and reinforces roles.

Researchers point out that people's use of television varies, depending on the context of the situation (Palmgreen, 1984). Donohew, Palmgreen, and Rayburn (1987) state, "People vary widely in their use of mass media for such purposes as surveillance, entertainment, companionship, and social learning" (p. 255). Any or all of these uses can be employed at any given time, depending on the situation.

What does all this have to do with soap operas? Quite a bit according to some of the studies done on this particular program format (Compesi, 1980; Lemish, 1985; Rubin, 1985; Babrow, 1987). People use soap operas to gratify the needs mentioned above. However, before a discussion of soap opera

uses and gratifications can be presented, a discussion of soap opera characteristics in particular is warranted.

Soap Operas

According to the content categories proposed by DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1982), soap operas definitely fall into the "low-taste content" category. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1982) define low-taste content as "media content widely distributed and attended to by the mass audience, but which has consistently aroused the ire of critics" (p. 173).

What is a soap opera? Cantor and Pingree (1983) write, "soap operas are a form of serialized dramatic television broadcast daily over the commercial television networks--the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), usually during the afternoon" (p. 19). They are shown five days a week, throughout the year with very few preemptions. "Only major news events, such as John Kennedy's assassination, and the assassination attempts on Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul, take precedence over the soaps" (Cantor & Pingree, 1983, p. 19).

Daytime serials originated on radio where they were fifteen minutes long (Cassata & Skill, 1983), and were developed to reflect the interests of the advertiser's target audience, American housewives (Cantor & Pingree, 1983). In the early 1950s, with the advent of television, daytime

serials made a successful transition from radio to television. Today, most soap operas are 60 minutes long, although ABC's recently canceled "Ryan's Hope" and current hit "Loving," as well as CBS's "The Bold and the Beautiful" are 30 minutes long.

"A soap opera broadcast consists of a number of continuing stories and interwoven plots, with daily episodes divided into fifteen minute segments" (Cantor & Pingree, 1983, p. 67). Compared to prime time television shows, soap operas move at a virtual snail's pace, in an attempt to more closely duplicate real time. Plots move slowly, with most of the action taking place through dialog.

The soap opera formula has changed little over the years, relying heavily on the interpersonal dyad to advance the plot. Characters, usually not more than two at a time, "discuss problems, add minor pieces of information, and discuss the problem again" (Cantor, 1979, p. 70). This slow pace enables viewers to keep up with the plot, even making it possible for them to miss several weeks without losing track of the plot line (Cantor & Pingree, 1983). Because of this slowness, a pattern has emerged in which crises and action introduced on Friday are usually resolved on Monday, and small crises occur on Wednesdays (Cantor & Pingree, 1983). This feature, along with storylines that never begin and

never really end, distinguish the soap opera from other types of television programming.

Generally, soap opera content reflects its intended audience, which, by and large, is women (Cantor & Pingree, 1983; Cassata & Skill, 1983). "The stories are women's stories, focusing on love, romance, childbearing, health and illness, manners and morals" (Cantor & Pingree, 1983, p. 28).

Love and romance on the soaps comes in all shapes and sizes. There is pure love, young love, old love, unrequited love, lustful love, infidelity, platonic love; the list goes on and on. Philip Wander (1979) writes, "the soaps are built on faith in the power of love" (p. 85). Unfortunately, love is rarely enough to keep people together, as is evident from the number of failed relationships in any soap opera (Wander, 1979).

Sex on the soaps has become more explicit and frequent since the early days of soap operas (Cantor, 1979). Premarital sex and adultery are common occurrences. Sex is talked about a lot on the soaps, as people are always discussing the pros and cons of sleeping together. Cantor and Pingree (1983) point out the use of "sexual teasers" in promotional spots broadcast by the networks and cite ABC's theme of "Love in the Afternoon" as a prime example.

Generally, there seems to be more emphasis on the anticipation of sex or kissing than the acts themselves.

Romantic tension is raised to a fever pitch as characters get close enough to kiss and don't or are interrupted. This anticipation strings viewers along until, finally, the characters consummate their feelings for each other. The anticipation is enhanced by longing looks between the characters and the use of fantasy and flashback sequences, often accompanied by popular romantic songs.

Often, the result of this sex and romance on the soap opera is pregnancy. The pregnancy rate on the soap opera is higher than the national rate. Often, pregnancies end in miscarriages which occur as a result of some stressful situation in which the character is involved (Cassata, Skill, & Boadt, 1979).

Other illnesses are commonly depicted on soap operas. On every soap opera, there is at least one character who is a doctor or a nurse (Cantor & Pingree, 1983). The illnesses that crop up on soap operas are either the result of a violent act (i.e., rape, assault, homicide, car accidents), or obscure diseases that do not threaten the audience (Cassata et al., 1979; Cantor & Pingree, 1983). People on soap operas are not supposed to be afflicted with or dying from anything a member of the audience might be afflicted with or dying from (Cassata et al., 1979).

Recently, two soap operas have violated this premise. "All My Children" (ABC) and "Another World" (NBC) have

introduced storylines which deal directly with AIDS. On each of these soaps, a female character became infected with the AIDS virus. On "Another World," the character is no longer on the show, and on "All My Children," the character is still on the show, but is presumed to be in remission, as the disease is rarely talked about. Still, this seems to be quite an adventurous step in the world of soap operas as AIDS is not an obscure, nonthreatening disease, but a serious, life-threatening epidemic. Interestingly, the characters on both shows are women who presumably contracted the AIDS virus through transfusions, or some equally inoffensive way that does not involve intravenous drug use or homosexual sex. In spite of this, it does represent an attempt by these two shows to deal with an important social issue.

Soap opera content is also extremely value laden (Wander, 1979; Cantor & Pingree, 1983; Schrag & Rosenfeld, 1987). Wander (1979) discusses the importance of the values of love, family, tradition, trust, and honesty. Cantor and Pingree (1983) point out that the values conveyed by soap operas "tend to glorify and idealize women who are committed to children rather than careers" (p. 90).

Schrag and Rosenfeld's (1987) study of audience perceptions of values made a distinction between instrumental (ways to behave) values and terminal (goals or end states) values. The important values on daytime soaps are

"relationship oriented (loving, cheerful, true friendship, and equality) and argue for the importance of interpersonal transactions that intimate and supportive" (Schrag & Rosenfeld, 1987, p. 374).

Although soap operas try to be realistic, they present a version of reality that is neater and cleaner, a "fictionalized representation of our social structure and social relations..." (Cantor & Pingree, 1983, p. 28). Social problems such as unemployment are rarely presented. Money problems are virtually nonexistent. The upper-class is overrepresented while the lower-class is underrepresented (Wander, 1979). And although scenes often occur in the workplace, people are rarely actually working.

In spite of this, soap opera characters have the potential to become more real to us "than the people living next door or down the hall" (Wander, 1979). The reason for this is:

... we encounter the characters in the soaps five days a week, overhear them in their own homes and offices revealing the most intimate things about themselves, hear about them from a number of other people who also know them intimately. (Wander, 1979, p. 88)

Because of this high level of involvement, the implications for uses and gratifications research are very strong.

Uses and Gratifications and Soap Operas

The uses people have for television has been the subject of many studies and a discussion of all of them is beyond the scope of this study. For present purposes, only those studies containing information relevant and applicable to the uses of soap operas will be covered. These studies include articles and papers by Compesi (1980), Rubin and Rubin (1982), Rubin (1983), Lemish (1985), Rubin (1985), Kubey (1986), and Babrow (1987).

Rubin (1983) makes a distinction between two viewer types who use television in different ways. The first viewer type is the habitual viewer. This type "uses television out of habit and to pass time--when there's nothing better to do, to occupy idle time, and to relieve boredom--and for entertainment--because television viewing provides amusement and enjoyment" (Rubin, 1983, p. 48).

The second viewer type is more active, using television "to seek information or to learn, not for escape" (Rubin, 1983, p. 50). They then use this information about people, places, and things in their interpersonal interactions.

Although the study by Rubin (1983) does not address soap operas specifically, the uses he points out are applicable to them. It should also be noted that the two viewer types can be interchangeable within one person depending on the context

of the situation. Of course, this is a major theoretical problem with uses and gratifications theory.

Rubin and Rubin (1982) studied the uses of television by older people. They found the elders of the study watch television nearly five hours a day for reasons such as information needs, entertainment, companionship, and relaxation (Rubin & Rubin, 1982). Companionship viewers are "particularly partial to gameshows, daytime serials and dramas" (Rubin & Rubin, 1982, p. 309). For these older people, then, soap operas provide companionship, although for their information needs, they turn to news and talkshows (Rubin & Rubin, 1982).

Kubey (1986) points out a negative aspect of television use in people who are heavy viewers. He showed that:

... particular kinds of experiences (moods), occurring among certain kinds of people (e.g., less privileged and divorced and separated persons) and under certain conditions (solitary and unstructured time), can explain particular use of media (heavy television viewing). (Kubey, 1986, p. 119)

People in Kubey's sample who were from less affluent, less educated, less privileged, and divorced and separated demographic groups were more likely to turn to television than more affluent, more educated, more privileged, married respondents (Kubey, 1986). These people turn on the television to avoid being left alone with their feelings, thoughts, and problems. This form of heavy viewing leads to

a structuring of life around television that is disruptive when television is not available.

Tan and Tan (1986) studied the use of television and its relationship to mental health. They conclude their survey by stating soap operas may be harmful to one's mental health but situation comedies and gameshows are beneficial. They found "soap opera viewing was also positively and significantly related to a general negative mental state" (Tan & Tan, 1986, pp. 110-111).

This conclusion seems strange when the results of other studies are presented. Several uses and gratifications studies dealing specifically with soap operas list gratifications such as: relaxation or escape from problems, reality exploration or advice (Compesi, 1980); help with problems (Lemish, 1985); emotional release (e.g., "let off steam") (Cantor & Pingree, 1983; Babrow, 1987); "watching soap opera characters deal with their problems helps me cope with my own problems" (Rubin, 1985). These types of uses suggest the ability to achieve a positive mental state and good mental health rather than the poor mental health suggested by Tan and Tan (1986). Of course, one would need to examine the definitions of terms very carefully.

Compesi's (1980) study on gratifications of soap opera viewers used a sample of 250 viewers who responded to a 5-point Likert-type scale which contained 52 gratification

type statements. The most important gratifications (in order of their importance) were: (a) entertainment, (b) habit (routine part of the day), (c) convenience ("it's on at a convenient time"), (d) social utility (facilitation of social interaction), (e) relaxation or escape from problems (tension reduction), (f) escape from boredom ("nothing else to do"), and (g) reality exploration or advice (help solve problems) (Compesi, 1980).

Similar motives were uncovered by Lemish (1985). Her study concentrated on interviews with college students who gather in the student union to watch "General Hospital" (ABC). In spite of the different methodology, Lemish (1985) found soap operas are "viewed as a vehicle for escape from reality, excitement, companionship, relaxation, help with problems, and emotional satisfaction gained from intimate involvement in the lives of the characters" (p. 285). The responses from the students interviewed indicate a complexity in the combinations of gratifications obtained.

Babrow (1987) found similar motives for viewing among college students. However, she points out "it is important to realize more fully the broad differences among students in the particular desires or expectancies they associate with viewing" (p. 319). This, like the Lemish (1985) study, suggests a complex structure in viewing motivations and uses.

Once again, Rubin's (1985) study of college students' uses of soap operas describes findings consistent with the other studies (Compesi, 1980; Lemish, 1985; and Babrow, 1987). Motives in the Rubin (1985) study included orientation or reality exploration, avoidance or escape, diversion or amusement, and social utility or interaction. Rubin cautions that too simplistic a view of soap opera viewing can be misleading, and that the least important factor, quantity of viewing, is the most often studied.

These studies (Compesi, 1980; Lemish, 1985; Rubin, 1985; and Babrow, 1987) found the least significance on the advice, tension reduction, escape type variables. However, Wallack, Breed, and de Foe (1985) discuss the opportunity to educate people through soap operas. Their study was based on the portrayal of alcohol consumption on daytime serials. They found accurate representation of drinking problems with good role models for social drinking and abstinence, and negative reinforcement of heavier drinking. Wallack et al. (1985) recommend soap opera depiction of drinking in health education saying people could use content to help them deal with their own problems.

Along similar lines, Kilguss (1974) proposed the use of soap operas as a therapeutic tool. She pointed out that soap operas are myth-like and myths are catalytic to the reworking of internal conflicts and identities. The problem with

establishing this type of use empirically is that most of this activity occurs in one's subconscious and, therefore, is not readily accessible for study. The activity of the subconscious may also be the reason for the lack of significance in uses mentioned above.

Most of the studies in uses and gratifications are empirical studies that rely on survey data for answers (Compesi, 1980; Rubin, 1985; Babrow, 1987). And, as noted above, uses such as advice, escape, companionship, etc. are often found to be insignificant even though those answers are given by respondents. Thomas (1981) states that asking people what they learn from, and how they use media is not the best way to uncover media learning and motives for use. When people are asked what they learn from soap operas, they often say very little or use disclaimers ("I don't use soaps for advice"), but that is on a conscious level. Learning may also take place subliminally, which is more difficult to assess (Thomas, 1981).

A similar discussion is undertaken by Lichtenstein and Rosenfeld (1983). Their criticism of uses and gratifications is that the approach is easier to use with biological needs (hunger, thirst). However, the needs the media can gratify are harder to discern. Often, researchers are forced to make assumptions about needs people have for the media that cannot be observed (Lichtenstein & Rosenfeld, 1983).

It has been suggested that value themes conveyed by the media can provide value reinforcement (Katzman, 1972; McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972). Kenneth Burke (1941, 1967) proposes that the media can provide "equipment for living" in his critical dramatistic perspective. Colbert (1987) has suggested that a qualitative, humanist perspective may be an effective method of studying television uses because of the subjective nature of television viewing. An approach of this nature can provide an understanding of how television content relates to man's ability to deal with life and society (Colbert, 1987). Miyazaki (1981) also points out the need to pay more attention to the qualitative aspect of audience reactions to media. This would point to the participant-observation method advocated by Lull (1980), to name one.

Research Questions. It seems logical that, before one can attempt to establish value reinforcement in viewers by the media, one must first show that the value laden content is present. Secondly, one must show that the values present in the content are being perceived by the audience. If this initial connection is made, it can be used as a point of departure for further studies in this area of uses and gratifications.

Therefore, this study is exploratory in nature. It combines two different methodologies in an attempt to establish the connection between content and perception

mentioned above. The following research questions were explored:

1. Do soap opera scenes contain common value themes?
2. Do common value themes exist between soap operas?
3. Does the viewing audience perceive the value themes?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study was to explore and identify common value themes among daytime serials and examine the extent to which these value themes are perceived by the soap opera audience.

The study was conducted in two phases. The first phase consisted of a content analysis designed to identify value themes common in soap operas, regardless of plot-line or the network on which the soap opera appears. The second phase consisted of a survey which will be discussed later.

One soap opera from each of the three networks was selected for the content analysis. "Days of Our Lives" (NBC), "The Young and the Restless" (CBS), and "General Hospital" (ABC) were the soap operas selected. The selection was based on the ratings of each of the shows. Nielsen ratings showed each to be the highest rated soap on their respective networks at the time the sample was taken. Although this is a purposive sample, soap operas are, by definition, formulaic in nature and so are all very similar in structure. The highest rated soap operas were chosen in order to increase the chances of the respondents in the second phase of the study watching the same soap operas. One soap opera from each network was chosen to give equal

representation to the networks and to allow for possible differences in shows between networks.

The sample was drawn based on a constructed week made up of a fifteen-week period from November 1988 to February 1989. This provided a total of fifteen hours of viewing, five episodes of each soap opera (all are hour long soaps). Using consecutive days was not necessary because the plot-line involved was not relevant to the purposes of the study.

The unit of analysis was the individual scene. A scene was defined as a segment of action/dialog that is uninterrupted by a change in place, or characters, or topic of discussion, or all three, or by a commercial. If one or more characters joined or left a scene in progress, it was not a change in scene. A scene changed when different characters began a new topic of discussion, action cut or panned to a different locale, or action cut to a commercial.

Within each scene, the unit of observation was the topic or theme of the scene. The unit of observation was assessing the latent content of the scene as opposed to the manifest content. The topic of the scene was defined as the underlying theme connoted by the scene and the dialog.

Of course, the word connotation is a subjective term, but as Schrag and Rosenfeld (1987) submit,

... the final shape and meaning of the constructed soap opera is much more amenable to subjective interpretation.... The role of audience interpretation makes the study of that

interpretation especially important for soap operas. (p. 363)

Coding Categories

The data were coded by three coders, the author and two female assistants.

The coders recorded the value themes inherent in each scene, as well as the total number of scenes in the soap opera, and information such as the title of the soap. The value themes recorded consisted of the following:

1. SYMPATHY: sympathetic, compassionate, "know how he/she feels."
2. PRINCIPLES: doing the right thing, standing up for one's beliefs, fighting evil in the form of "bad" people.
3. FRIENDSHIP: platonic love, being supportive of friends, caring, understanding, enjoying company of friends.
4. MATURE LOVE: love will conquer all, it transcends everything, i.e., time, distance, conflict; someone to share one's life with, people who are destined to be together overcome tremendous odds to be together, dedication, support.
5. INNER STRENGTH: inner strength and character in the face of adversity and/or tragedy, follow own instincts, search for truth, facing reality.
6. FAMILY: family is important priority, defending family members, helping them out of trouble, being supportive of family, blood is thicker than water.

7. INTEGRITY: have integrity, be honest, deception of others almost always results in some sort of consequence.

8. PERSERVERENCE: even when the situation seems hopeless, never give up.

9. TRUST: trusting people and earning their trust.

10. INFORMATION: some scenes are attempts to convey information of a topical nature to the audience.

11. FIDELITY: extramarital affairs are not acceptable.

12. AMBITION: success at all costs, usually seen in "bad" people.

13. DECEPTION: lying to achieve ends, mostly engaged in by bad people; lying to protect loved ones, mostly engaged in by good people.

14. WORK ETHIC: having success in job, following orders.

15. ADVICE: providing guidance to family or friends.

16. POWER: controlling other people's lives, engaged in by bad people.

17. HAPPINESS: being happy and content with one's life.

18. REVENGE: getting even, bad people often speak of "paying people back" and "getting even."

19. COMMUNICATION: being open, self disclosure, talking about problems.

20. FORGIVING: forgiving others, accepting apologies, not holding grudges.

21. LIVE FOR PRESENT: don't look back, don't live in past.

22. TOLERANCE: accepting people for who/what they are. Any and all value themes were recorded for each scene. Fifteen soaps were coded, five of each soap in the sample for a total of fifteen hours viewing time. A total of 393 scenes were coded for the content analysis.

Coder Reliability

In order to achieve coder reliability, one episode of each soap opera coded by the two assistants was selected at random and coded by the author. The reliability criterion, based on percentage of agreement, was maintained at an average of .91.

Phase Two

The second phase of the study was a confirmatory survey which determined if the value themes identified in the content analysis are perceived by the audience. This portion was a modified replication of the Schrag and Rosenfeld (1987) study in which they used the Rokeach Values Survey (Rokeach, 1979) to assess value perceptions in daytime versus prime-time serials.

The Rokeach Values Survey (1979) as used by Schrag and Rosenfeld (1987) is a list of 36 values, eighteen of which are instrumental values (ways to behave), and eighteen of which are terminal values (goals or end states). Instead of

employing this same method, this study based its survey questions on the results of the content analysis. The major difference in the two studies is that Schrag and Rosenfeld (1987) did not do a content analysis prior to their survey.

The survey was given to a sample of 212 college students who watch daytime serials. Because the study is exploratory, and is merely testing a methodology, the sample was not random, and includes only students who are soap opera viewers.

Survey questions were based on the results of the content analysis. Respondents were asked first whether they watch soap operas, and those who answered "no" were eliminated from the sample. Those who answered "yes" were further asked to name their favorite soap opera, how often they watch it, and whether they schedule their day around the soap, or record it for later viewing, or both. Respondents were then asked to keep their favorite soap opera in mind while they answered questions regarding the extent to which the soap opera reflects the value theme listed. Response choices were as follows: never or almost never (reflects this value); rarely (reflects this value); sometimes (reflects this value); often (reflects this value); always or almost always (reflects this value). Respondents were also asked the usual demographic questions such as age, gender,

and academic level. The actual questionnaire may be found in the Appendix.

CHAPTER IV

Results

This study has examined value themes in soap operas and audience perceptions of those themes. The first phase of the study was a content analysis which addressed the first two research questions regarding the presence of value themes in the soap operas. The second phase of the study was a confirmatory survey which addressed the third research question.

Research question 1 asked whether soap opera scenes contain common groupings of value themes. The results indicate that this is not the case. A factor analysis was performed for data reduction purposes; however, since the data were binomial, the factor analysis did not work. Following the factor analysis, an elaborate series of cross-tabulations was run to determine if the value themes occur together in scenes.

The cross-tabulations also failed to show any value theme groupings, indicating that the initial 23 value themes are fairly independent of each other. This is supported by the frequency distribution which shows that of the 393 scenes, more than half contained only one or two value themes (see Table 1).

Table 1

Total Number of Value Themes Per Scene

Number of Themes	Number of Scenes	Rel %
1	140	35.6
2	135	34.4
3	78	19.8
4	29	7.4
5	5	1.3
6	5	1.3
7	1	.3

N = 393.

Research Question 2 asked whether soap operas across networks contain common value themes. Cross-tabulations of the three soap operas by each of the variables indicate that the soap operas do contain common value themes in spite of differences in plot line. Table 2 shows the rankings, in order of occurrence, of the value themes based on the cross-tabulation results.

Table 2

Value Themes Across Soaps Based on Crosstabs

Value Theme	# of Occurrences	Rel %
Communication	132	33.6
Friendship	95	24.2
Deception	67	17.0
Information	65	16.5
Family	60	15.3
Sympathy	60	15.3
Mature Love	57	14.5
Power	41	10.4
Advice	35	8.9
Principled	32	8.1
Perseverance	24	6.1
Other	22	5.6
Work Ethic	19	4.8
Revenge	17	4.3
Fidelity	16	4.1
Inner Strength	16	4.1
Ambition	13	3.3
Trust	11	2.8
Integrity	10	2.5
Tolerance	10	2.5
Live for Present	9	2.3
Forgiving	7	1.8
Happiness	6	<u>1.5</u>
		100.0

Note: Top nine value themes were kept for the survey.

The results of the cross-tabulations were used to determine which value themes would be asked about in the survey. Only the top nine value themes were kept. The criterion used was based on two determinants: (a) If one of the cells was empty, indicating an absence of the value theme in one of the soaps, that value theme was eliminated and (b) if the relative percentage was 5% or less, the value theme was eliminated. The "other" category was eliminated in spite of an adequate percentage because the scenes which comprise the category are transition scenes. Transition scenes generally occur right before a commercial and serve the purpose of setting up upcoming action; therefore, they don't contain nor do they convey any value theme.

Research Question 3 asked whether soap opera viewers perceive value themes conveyed by the soap operas. The survey was conducted in eight upper and lower division classes at San Jose State University.

The sample was 71% female and 29% male. Most of the respondents had attained the class level of junior, although senior was the next most commonly occurring class level. The sample was comprised mostly of respondents falling into the 18 to 25 years of age group (82.5%). "All My Children" (ABC) and "Days of Our Lives" (NBC) were the most commonly watched soap operas (22% and 30%, respectively). Respondents watch their favorite soap once or twice a week on the average,

although many (42.9%) watch less than once a week. Regarding the questions dealing with rearrangement of schedule and videotaping for later viewing, the respondents overwhelmingly answered no to both questions. Over 88% of the viewers said they do not rearrange their daily schedule in order to watch their favorite soap opera, and 68% said they do not record their favorite soap opera for viewing at a later time.

Three analyses were completed in order to determine audience perception of the value themes. Results of the first analysis showed that respondents do perceive the value themes conveyed by the soap operas, based on the mean score for each variable (see Table 3).

It should be noted here that the deception value from the content analysis was divided into two dimensions for the survey, lying for selfish reasons and lying to protect loved ones. These are the two dominant reasons people lie on the soap operas. Therefore, in order to avoid any ambiguity that might have occurred in the survey, the value theme was divided into those two dimensions.

The second analysis was a factor analysis to determine if the respondents perceived value themes categorically. Initial results showed the ten values loaded on three factors. However, four of the values (sympathy, information, advice, and communication) loaded ambiguously and were eliminated.

Table 3

Mean Scores for Audience Perceptions of Value Themes

Value Theme	Perception Scale Means
Power	4.07
Selfish Deception	4.04
Advice	3.80
Protective Deception	3.75
Sympathy	3.70
Family	3.31
Communication	3.20
Friendship	3.15
Mature Love	3.08
Information	2.50

Note: Perception scale scores ranged from 1-5, where 1 equals non-occurrence of the value in the soap, and 5 equals frequent occurrence of the value in the soap.

Another factor analysis was run with the remaining six values. Results showed them to load on two factors. Factor 1 contained those values that related to power and deception, and was called "control." Factor 2 contained those values that related to family, love, and friendship, and was called "love." The factor loadings are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Factor Loadings for Viewer Perceptions of Value Themes

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Values	Control	Love
True Friendship	-.14	.71
Mature Love	.03	.77
Family	.17	.57
Protective Deception	.57	.20
Selfish Deception	.78	-.11
Power	.78	-.01
% of Variance	52.4	47.6

Eigenvalues: Factor 1 = 1.6; Factor 2 = 1.5.

The third analysis was a Spearman rank-difference correlation coefficient to determine if audience perceptions of the value themes match those found in the content analysis. Results showed a negative correlation of $-.65$, indicating that although the respondents perceive the value themes, they don't perceive them in the same rank order as the content analysis (see Table 5).

Table 5

Rank Correlation Coefficient of Content Analysis Versus
Survey Responses

Value	Content Analysis	Survey Response	Diff.	Diff. Squared
Communication	1	7	-6	36
Friendship	2	8	-6	36
Deception	3	2 (4)	1 (-1)	1
Information	4	10	-6	36
Family	5.5	6	-.5	.25
Sympathy	5.5	5	.5	.25
Mature Love	7	9	-2	4
Power	8	1	7	49
Advice	9	3	6	36
			—	—
			-6	198.5

Note: $\rho = -.65$. Survey ranking in parentheses indicates protective deception since deception value was divided into two dimensions to avoid ambiguity in the survey.

Additional Analyses

Further analyses examined differences in perceptions of the two factors, control and love, and those respondents who viewed the two most commonly occurring soap operas, "Days of Our Lives" (NBC) and "All My Children" (ABC). An index of

these variables was constructed and a t -test was run to determine if any differences were significant.

Results showed that those respondents who said "Days of Our Lives" was their favorite soap opera perceived the love factor significantly more often than those respondents who said "All My Children" was their favorite soap opera at the $p < .0001$ level of significance (see Table 6). However, no significant difference was found for the control factor between the two groups.

A second t -test was run between the same two soap operas and frequent versus non-frequent viewers. Again, results showed that the more frequent viewers perceive the love factor more than the non-frequent viewers at the $p < .0001$ level of significance. No significant difference was found between frequent and non-frequent viewers for the control factor (see Table 7).

There were sixteen respondents in the survey who responded with more than one answer to the question which asked them to name their favorite soap opera, suggesting that they are avid viewers. These sixteen respondents were isolated and a simple frequency distribution was computed. Contrary to expectations, the majority of the sixteen subjects watched the soap operas less than once a week, did not schedule their day around the soap operas, and did not record them for later viewing.

Table 6

Comparisons of "All My Children" and "Days of Our Lives" for the Factors Love and Control

Variable	N of Cases	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	t	df	p
Love							
AMC	46	8.24	2.27	.34			
					5.90	107	.0001
DOOL	63	10.78	2.18	.28			
Control							
AMC	46	11.90	2.23	.33			
					.60	107	.551
DOOL	63	12.13	1.87	.24			

Note: Test is two-tailed. Score range for love and control: 3-15.

Table 7

Comparisons of Frequent and Non-frequent Viewers for the Factors Love and Control

Variable	N of Cases	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	t	df	p
Love							
Infreq.	91	8.70	2.59	.27			
					4.30	209	.0001
Freq.	120	10.13	2.24	.21			
Control							
Infreq.	91	11.78	1.93	.20			
					.38	209	.704
Freq.	120	11.88	1.97	.18			

Note: Test is two-tailed. Score range for love and control: 3-15.

A Spearman rank difference correlation coefficient was computed to compare the ranked means of the value themes of the sixteen subjects with those found in the content analysis. Results showed a negative correlation of $-.3$ (see Table 8), which, although not as strong as the $-.65$ correlation of the earlier test (see Table 5), still indicates a difference in value perceptions of the

respondents, compared with the results of the content analysis.

Table 8

Rank Correlation Coefficient of Content Analysis Versus
Sixteen Multiple Soap Viewers

Value	Content Analysis	Sixteen Viewers	Diff.	Diff. Squared
Communication	1	7	-6	36
Friendship	2	4	-2	4
Deception	3	3(2)	0(1)	0(1)
Information	4	10	-6	36
Family	5	8.5	-3.5	12.25
Sympathy	6	6	0	0
Mature Love	7	8.5	-1.5	2.25
Power	8	1	7	49
Advice	9	5	4	16
			-8	155.5

Note: $\rho = -.3$.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The intent of this study was to examine the value themes conveyed by three soap operas ("Days of Our Lives," "The Young and the Restless," and "General Hospital"), and the extent of audience perceptions of those themes.

The review of the literature showed soap operas to be useful in gratifying the various needs or expectations of the viewer. Several studies also suggested that soap operas are extremely value laden, and because of the high level of involvement inherent in soap viewing, they may provide value reinforcement for the viewer.

However, before value reinforcement can be established, two prerequisites must be met. First, it must be determined that there are values being conveyed by the soap opera content. Second, it must be determined that the audience is perceiving the values. Without these two prerequisites, any discussion of value reinforcement seems moot. Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to attempt to establish the prerequisites.

The study did indeed establish that soap operas contain value themes, which are conveyed by example. The characters demonstrate the value themes through their treatment of each other in various interpersonal situations. One might even go

so far as to suggest that soap operas are modern day allegories, weaving elaborate plots that ultimately teach a moral lesson such as, "love will conquer all," or "be true to yourself." In order to examine these themes, one must get past the occasional silly plot line, and the sometimes bad acting, to reach the subtext of the soap opera.

The study also showed that survey respondents perceived the value themes. Unfortunately, they did not perceive them in the same rank order as the content analysis. Nonetheless, an initial connection was made between content and viewer.

It is interesting to note that, contrary to expectations, frequency of viewing didn't seem to have any impact on respondent's perceptions of value themes. Most of the respondents watch their favorite soap less often than once a week. This tends to support Rubin's (1985) assertion that the quantity of viewing is not important, although it is the most often studied.

Future Research

There has been relatively little research done on the connection between content and perception with respect to soap operas. Further analysis would provide increased understanding and would lay the foundation on which value reinforcement and personal guidance research could rest. The following are some suggestions for further research:

1. Although two of the three research questions were answered affirmatively in this study, further research is needed on the relationship between content and perception. This research would include careful examination of the definitions of terms used in this study in order to provide possible explanations for the difference between the content analysis results and the survey results demonstrated in the correlational analysis in this study.

2. The same methodology employed in this study should be attempted on a larger scale, using larger samples for both the content analysis and the survey. For example, a larger content sample might show changes in value themes over times. Also, the survey could be administered to a larger and more representative sample of soap opera viewers, in order to obtain generalizable results that represent the soap opera viewing population as a whole.

3. Further research is also needed to explore the relationship between frequency of viewing and perception of value themes. The results of this study seem to indicate that frequency of viewing has no impact on the respondent's perception of values. However, studies should be conducted to determine if this is indeed the case. Does the frequency of soap opera viewing affect the extent of value theme perception?

4. Research is also needed in the area of value reinforcement. Once it has been firmly established that viewers perceive value themes contained in soap operas, studies should be conducted to determine if perception leads to reinforcement of values. For example, a perception questionnaire, similar to the one in the Appendix, could be combined with a list of statements in a Likert-type format. This would show comparisons between value perception and the strength of the values held by respondents. Are people's values reinforced by values conveyed by soap operas?

5. Finally, studies should be conducted in the same areas mentioned above, with respect to television in general. Other types of programming should be subjected to content analyses like the one employed by this study to explore value themes and differences between them with respect to the different program styles. Confirmatory surveys should be conducted to explore audience perceptions of program content. It would be possible, then, to discover which program styles are the most conducive to value perception and value reinforcement.

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APPENDIX

SOAP OPERA VALUES ASSESSMENT SURVEY

My name is Beth Colbert and I am a candidate for the Master of Science Degree in Mass Communications. I need your help in assessing audience perceptions of soap opera value themes. The results of this study should provide a point of departure for further studies in the field of uses and gratifications research. Attached is a questionnaire asking about your soap opera viewing habits and your perception of value themes conveyed by them. Would you please take a few minutes to complete the form and return it to me?

It should be made clear that your participation is voluntary and you are free to stop at any time during the survey. Your answers will remain anonymous and confidential. There is no way I or anyone else will be able to identify you or your survey. In order to ensure this, please DO NOT put your name on the form. You may benefit from this survey by developing an increased awareness of soap opera content or television content in general.

If you have any questions about this study, I would be happy to talk with you. I can be reached at (408) 847-0264. You may also direct any questions to my thesis adviser, Dr. Serena Stanford, in the Graduate Studies Office at (408) 924-2480. Thank you for your time and cooperation!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Beth H. Colbert". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Beth Colbert
Graduate Student in Mass Communications

Please answer the following items by placing an "X" in the appropriate space.

1. Do you watch daytime soap operas?

_____ Yes

_____ No

2. Which daytime soap opera is your favorite? (Please choose one, only.)

_____ "All My Children"

_____ "Loving"

_____ "One life to Live"

_____ "General Hospital"

_____ "Days of Our Lives"

_____ "Generations"

_____ "Another World"

_____ "Santa Barbara"

_____ "The Young and the Restless"

_____ "The Bold and the Beautiful"

_____ "As the World Turns"

_____ "Guiding Light"

3. How often do you watch your favorite soap opera? (Please choose the answer that best applies.)

_____ Watch it less than once a week.

_____ Watch it once a week.

_____ Watch it twice a week.

_____ Watch it three times a week.

_____ Watch it four times a week.

_____ Watch it every day.

4. Do you adjust your daily schedule so you are able to watch your favorite soap opera?

_____ Yes

_____ No

PLEASE CONTINUE THE SURVEY ON THE NEXT PAGE.

5. Do you ever record your favorite soap opera on video tape and watch it at a later time?

 Yes

 No

Keeping your favorite soap opera in mind, please answer the following value questions.

6. How often do the characters on the soap opera demonstrate sympathy and compassion towards each other?

 Never or almost never

 Rarely

 Sometimes

 Often

 Always or almost always

7. How often is true friendship (close companionship) conveyed by the soap opera?

 Never or almost never

 Rarely

 Sometimes

 Often

 Always or almost always

8. How often is mature love (love that will conquer all) conveyed by the soap opera?

 Never or almost never

 Rarely

 Sometimes

 Often

 Always or almost always

PLEASE CONTINUE THE SURVEY ON THE NEXT PAGE.

9. How often is family security (taking care of loved ones) conveyed by the soap opera?
- ☐ Never or almost never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Always or almost always
10. How often does the soap opera convey information on current issues?
- ☐ Never or almost never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Always or almost always
11. How often do characters on the soap opera deceive people they care about in order to protect those same people?
- ☐ Never or almost never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Always or almost always
12. How often do characters on the soap opera deceive people in order to achieve selfish ends?
- ☐ Never or almost never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Always or almost always

PLEASE CONTINUE THE SURVEY ON THE NEXT PAGE

13. How often do characters on the soap opera provide advice and guidance to family or friends?
- ☐ Never or almost never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Always or almost always
14. How often is power (control over other people) conveyed by the soap opera?
- ☐ Never or almost never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Always or almost always
15. How often is communication (self-disclosure) conveyed by the soap opera?
- ☐ Never or almost never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Always or almost always
16. Where do you usually watch your favorite soap opera?
- ☐ At home
- ☐ Elsewhere
17. In what age group do you belong as of your last birthday?
- ☐ 18-25
- ☐ 26-30
- ☐ 31-35
- ☐ 36-40
- ☐ 41-45
- ☐ 46-50
- ☐ 51-55
- ☐ 56-60
- ☐ Over 60

PLEASE CONTINUE THE SURVEY ON THE NEXT PAGE.

18. What is your gender?

☐ Female

☐ Male

19. What is your current academic level?

☐ Freshman

☐ Sophomore

☐ Junior

☐ Senior

☐ Graduate

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION!