

**Talk Ricki! A Qualitative Study of Teen Perspectives on
the “Ricki Lake Show” and Other Daytime Television Talk
Shows**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the responses of a selected group of female teenage viewers to the *Ricki Lake Show*. Although a number of studies have been done in the area of audience, very few of them have considered teenage and young adult audiences. Most of the current research to date has focused on either how television affects viewers' behaviour, primarily children, or in the field of reception research, where studies have explored how viewers respond to various television programs, primarily soap operas, where the subjects were mostly adult women. This study uses the reception research methodology of visiting participants in their homes. A total of seventeen teenage women were interviewed in ten sessions. Interviews covered the following areas: a) why they watch television talk shows; b) their perceptions of the components of the genre, i.e., host, topics, guests, studio audience members, expert, and visual style; and c) their overall perceptions of the genre of talk TV. Each session involved a different episode of the *Ricki Lake Show*, except for one repeat. Each session lasted for between two and three hours, one hour of which was spent watching the show. The remainder of the time was spent in discussions. A list of questions was used to guide discussions. Interviews and discussions were fully transcribed prior to analysis. The overall results strongly suggested that age and socio-economic status influenced the responses of the study participants. The results also made it clear that these viewers were active participants of media in the sense that they could critique and interpret the genre in a personal manner. However, the participants seemed to lack media awareness skills essential for critical viewing, such as an understanding of the techniques used in creating media images, awareness of the distinction between the view of the world presented on television and the real world, and awareness of the commercial motivations for creating these programs.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Talk shows appeal to the natural voyeur in all of us (Waldron, 1995, p. 132). Our [the Ricki Lake] show is a clear voice for young people who like talk TV but can't relate to what is out there. I want to do for daytime what Arsenio Hall did for late night. I want to bring talk shows down a few degrees with hipper music and more energy, (Waldron, 1995, p. 150). I think every talk show that comes out says we're different, but clearly, from my being the youngest host ever, and the music and the set, and the bumpers [the panels that go up on the screen before commercials] and the man-on-the-street interviews, and the surprise guests and the quizzes – from every aspect, we're completely different and we do stuff that's unexpected (Ricki Lake, quoted in Waldron, 1995, p. 151).

SHAME! ...on you trash show PRODUCERS who fill our children's minds with moral rot. ... on you TV STATIONS which bring these perverse programs into our communities. ... on you greedy ADVERTISERS who sponsor trash shows simply to fill your coffers with money. We are FED UP with your callused and arrogant disregard for the impact your filth is having on our children. We are not going to take it any more. WE ARE FIGHTING BACK! [The remainder of the page was filled with "trash themes" – "I'm marrying a 14 year old," "Virgins who are choosing their first sex partners (including a homosexual couple)," "Mom I'm a teen prostitute," and more. Top sponsors of these talk shows were listed accompanied with mailing addresses as well as a cut-out section designed as a petition to be sent to the sponsors of these "trash" TV talk shows.] (The American Family Association, Sunday New York Times, January 21, 1996, full page advertisement.)

Teens Tune in to Talk Shows

Daytime television talk shows have been part of American television since the Phil Donahue Show began in 1969. According to Jane Shattuc, this "new genre had ended the near-fifty-year reign of soap operas as the most popular

daytime dramatic form. More importantly, talk had become the most watched-for, women TV genre" (Shattuc, 1997, p. 1). But the talk show genre transformed in the mid 1990s, attracting more attention than ever before.

During the mid 1990s, talk shows were making the headlines in widely read magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time*. For example: James Wolcott's (1996), *Talking Trash; A Send-up of Talk Shows Argues that Good TV and Virtue Don't Mix*; Bellafante's (1995) *Playing Get the Guest*; Richard Zoglin's (1995) *Talking Trash*; Rick Marin's (1995) *Their 15 Minutes are Up, They Grab an Hour! – Pseudo Celebrities: Think Talk Shows Can't Get any Trashier? You Haven't Met Ricki Lake's Evil Spawn*; Jeanne Albronda Heaton & Nona Leigh Wilson's (1995) *Tuning into Trouble; Ricki Lake! Talks the Talk and Walks the Walk*; and Joshua Gamson's (1996) *Do Tell; TV talk shows may be crass and voyeuristic, but they give a voice to those who have been silenced, and more.*

The mid 1990s also saw the publication of a number of critical academic works: Munson's (1993) *All Talk: The Talk Show in Media Culture*; Livingstone & Lunt's (1994) *Talk on Television: Audience Participation and Public Debate*; Kurtz's (1996) *Hot Air: All Talk All the Time*; and Shattuc's (1997) *The Talking Cure: TV Talk Shows and Women*. Even talk shows themselves had academic pretensions and discussed the effects of talk shows on audiences: Oprah (June 14, 1995) invited Vicki Abt, a Penn State University sociologist and researcher and co-author of *The Shameless World of Phil, Sally and Oprah: Television talk shows and the deconstructing of society*; Abt aired her findings that daytime shows do more harm than good. Also appearing on this episode of Oprah was the director of a media-watch group, "Children Now," who asserted that "talk shows are much worse than soap operas, night time dramas and violent movies," arguing that "we don't have a clue how children are being affected." (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, June 14, 1995)

By 1996, Neilson Ratings reported the *Ricki Lake Show* as the fastest growing daytime talk show in North America, second to Oprah; Ricki Lake was

syndicated on 212 stations, with over 5.8 million viewers, targeting teens and young adults (Zoglin, 1995, p. 43). It had been her New York producers Garth Ancier and Gail Steinberg who had first noticed a void in the marketplace of young women and were determined to fill it (Waldron, 1995, p. 118). Prior to Ricki, they had launched *Jane*, a thirteen-week trial run television talk show, aired on WNYW-TV, a Fox-owned and operated station, hosted by the 29 year old Jane Pratt, former editor of *Sassy Magazine*. The producers attributed *Jane's* failure to going after strictly a teen audience, and to choosing a host who they saw as being "too old" and not vibrant enough (Waldron, 1995, p. 117). On their second try, they expanded the market to include the 18 - 34 year olds, and hired Ricki Lake, a celebrity well known for her John Waters' cinematic roles. On September 13, 1993, "fresh out of Columbia Tristar Pictures, twenty-five year old Ricki Lake hosted her first talk show titled 'I'm Getting Married, But I Haven't Met My Husband Yet'" (Nickson, 1996, p. 146).

The success of the Ricki Lake Show prompted other actors to the scene: Carnie Wilson, the daughter of Beach Boy Brian Wilson; Tempest Blesdoe, one of the daughters on *The Cosby Show*; Danny Bonaduce, former member of the *Partridge Family*; (Nickson, 1996, p. 158); and Gabrielle Carters from *Beverly Hills, 90210* (Marin, 1995, p. 100).

In September 1993, Ricki Lake's ratings were double those of other shows that debuted that Fall, with a 1.9 point rating (one rating point equates to 942,000 households, meaning an audience of at least 1,789,800 viewers.) (Nickson, 1996, p. 147). By October, of her second season (1994), the Neilson Ratings showed that she had attracted more of the 18 - 34 year old group than Oprah, who was still in the lead with a total of 9.4 million viewers (Nickson, 1996, p.173, 174). Ricki was second followed by Donahue, Geraldo, and Sally Jesse Raphael (Nickson, 1996, p. 175). In January, 1994, the *Les Brown Show* was canceled and Ricki's ratings rose to 4.0 (3,768,000 households). (Nickson, 1996, p. 153). By 1995, talk shows were increasing in popularity with Jenny Jones, Jerry

Springer, and Montel Williams entering the scene, cashing in on the new, younger audience (Waldron, 1995, p. 181).

A young host, relationship topics, a vibrant setting, and a lively pace were among strategies used to attract a youthful audience. Alan Perris, vice president of Columbia Pictures Television, said "Ricki will use relationship topics to try and wrest young adult viewers away from cable" (Waldron, 1995, p. 131). Producer Ancier described the audience as:

A less married population, a more socially tolerant group, but one that is not intellectually interested in issues that don't directly affect them. They are interested in things that do affect them like gun violence or racism, but not international or national issues that don't relate to their daily life.

He then added, "our audience is more interested in dating than marriage. They like issues about teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, topics that affect people their age" (Waldron, 1995, p. 154). As a result, relationships, shoplifting, condoms, teen pregnancy, drugs and violence were among some of the topics used during Ricki's first season to attract younger viewers (Waldron, 1995, p. 155).

Assessing the Influence of Talk Shows

One of the concerns of organizations like the American Family Association was that, for young audiences watching daytime television talk shows, the content of these programmes might induce negative effects by influencing their attitudes. Critics feared that these youths might model their behaviour after the promiscuous guests who appear on the shows. I maintain, however, that these fears stem from limited knowledge of teen audiences. Most of the relevant studies that have been conducted with teens and young children have focused on *effects theories* rather than interpretive responses. We have insufficient knowledge of how teens are interpreting the programmes they are watching. Therefore, in order to address this deficit in the literature, this study has investigated a selected

group of teens (females), to see how they are responding to daytime television talk shows.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first part of this literature review considers current research devoted to the history, popularity, audience, and controversial subject matter of daytime television talk shows. This chapter considers the paradigms of audience research in light of its history, and in particular, focuses on researchers' struggles with the "power of the text" versus the "power of the audience." This discussion leads to the development of the study's chosen methodology: A qualitative approach which attempts to see through the eyes of a postulated "active viewer", and which examines how audiences are making sense of what they watch on television.

What is a Daytime Television Talk Show: A Critical Discussion of its History, Controversy, and Issues

Daytime television talk shows are structured around controversial matters that bring the issues belonging to a diversity of marginalized and excluded voices to the public arena. Through an audience discussion programme, "ordinary" people are given a public platform to openly discuss issues of a social, political or personal nature. Sometimes, as Livingstone notes, the topics are "trivial", but usually they take on a more serious form (Livingstone, 1994, p. 431). Talk shows provide a forum where everyone is encouraged to participate and "must talk in ordinary, personal narrative discourse" (Livingstone, 1994, p. 432).

The syndicated talk show genre commenced in 1969, with Phil Donahue leaving his career in radio, to introduce "hot topics" to national television (Kellar, 1993, p. 196). He changed the focus of lively variety shows like Mike Douglas and Dinah Shore to a full hour's discussion to a single theme of a controversial nature. Donahue's success was attributed to his mastery of women's issues as well as to the inclusion of audience members in an unrehearsed public discussion (Kurtz, 1996, p. 54). Donahue ruled the daytime talk genre without any competition until

1983 when Sally Jessy Raphael became syndicated. Donahue and Raphael were followed by Oprah Winfrey in 1984, Geraldo in 1987, and others (Kellar, 1993, p. 197).

Since their debut, talk shows have experienced continuous growth. By the early 1990s, these programmes were steady moneymakers (Munson, 1993, p. 4). Syndicators "sell them as good lead-ins to the local evening news or as lead-outs from morning programmes such as *Today* and *Good Morning America*" (Acland, 1995, p. 98). Large audiences draw advertisers who are willing to spend liberally to access talk show viewers. According to Kurtz, advertisers like Proctor and Gamble, and American Home Products were prepared to pay as much as \$20,000 to fill a 30 second spot on the highest rating daytime television show (Kurtz, 1996, p. 66)

Named as "trash TV" by *Newsweek Magazine*, along with other news/magazine programmes (Acland, 1995, p. 197), talk shows have been accused of manipulation and of trivializing people's lives to boost ratings:

The subject matter for these shows is chosen because of its ability to generate ratings and therefore revenue. Mental health issues make for interesting shows that attract viewers, and viewers produce profit. And profit is the overriding goal of talk shows, not good mental health. (Heaton & Wilson, 1995, p. 3)

Sociologist Vicki Abt from Penn State University elaborates:

To experience the virtual realities of television talk shows is to confront a crisis in the social construction of reality. Television talk shows create audiences by breaking cultural rules, by managed shocks, by shifting our conceptions of what is acceptable, by transforming our ideas about what is possible, by undermining the bases for cultural judgment, by redefining deviance and appropriate reactions to it, by eroding social barriers, inhibitions and cultural distinctions (Abt & Seesholtz, 1994, p. 172).

However, other researchers argue that although talk shows may be “crass and voyeuristic” they give a voice to those who have been silenced (Gamson, 1996, p. 79). In her study, “C’mon girl: Oprah Winfrey and the Discourse of Feminine Talk,” Masciarotte argues that “talk shows afford women the political gesture of overcoming their alienation through talking about their particular experience as women in society” (Masciarotte, 1991, p. 90). In his book, *Media Virus*, Rushkoff asserts that in spite of talk show participants’ exploitation, the outcome isn’t all negative. Producers may be hungry for stories and deceive their guests, but important messages do get out: “It is nearly impossible for the courts to quietly outlaw homosexuality or euthanasia when home viewers who may have felt marginalized before now see that the audiences agree with their feelings” (Rushkoff, 1994, p. 64).

Although Kellar argues, “not all talk shows are trash, and content varies among episodes” (Kellar, 1993, p. 204), it’s how the issues are exploited and how the guests are represented that causes concern. Nevertheless, the option between being heard and not heard also deserves consideration. Therefore, Munson is correct in questioning whether talk shows have become another source of “harmful effects” for a degraded “public life” in which we “amuse ourselves to death,” or whether they are an indication of a “new revitalized public and political life” where “ordinary” citizens are finally given a voice through interactivity (Munson, 1993, p. 3). Clearly there are no easy answers to the questions and arguments raised. As Livingstone notes, debates of this nature are currently being addressed within a multitude of disciplines as well as within the mass media themselves (Livingstone, 1994, p. 429).

Just as there are multiple points of view regarding the nature of television talk shows, there are also various critical approaches to audience research. One group of researchers see viewers as passive recipients who don’t stand a chance against the media’s hegemony and economic dominance and are primarily concerned with how the media primarily affects their viewers. Another group of

researchers attempts to treat viewers as individuals, empowering them as active participants in a dialogue with the media. It seems that although “the television talk show seems almost extravagantly participatory” (Masciarotte, 1991, p. 81), there has been little research on the experiences of participants and home studies (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994, p. 43). It is for this reason, therefore, that my current study focuses on an audience-centered analysis of a selected group of viewers, exploring teenagers’ experience of talk TV.

Duped or Discriminating? Young Audiences and the Paradigms of Audience Research – A Brief History

The view of young people as the “dupes” of popular media has a long history, and is regularly espoused by critics of all political persuasions. For many on the Right, the media are often seen as a major cause of moral depravity and violence; while they are routinely condemned by many on the Left for their reinforcement of racism, sexism, consumerism and many other objectionable ideologies. What unites these otherwise very different views is a notion of young people as helpless victims of manipulation, and as extremely vulnerable and impressionable. In this account, the text is seen to be all powerful, while the reader is powerless to step back and resist: “reading” or making sense of the media texts is regarded as an automatic process, in which meanings are simply imprinted on passive minds. (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994, p. 17)

The question of who is to be master over meaning, the audience or the text, has been an ongoing debate among media scholars. While cultivation theorists have held the belief that text is responsible for shaping our perspectives of reality over long periods of time, more recently, cultural theorists have rejected notions of passivity in viewers. This section traces the history of audience research, demonstrating how models of viewers have shifted from passive to active participants.

Since the post-war period, audiences have been perceived as either “zombies” and “glassy eyed dupes” (Morley, 1989, p. 16), or as “cultural heroes” (Ang, 1996, p. 8). After witnessing the effects of media propaganda in Nazi Germany, a group of Marxist theorists, Adorno, Benjamin, Fromm, Horkheimer, Pollart, Neumann and Marcuse, members of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, came to believe that the masses were victims of the capitalist economy, indiscriminate in their consumption of images and duped by the corporate agenda (Morley, 1980, p. 1,2). Fleeing to the United States to escape war, they brought with them their concerns that people were defenseless against the media. However, their theories were soon critiqued because they appeared to be simplistic, in believing that the masses could be directly manipulated by media (Seiter, et al., 1989, p. 2). American scholars thought the Frankfurt School placed too much emphasis on the leaders of the media and their ability to control the masses, while not enough consideration was given to the diverse cultural backgrounds of the American people (Morley, 1980, p. 1,2). In other words, the concepts of multiple points of views, free thinking individuals, and the power of the ordinary person were ignored in lieu of the consensus of powerful politicians.

American Media Research

The Frankfurt School was nevertheless influential in America in bringing the powerful effect of the media to the attention of American Scholars. As a result laboratory studies were designed to examine the effects of media on viewers. For example, early researchers found that children are more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviour after watching violent programming than children who are exposed to non-violent programming such as sporting events (Condry, 1989, p. 88). Liebert and Baron (1972), in an attempt to use actual material found on TV, examined whether children were willing to hurt other children after viewing scenes from *The Untouchables*. After watching a few sequences, children were led to a room and seated in front of a box which displayed a red button with the word “Hurt” beneath it, and a green button with the word “Help” beneath it. The children

were told that when a white light appeared, they were to push one of the two buttons, both of which would have an effect on a "child" playing a game in the next room (in fact, there was no child in the next room). If the "Hurt" button was pushed, the handle of the game with which the child in the next room was playing would become hot, and he or she would have to let go. Pushing the "Help" button would help the other child win the game. It was found that children who had watched sequences from *The Untouchables* were more likely to hurt other children than were the children who had watched scenes from a race track sporting event.

Experimental or laboratory studies of this nature have been criticized because the material used was manipulated by researchers for the purpose of these studies. In some cases researchers produced their own material, and in other cases researchers chose selected scenes from specific programmes or films (Condry, 1989, 88). Furthermore, critics discredited the results of these studies on the basis that there was insufficient monitoring of the long term effects of violent behaviour allegedly caused by watching violent television (Pearl, 1987, p. 109).

Cultivation Theory: Content and Cultivation Analysis

George Gerbner and colleagues at the Annenberg School of Communications of the University of Pennsylvania, in collaboration with the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behaviour, have examined both the impact of television violence and aggressive behaviour found in children, and the mechanisms by which television shapes attitudes. They hypothesized that regular viewing of television will have gradual cumulative effects on viewer perception by cultivating culturally dominant attitudes and values. As Gerbner notes:

A culture cultivates the images of society. The dominant communication agencies produce the message systems that

cultivate the dominant patterns. They structure the public agenda of existence, priorities, values and relationships. People use the agenda – some more selectively than others – to support the ideas, actions or both, in ways that, on the whole tend to match the general composition and structure of message systems, (provided of course that there is also other environmental support for these choices and interpretations). (Gerbner, 1973, p. 569).

The “Cultural Indicators Research Project,” designed by Gerbner in the mid 1960s, was set up in two stages. The first stage involved a series of studies known as the *message system analysis*, which is “the annual monitoring of samples of prime time and weekend daytime network dramatic programming” (Gerbner, et al., 1980, p. 10), and the second stage of the research involved *cultivation analysis*, which involved measuring the belief systems of heavy viewers (Condry, 1989, p. 60).

Using Gerbner’s message system analysis to decode reality as depicted on television, researchers have shown that television is dominated by males, and that women, the elderly, and ethnic minorities are under-represented in television drama programming; when they are portrayed, they are over-represented as victims of violent acts. Furthermore, women tend to be portrayed primarily as young and attractive, preoccupied with domestic activities, while men are portrayed as successful in the work force. Researchers have also shown that there is an over-representation of professional groups such as lawyers, medical doctors and reporters (Wober & Gunter, 1988, p. 4,5).

Gerbner’s cultivation studies found that heavier viewers were more inclined to believe what they watched on television than were lighter viewers. Heavier viewers “revealed a significantly higher sense of personal risk, law enforcement, mistrust and suspicion than did lighter viewers in same demographic groups, exposed to the same real risks of life” (Gerbner, 1987, p. 153).

Some cultivation research studies have been unable to show that television actually does have a long-term effect on people’s attitudes. In Shatzer, Korzenny,

& Griffis-Korzenny's (1985) study *Adolescents Viewing Shogun: Cognitive and Attitudinal Effects*, found that although viewers gained some knowledge of Japanese customs, phrases, and history, "exposure to Shogun was not found to affect Japanese stereotype" (Shatzer, Korzenny, & Griffis-Korzenny's, 1985, p. 345). Other studies focused on adolescents viewing the television programme *Roots* and its sequel *Roots: The Next Generation*. While researchers determined that emotional reactions and informational gains were found with this type of television viewing (Surlin, 1978, p. 319, Ball-Rokeach, Grube, and Rokeach, 1981), they did not find shifts in attitudes with respect to egalitarianism among viewers (Ball-Rokeach, Grube, & Rokeach, 1981, p. 67). According to Condry, there is no dispute about how people are represented on television; however there is debate about whether we can know if television is responsible for homogenizing our opinions "because the causal mechanisms are not understood." In other words, "a correlation does not 'prove' that there is a causal relationship, but it suggests the possibility that there may be one" (Condry, 1989, p. 125).

Another development in the area of audience research, "the needs and gratification" approach, focused on *why* people watch television rather than on *what* they are watching (Condry, 1989, p. 44). According to Berger, this model "turned the act of watching television into a complicated activity rather than a mindless process" (Berger, 1987, p. 3). Gratifications can be derived from a number of factors, such as content, familiarity with genre, pleasure, relaxation, boredom, education, and so forth. One of the criticisms of this approach, according to Condry, is that, because people like to see themselves in a positive light, they might not always be truthful in how they respond to questions (Condry, 1989, p. 44). Other critics see this model as being too simplistic, focusing on the "psychological needs of the individual rather than on the social and ideological ones" (Seiter, et al., 1989, p. 2).

Reception Research: The Shift to the Model of the Active Viewer

The field of reception research advanced the concept of the active viewer. This approach diminishes the power of the text and recognizes audiences as negotiators of meaning (McQuail, 1994, p. 297). It is important because it approached its subjects by borrowing practices from the field of ethnography, relying on qualitative methodologies of in-depth interviews and detailed analyses of small samples of people.

In the late 1970s, the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies began exploring models of audience members as active participants. Hall's essay on "Encoding/Decoding" introduced the idea that television programmes could be interpreted in different ways by different people. He suggested that correlations could exist between the meanings that are made by the viewers and the viewer's position in society. He referred to these as *preferred* meanings and noted that they could diverge from the meanings intended by the producers (Hall, 1980, p. 128-39). This approach was unique in that it recognized the viewer's position as "co-constructors" of text, and that the audience member was an active producer of meaning in relation to his or her cultural background, gender, and class-based identity.

Subsequent, cultural studies researchers exploited the concept of polysemy to investigate viewers' interpretations of the programmes they watched. By means of combining textual analysis with reception research, Morley (1980), for example, explored viewer responses to the popular British television programme *Nationwide*. He found that the viewers were not willing to accept the roles of the characters as inscribed in the text, and that viewers' readings of the text did not correspond directly with their socio-economic status. Influenced by literary criticism, Radway (1991), in *Reading the Romance*, investigated why women read romance novels. Radway found that her subjects sought pleasure through the act of reading, through which they could venture off into fictional worlds and live

vicariously through the heroines, and thus escape from the pressures of their own mundane daily routines.

The field of reception research flourished, focusing increased interest on soap opera viewers: Through in-depth interviews in the homes of viewers, Hobson (1982), for example, investigated the gender based responses of a community of soap opera fans. She found that soap opera characters were perceived as an important point of reference for the maintenance of viewer's cultural identity. She also found that housewives used soap operas as a means for engaging in public discussions of social issues. Studying letters written to her by her research subjects, Ang found in *Watching Dallas* (Ang, 1985) that viewers' satisfaction with the popular programme *Dallas* was linked to their interpretations. Subsequently, Leibes and Katz (1989), in a cross cultural study of the same soap opera, found by way of group discussions that cultural differences were an important factor in viewers' interpretations.

Working class culture was also being studied during this time. Paul Willis, in *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs* (1977), found that kids' rebellion against school authority is what prepares adolescent males for working class jobs. Angela McRobbie studied working class girls and subculture through ethnographic studies and teen magazines. In *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen*, McRobbie contends that "the culture of femininity, which is made available to girls through the intimate world of magazines, can be used by girls as means of creating their own space in the school, the youth club or even home" (McRobbie, 1991, p. xvii). Despite this, however, she found that the expectations of these girls' futures never departed from "the prescribed expectations of becoming a wife and mother who is financially dependent on her husband" (McRobbie, 1991, xviii). Finally, in his study of working class youth, *Public Secrets: EastEnders and Audiences*, David Buckingham observed that much of the fascination with the popular British soap opera, *EastEnders*, particularly of younger children, arose from its inclusion of

aspects of adult life from which they were normally “protected” (Buckingham, 1987, p. 200).

One of the criticisms of reception research is that too much emphasis is placed on the power of the audience, inappropriately minimizing the consequences of media influence. As Corner notes, “so much conceptual effort has been centered on audiences’ interpretative activity that even the preliminary theorization of media power has become awkward” (Corner, 1991, p 267, cited in Ang, 1996, p. 10). Similarly, McGuigan asserts that active audience research avoids investigating the media’s economic and political subtexts, and how these might be affecting viewer perceptions:

Active audience research and the meaning of television in everyday life took a certain priority during the 1980’s. Such research was rarely linked to the complex economic determinations, technological and policy changes occurring around television nationally and internationally. (McGuigan 1992, p. 128, cited in Ang, 1996, p. 10)

Although these criticisms are valid and need to be addressed, they have not gone unnoticed. As Ang notes, “the ‘active audience’ should not be viewed as ‘antagonistic’ to media power”, nor should the “recognition of audiences as active meaning makers have to lead to their romanticization” (Ang, 1996, p. 10).

It seems that, rather than confronting issues of media power, cultural theorists have focused on other areas of research--matters of ethics and viewing TV within family contexts, for example. However, if researchers continue to support “political rhetoric” about “empowerment” and “cultural struggle” which are fundamental to cultural studies tradition, as Buckingham observes, there is a danger that it “will come to be replaced by a kind of postmodernist navel-gazing that we would regard as little more than an academic luxury” (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994, p. 11).

In order to acknowledge the influences of both media power and viewer diversity, we must simultaneously recognize that viewers are active participants

who are capable of producing and negotiating meaning, while taking into account factors of experience, cultural background, socio-economic status, gender, age, and education. As Livingstone notes, "If the mass media are to provide some kind of public sphere, the audience must be capable of critical response" (Livingstone, 1994, p. 70). She says:

Viewer's critical responses reveal the status and hence the power given to the media by viewers, they reveal the interpretive resources used by viewers, and they reveal the relations which hold for viewers between media meanings and social context (Livingstone, 1994, p. 71).

However, while we acknowledge that audiences are interpretive participants in television, we must also recognize that television is a powerful and provocative industry. Background knowledge and education (so called "media literacy") is needed to fully understand the complexities of media production. It is not intuitive but rather learned. Without education, even the most active of viewers might have difficulty recognizing and/or interpreting the subtexts found within the media.

It seems that researchers to date have not fully come to terms with the complexity of either viewer diversity or media power. Therefore, this study explores viewers' perceptions of teen-focused television talk shows by considering both teenager interpretive responses and their overall media literacy.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the process and methods used for investigating a selected group of young women and their responses to the *Ricki Lake Show*. In this study I have used a qualitative research methodology and have borrowed from ethnographic practices in that I visited the participants in their own homes. This chapter provides a detailed description of the study ñ explaining who the participants are, how they were selected, and how they were interviewed ñ followed by a method of analysis.

Description of the Study

While ten young women were selected for the study, I ended up interviewing a total of seventeen teen girls from the Vancouver/Toronto region. The reason for the increase was because some of the participants wanted to invite a relative or friend to come along. As a result, there were seven new participants, leaving me with three group interviews and seven solo ones. I had one group of five; one group of three; and one group of two. Before each session started, the respondents were briefed about what was to be expected. I explained that we would watch one entire episode of the *Ricki Lake Show* together, which would be followed by an in-depth interview that would be tape recorded. They were also advised that the tape recorder would be playing during the course of the episode, so that any conversations or comments made during this time could also be used for the purpose of the study.

The Consent Forms

All participants were required to sign a consent form explaining the details of the study. Furthermore, a parent or legal guardian was required to sign the consent form if the participants were not of legal age.

Setting

All the interviews took place in the private homes of the participants. Although I suggested that the sessions be scheduled at the time the *Ricki Lake Show* was normally broadcast, the participants were free to choose a time and day convenient for them. The room where the programme was watched varied from viewer to viewer. Some of the teenagers brought me to their bedrooms, where they had their own personal television sets, while others brought me to either the family room or basement.

The Episodes

The episode of each session was determined by what was broadcast that day. We attempted to watch the show at the time scheduled, but when that was not possible, the daily episode was videotaped in advance; usually we would watch the taped version that evening. Participants watched different episodes except for the participants in the two larger groups from Toronto which happened to be scheduled for the same day.

	PSEUDO NYM	AGE	CULTURAL BACKGROUND	RICKI LAKE VIEWING /HRS	TV HRS/ WK	RICKI LAKE EPISODES WATCHED
1	Tracy	15	Euro-Canadian	5/year	14+	I'm all that and more.
2	Emma	15	Euro-Canadian	7/Year	30+	Gothic teens and secret crushes
3	Sofi	14	Euro-Canadian	4/year	5	Gothic teens and secret crushes
4	Niki	15	Euro-Canadian	4/Year	40	Gothic teens and secret crushes
5	Nina	18	Euro-Canadian	2/week	10+	I disapprove of your inter-racial relationship
6	Lulu	17	Euro-Canadian	4/year	21	I want my baby back!
7	Karen	19	Euro-Canadian (Portuguese)	5/Week	14	Gothic teens and secret crushes
8	Linda	19	Euro-Canadian (Portuguese)	5/Week	20	Gothic teens and secret crushes
9	Cathy	19	Euro-Canadian (Portuguese)	1/week	14	Gothic teens and secret crushes
10	Wendy	19	Euro-Canadian (Portuguese)	4/year	2	Gothic teens and secret crushes
11	Emily	19	Euro-Canadian (Portuguese)	3/week	17	Gothic teens and secret crushes
12	Peni	13	Philippine- Canadian	2-3/wk	21	Rivaling siblings
13	Sara	13	Philippine- Canadian	2-3/wk	56	Rivaling siblings
14	Mika	13	Euro-Canadian	1/wk	15	Reunions
15	Edie	17	Japanese- Canadian	1/wk	14	Kids who are out of control
16	Anna	14	Euro-Canadian	1/month	14	Secret crushes
17	Mary	18	Euro-Canadian	2-3/wk	35	Are you cheating on me?

Table 1. The Participants and the Episodes They Watched

Table 1 describes the participants in terms of their age, cultural background, frequency of viewing the *Ricki Lake Show*, and the Ricki Lake episode watched. A total of nine episodes was watched. The repeated episode was about *Gothic Teens and Secret Crushes*. This episode was shown to two very different groups of young women. One group had finished high school and was now working in the labour force and was of Portuguese descent; the other group of participants was still in high school and of Western Euro-Canadian descent. The participants in both groups live in Toronto. The only other participant who is from Toronto is Tracy – the remaining eight participants are from the Vancouver region. All names of participants have been changed so that their anonymity can be preserved.

Selection of Participants

There were three requirements for selection: Participants had to have watched the *Ricki Lake Show* at least once or more; they had to be female; and they had to be between thirteen and nineteen years of age. The reason behind these decisions is because this was, as are many qualitative studies, a small study; I attempted to have some commonality among my subjects. I targeted young women in particular because of the lack of popular culture and television studies literature focusing on this demographic group, an important deficit because Ricki Lake is targeting teen women.

I originally set out to find the participants by using the “snowball technique,” one participant who introduces you to a second participant who introduces you to a third and so on. However, because of the lack of success with this method (see limitations, chapter 5), I contacted parents through word of mouth who had teenage daughters who watched the *Ricki Lake Show*. This proved to be a more successful method in finding participants for two reasons: first, it practically guaranteed that the interview would take place as scheduled; and second, it

meant that I would receive fresh ideas from all of the subjects who participated, because, for the most part, they did not know one another.

Coming from a white middle class educated background, it would almost seem reasonable to expect that all the participants would come from a similar socio-economic background. However, because of my connections and lifestyle, it turned out that the participants varied quite considerably. For example, a group of young Portuguese-Canadian women were introduced to me by a friend who is a single mother living in Toronto in the Portuguese quarter. These young women had just finished high school and had no plans to continue on to college. Most of them are working. Later, I met Peni and Sara's mother at an outing for one of the ESL classes I was teaching. She used her house as a homestay for visiting students. Again, she was from a working class background. I was then introduced to Nina who was the baby-sitter of a friend of mine. She is a high school dropout living in downtown Vancouver with her mother and grandmother.

The other respondents, however, come from a middle to upper middle class environment, whereby their parents are educated professionals. Tracy was introduced to me by a friend in Toronto who knew her father because he is an active artist in the community. Emma, Niki and Sofi were then introduced to me by Tracy – the first time the “snowball technique” worked as I had hoped it would. Edie was introduced to me by a friend who is active in the Japanese community. Mary is the daughter of one of the supervisors where I worked. Lulu was introduced to me as the daughter of a friend of a friend of mine. Mika was also introduced to me by a friend of a friend's daughter. And finally Anna was introduced to me by a co-worker as the daughter of a friend.

Interview/Discussion

While most of the formal interviewing took place after we watched an episode of the *Ricki Lake Show*, a fair bit of the discussion occurred either prior to or during the show as well. Again, this varied from viewer to viewer. The liveliness

of the discussions was dependent how interested the respondents were in the episode they watched.

During the formal interview, which took place after we finished watching the episode, I used a set of questions to guide the interview. However, because this was interpretive research I allowed the participants to express themselves freely. I found that the participants often went off on their own tangents and wanted to share some of their thoughts or ideas with me. I encouraged these tangents because I felt they were inspired by our conversation of talk shows and therefore connected to the research.

Questions

I had a set of personal questions I referred to as well as a set of questions that related specifically to the show. Although I usually referred to the list after the episode, on occasion some of the questions were discussed during the episode. The personal questions provided me with some background information about their age, television viewing habits, programmes they watched, and their interest in Ricki Lake and other talk shows in general. The other questions were aimed specifically at the episode being watched, focusing on genre, topics, hosts, studio audience, experts, and so forth. Although these questions may seem somewhat contrived, they proved useful in motivating detailed discussions. It was often impossible to determine how long any given response to a question would take. Depending on the participant, different questions inspired different conversations for reasons of either personal experience and/or topic that we watched. I spent approximately 2-3 hours with each participant from beginning to end.

Personal Questions

How old are you?

1. *How many hours of television do you watch a week?*

Ricki Lake and Other Talk Shows

1. *How often do you watch the Ricki Lake Show?*
2. *Do any of your friends watch the Ricki Lake Show? How often?*
3. *What is your overall impression of the Ricki Lake Show?*
4. *Is the Ricki Lake Show popular among teenagers? Why or why not?*
5. *Are any other talk shows popular among teenagers? Why?*
6. *What other television shows do you watch? What magazines do you read?*

Specific Questions About Talk Shows

1. *What do you think about the topic selected for this show? Why?*
2. *What other topics have you seen that you liked? Why?*
3. *What other topics have you seen that you didn't like? Why?*
4. *What topics would you like to see aired? Why?*
5. *How would you describe Ricki Lake as a person?*
6. *What do you like most about her?*
7. *What do you like least about her?*
8. *How would you compare her to other talk show hosts?*
9. *How would you describe the studio audience?*
10. *What do you like most about them?*
11. *What do you like least about them?*
12. *Would you like to be a member of the studio audience?*
13. *If you were a member of the studio audience, would you raise your hand to make a comment?*
14. *What did you think about the panel?*
15. *Who did you like the most on the panel? Why?*

16. *Who did you like the least? Why?*
17. *Would you like to be a guest on her show? Why?*
18. *What did you think about the guest speaker (psychologist)?*
19. *What did you like best about the guest speaker?*
20. *What did you like least about the guest speaker?*
21. *What do you like most about the Ricki Lake Show? Why?*
22. *What do you like least about the Ricki Lake Show? Why?*
23. *Why do you think people are attracted to her show?*

Method of Analysis

The analysis began by transcribing the ten, two-hour tapes in full. I then organized viewers' responses into the following three categories: a) why they watch television talk shows or why they think other people watch television talk shows; b) the elements of the genre; i.e. host, topics, studio audience, expert, and guests; and c) their overall perceptions of talk shows. Finally, I looked for common themes in each of these three categories. I also took factors of respondents' cultural background, socio-economic status, gender, and age into consideration when analyzing the data.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Youth Culture and the Female Viewer: Teen Girls' Responses to Daytime Television Talk Shows

Forum media has catered itself to our culture's need for open debate and participation. It is a way for media to address the complex, chaotic nature of the postmodern experience and liberate itself from the obligation of providing simple answers or confirmations of already-held beliefs. It opens our mainstream and alternative media to viruses of all kinds and permits natural self-regulatory mechanisms to operate relatively unfettered by the control of any select group. Forum media also calls upon the intelligence of its viewers and participants. To enjoy a courtroom drama, a computer debate, or even a rowdy battle on "Geraldo," the audience must evaluate the arguments in relationship to its own developing awareness about a particular issue. Forum media, however sensationalized or tabloid it may get, depends upon the interpretive and evaluative skills of its audience, even if it does not demand knowledge of facts or history. (Rushkoff, 1996, p. 65)

This chapter explores viewers' responses to how young women are understanding the genre of television talk shows. The first of the chapter's three sections examines why the respondents think people are attracted to the genre. The second section focuses on their responses to the structure and style of the talk show genre (i.e., host, guests, studio audience, expert speakers, topics, and visual style). The final section discusses the ways in which the respondents perceive talk shows in general. In each section, a general introduction precedes quotations which are selected from the interviews, and which are accompanied by a brief commentary; each section ends with a summary of the key points found. The analysis of this study takes into account viewer diversity--their cultural backgrounds, age, socio-economic status, and educational level. In addition, respondents' awareness of media production (i.e., media literacy) is also considered.

Why Teens Watch Talk TV

This section explores viewers' explanations for why they think people are attracted to the genre.

Viewers' Perceptions as to Why People Watch Talk Shows

Lulu thinks people might watch television talk shows in order to forget about their own problems:

Lulu: Well... it's an escape, they can see problems that are most likely worse than theirs so they don't have to worry about their own problems. I think people watch TV as an escape personally, so... it's a good... it holds your attention and you can make judgments without repercussions.

For Lulu, watching television talk shows is a way to escape from one's own problems by focusing on other people's problems. For the most part, she thinks that the problems experienced by the guests are far more serious than the problems experienced by the average person. This perception can perhaps be explained by the fact that Lulu comes from an upper middle class background, placing some of the problems being discussed on these talk shows out of her realm of experience. When she says "you can make judgments without repercussions," she might be implying that home viewers have the advantage of analyzing situations from a distance, and forming opinions without having to take responsibility for them. This is a similar theme to that found by Buckingham who found that young children enjoyed watching a popular British soap opera, *EastEnders*, because it provided a "safe" way to acknowledge things which are normally forbidden to talk about, and because they were able to look without being seen--television also allows viewers to pass comment without fear of reprisals (Buckingham, 1987, p. 164).

Peni and Edie think people watch talk shows because it gives home viewers an opportunity to learn about new things and gain perspective on their own lives as a result:

Peni: Because they want to listen to other people's opinions and stuff... and then like their life and that sort of thing and what happened to them and why they are like that sort of people, and why they're losing weight and why they want to change...

Edie: To see other people's problems and to kind of I don't know... it's probably different for a lot of people, but for me it's like, if it's an interesting topic, like um, something that I think is really important then I guess I want to watch it. I don't know just to get those feelings going, like sometimes you just want to watch it because you know your opinion and you just want to see everyone else's... it kind of helps you make your opinion more clear to yourself or something... and sometimes you can totally get involved with your emotions and you can get so angry and or like so... or you can change your opinion sometimes too.

For Peni and Edie, watching television talk shows provides viewers with the opportunity to learn about other people's experiences and to analyze the situations being discussed. This process helps viewers understand complex problems and gain new and clearer perspectives for themselves:

Emma says that people watch talk shows to judge people:

Emma: To judge people.

Emma probably does not mean to sound as judgmental or harsh as her statement appears. What she most likely means to say is that home viewers are privileged in the sense that they can watch other people's problems from a distance and form their own opinions.

Sofi seems to agree with Emma's point of view in that she also thinks people watch talk shows to judge people or laugh at them. However, for Sofi, knowing that other people are in a worse position than herself is a comforting thought:

Sofi: I like talk shows cause I like to laugh at a bunch of exhibitionists who look stupid in front of everyone. It's kind of fun to laugh at them and degrade them cause I feel better than them when I watch them... [laughter in the room] I don't know, the Ricki Lake Show has some pretty interesting themes it's one of the better talk shows but I don't like talk shows... but Ricki Lake is probably one of my favourite talk shows – but I don't like talk shows...

Mika thinks people watch talk shows to form perspectives on their own lives. By watching other people address troublesome matters, people can sort out what they might do in a similar situation:

Mika: I think it's like not their life so people can just comment about it and "bla, bla, bla and you know what I would do if I were in their shoes..." I don't know exactly... and like yeah, you can say oh my life is way better or way worse or something...

Nina, who watches talk shows on a regular basis, believes that people watch talk shows because there is nothing else to watch on TV:

Nina: I don't know I think most people watch them cause there's nothing else to watch on TV.

For Nina, watching television is probably a time for relaxation and talk shows happen to be on during her time of rest. She probably prefers talk shows to other afternoon programmes which is why she watches them regularly. Also, because of the diverse nature of these audience discussion programmes, there are probably some topics that she does enjoy watching, and she just tolerates the others.

Sara on the other hand, who also watches talk shows regularly, knows why she watches them:

Sara: Cause they're funny and they're interesting.

Sara watches talk shows because she finds them entertaining. However, Sara is selective in the shows she chooses to watch. For example, Sara only likes topics that have to do with makeovers or have guest celebrities. She does not like topics concerning serious issues. Therefore, although she watches talk shows on a regular basis, she is a selective viewer of the genre.

Niki watches talk shows because she finds them amusing, but in actuality, she doesn't really like the genre:

Niki: I don't like them, but I enjoy them. They're really stupid and pointless and I wouldn't pay money to see them, but they're on and you can laugh at them and things.

Based on my discussion of talk shows with Niki, for her the genre is indicative of exploitation, which explains why she doesn't like them. However, she probably is able to laugh at them from time to time because some of the topics are so outrageous it is hard to imagine they can be true.

Mary likes watching talk shows because they don't involve much concentration, and because they are a window into people whose lives are much different than her own:

Mary: Well, I think they're easy to watch... they're not like a soap opera or sit-com where you have to be following it. Most of the time they're going to be different and they're going to be about people whose lives are somewhat different and/or people whose lives are horrible or really pretty people so it's sort of like watching stars or something or middle class but their lives are a little bit more interesting so it makes it a bit more relateable.

For Mary, the diversity of the topics and the lifestyles of the guests who appear on these audience discussion programmes are what attracts her to the genre. She finds it interesting to learn about people whose lives and experiences are very different from her own middle class upbringing. Furthermore, Mary finds talk shows easy to watch because of the way they are structured. In other words, with the use of repetition, the audience is always reminded of the topic being discussed and what was said, which alleviates mental activity for the viewer.

Karen, who is also a regular viewer of talk shows, says she watches them because of the time of day the shows are broadcast:

Karen: Well it [Ricki Lake] used to be on 1:00 AM and I'm always up then and I've never fallen asleep during it so I used to watch it all the time, but now it's not on at that time anymore so I haven't seen it in around a week...

Although Karen seems to enjoy watching talk shows, she doesn't have much time to watch television because of her full time job and busy schedule. Therefore, the time of day that talk shows are broadcast determines whether she watches them or not.

Wendy and Tracy watch talk shows for the topics. In other words, if they find a topic interesting they will watch it, but if a topic does not interest them they probably will not continue watching the show:

Wendy: [I watch talk shows] if they're good topics.

Tracy: I think [people watch talk shows for the same reasons as me], it's the same as with me, like it depends on the different topics which will attract them. Like some might like the ones like my husband is cheating on me. And others might like the ones that I like.

Wendy and Tracy's responses to watching talk shows for their topics is a typical response encountered in this study. Many of the participants said they would often surf the networks for talk shows in search of an interesting topic.

Furthermore, Tracy is correct in noting that people have different preferences when it comes to choosing a topic. Because viewers are active participants it follows that different topics will appeal to different viewers.

Cathy, Linda and Emily watch talk shows for the topics as well:

Cathy: Well I just started watching this show called "in person" and it's a more serious one about floods or something, and I don't know, I just like to watch the more serious types. Like tragedies and floods and more serious ones and stuff like that, I just don't really like... like once in awhile I like watching makeovers or stuff like that but I'm not really that interested.

Linda: Like he [Jerry Springer] gives you something to think about sometimes... like if you're going to a sperm bank or something.

Emily: The same as they said, serious issues.

The responses of these participants indicate they are active viewers. They can recognize the diversity of topics presented on talk shows, and they are able to articulate which ones appeal to them. While all three of these participants prefer serious issues, Cathy likes to watch tragedies and even makeovers from time to time, and Linda likes controversial topics.

Anna thinks that people are attracted to talk shows because they are fun and a relief from boredom:

Anna: [laugh] For me when I get bored... "aahhh let's see when Ricki's on..." [laugh] um, the attraction of talk shows... I don't know... It's just like watching your favourite cartoon... like why do you like it? Cause it's fun.

For Anna talk shows are something she watches only when she is bored. Although, talk shows may not be her favourite genre, she still finds them entertaining.

Summary

Respondents' perceptions as to why people watch television talk shows include:

1. *Viewers like to judge people who appear on the shows*
2. *The topics discussed help viewers' gain perspective on their own life*
3. *Viewers can escape from reality when they watch talk TV*
4. *Viewers select episodes they watch based on the topics*
5. *Viewers watch talk TV if it fits into their busy schedules*

Some of the participants stated that the reasons people watch talk shows are to judge other people, and/or gain perspective on their own lives by watching other people cope with difficult situations. Although the participants use the word "judging," I do not think the participants are in fact passing judgment. It seems as though they are analyzing and reflecting on the situations rather than judging them, because, based on our discussions of talk shows, many of the viewers seemed to be empathetic towards the guests.

Escapism is another reason why some of these viewers think people indulge in talk shows. For some of these participants, talk shows create an environment for viewers to escape from their own personal problems by becoming engrossed in other people's problems. Because these participants come from predominantly middle and upper class backgrounds, their own realities are quite different from the lives of the people who appear on these programmes. Therefore, it is understandable why they might think home viewers can forget about their own problems by watching "extreme" situations.

The time of day talk shows are broadcast is another reason why some participants think people watch these programmes. Although some respondents agree that they enjoy talk shows, which is why they watch them, they also say that they would not watch them if the time of the broadcast was inconvenient. In

other words, for these viewers, audience discussion programmes need to fit into their own busy schedules if they are to be watched ñ these viewers will not allot time for them. Nor apparently, will they tape them for viewing. This response is not uncommon, according to Barwise and Ehrenberg: "A major influence on people's viewing is their availability to view at a given time" (Barwise and Ehrenberg, 1988, p. 16).

Some of the respondents thought people watched talk shows for the topics. These respondents recognized the fact that there many different of topics ranging from serious to outrageous ones, and that different topics appeal to different viewers. According to Livingstone's study "Watching Talk: gender and engagement in viewing audience discussion programmes," topics are one of the motivating factors for viewer participation (Livingstone, 1994, p. 432).

Based on the many interpretations held by the participants' for why people watch daytime television talk shows, it seems apparent that these participants are active media viewers. Although it is difficult to comment on how age, gender, and/or cultural background may have influenced their responses, socio-economic status seems to be a strong influence. Some of the participants from a middle to upper-middle class environment perceived the problems experienced by the guests to be more severe than what they thought the average viewers' problems might be. It can be inferred, therefore, that for these participants, reality is class-based and is quite different than that of the guests who are often from a lower socio-economic status.

Deconstructing the Genre of Talk

This section explores viewers' perceptions of the components of talk shows. Daytime television talk shows are defined by a set of distinct characteristics, i.e., host, guests, studio audience, experts, topics, and visual style. While each component works alongside one another to create a whole, each component can

also be analyzed separately. Therefore, this section investigates how viewers are understanding the individual components of the genre.

Host

This section explores viewers' perceptions of Ricki Lake as a host. Typically talk show hosts are television personalities who roam the aisles holding a microphone, and who select members of the studio audience to contribute to the public forum. Whether they take on the role of saints, therapists, or political heroes, the role of the host is "highly salient to the viewers and attracts many comments which reveal the viewers' broader critical response to the genre" (Livingstone, 1994, p. 76).

Viewers' Perceptions of Ricki Lake as Host

Emma and Niki do not speak very highly of Ricki Lake as a person. They refer to her as being insincere and only interested in her career for monetary reasons:

Emma: I think she is really fake and she looks so concerned but I don't think she is.

Niki: She's in it for the money [laugh]...She doesn't care what she's doing, she just doesn't care.. You can get two people together and let them get mad at each other... she just doesn't care... She's an actress...

Emma and Niki seem disappointed with Ricki Lake as a person. When they refer to her as being fake and insincere, it implies that she is obligated to be concerned and caring. Perhaps, Emma and Niki think talk show hosts have a moral responsibility to help the guests they invite on their shows, which would explain their attitude toward her.

Sofi, on the other hand, comments on Ricki Lake's deftness in her role as host by listing her redeeming qualities and attributes:

Sofi: I like the way she can act young. She has the spirit of a child. As a person she seems friendly like I'd like to meet her and see her but I think she's kind of superficial. Like [when she says]: "Oh I understand, don't worry..." But she seems friendly and you really need those qualities to be a talk show host and I really respect her for that and she's a good speaker so I respect that about her too... she seems to be able to think things through and say things fast... so she seems kind of intelligent but superficial too... but those are kind of qualities you need to be a talk show host I think... and you need to be confident and she has that too and she's kind of ego-centric.

Sofi's analysis of the skills required to be a good talk show host are very insightful and perceptive, in that she is able to see past the negative attributes of Ricki's "superficial" and "egocentric" qualities, and turn them around to address her hosting skills. Her response infers that she has some understanding of the media industry – she recognizes the importance of Ricki's role as host: To be a communicator and mediator between guests and studio audience, to attract audiences, and to differentiate the Ricki Lake Show from other talk shows.

Mary also acknowledges Ricki's hosting skills. She comments on Ricki's talent to play her guests against one another to arouse her audience. However, Mary finds that Ricki tries too hard to be "cool":

Mary: She's very good at playing devil's advocate, I think, and which is why she might be so popular. She's very good at getting the audience to turn against one person and switch back and forth between people. ... Well the way she talks and everything she seems that's she's trying very hard to be cool, the way she thinks teenagers would be acting, I think that she tries to be like that sometimes, she comes across as trying to fit in with what she sees that youth would be doing and stuff, the way she, the phrases that she uses and stuff, um, so I think she comes across as kind of... I don't know how to put it almost, it seems kind of sad almost, I think that's why I don't really like watching her anymore, um she seems, well I guess she's pretty good at her job getting people to talk and stuff.

Mary is not alone in her perception that Ricki Lake is trying too hard. While Mary thinks she is trying “too hard to be cool,” other participants, like Mika and Lulu, are critical of Ricki for using colloquialism:

Mika: No not really, [I don't think she's a good host], ...there's just certain things that [she says which] are really dumb. ...Like “go girl” and stuff like that and like Ricki Lake always says that and it sounds really dumb [She means that this is a black person's expression and Ricki is white]. Yeah. And the way she was crying for people she hardly knew and I don't know... it seems sort of weird.

Lulu, Nina and Edie think Ricki is a good host and is genuinely trying to help her guests:

Lulu: Well, she's you know a good host in that she always has something to say and she can fill air-time and she does seem to generally want to help her guests opposed to just trying to get them to argue.

Nina: Oh yeah! I think she's a really good host. She's really outgoing and she has a language of everybody, she understands, and she's usually not very judgmental and she hears both sides of a story before she makes her judgment.

Edie: um... I don't know she's OK I guess, she's kind of... I think she's pretty good... I find her too happy, she's always, like she's always too, like she doesn't really show her own emotions except for making her jokes and stuff and like it's not, it's kind of, like I think it's good cause a talk show host should be a neutral person anyway. She seems like, she understands a lot [the guests], I think, and she might be able to help them and she must have taken some kind of counseling skills and all that to deal with it and stuff.

All three participants see Ricki Lake as a genuine person who cares about her guests and wants to help them resolve their problems. It could be implied that they perceive her role as host as congruous with her role as therapist. They

describe her as being non-judgmental, neutral and understanding, and skilled in counseling. According to Shattuc's research on daytime television talk shows, it is not uncommon for talk show hosts to take on the role of therapist. ñ the newer generation of talk shows use fewer professional therapists and rely on the hosts to take on the responsibility of spewing out "common sense advice."

Anna, Peni and Sara view Ricki Lake as a nice person who generally cares about people:

Anna: I think she's a nice person. You know she's a nice person, but I don't admire her or anything. She's just like the others.

Peni: She's funny, um, she's really nice and she's a person that cares about people.

Cathy, Karen, Linda and Wendy, who together watched the episode on "Gothic Teens", refer to Ricki Lake on a personal level:

Cathy: She kinda seems a bit snobby.

Karen: Yeah, she's cute and everything, she's a good host, I like her, but her show looks a little fake... I'd rather stick to Springer.

Linda: I like her ...she knows how to have a good time.

Wendy: I like her because she's funny, you know.

Tracy's perception focuses more on Ricki's ability to act than on her role as host:

Tracy: I didn't really like her before but then I saw her in a movie, *Mrs. Winterbourne*, it's about her and she had a baby and then her family got messed up... and I didn't like her before because I thought she was just another talk show host, but I saw her in the movie and she was pretty good and I really respect her because she really made it and her talk show is really

popular and a lot of people didn't like it for awhile and now a lot of people are watching it.

Tracy's opinion of Ricki Lake changed when she learned Ricki was an acclaimed actor instead of "just another talk show host." Perhaps, Tracy never perceived talk show hosts as having any "real" abilities to act. This could be explained by the negative publicity given to talk shows from the media. In other words, if talk shows are referred to as "tabloid" and "trash," then, perhaps for Tracy, the host might fall under a similar category. But after seeing Ricki Lake's performance in *Mrs. Winterbourne*, she might have felt compelled to reevaluate Ricki's talent.

Summary

The participants interpreted Ricki Lake's role as host in many ways. Here are some the ways in which they characterized her:

1. *Viewers find Ricki fake and insincere*
2. *Viewers think Ricki has good hosting skills*
3. *Viewers think of Ricki as a caring person*
4. *Viewers perceive Ricki as a therapist-type person*
5. *Viewers perceive Ricki as a celebrity*
6. *Viewers think Ricki tries too hard to be someone who she is not*

While some of the viewers found Ricki Lake to be fake and insincere, other participants found her to be caring. Emma and Niki thought Ricki didn't care about her guests and that she was only interested in the monetary rewards. But Lulu, Anna, Sara, Peni, Nina and Edie saw Ricki as being a genuinely nice person, who was caring and empathetic towards her guests. In fact, some of these participants even inferred that Ricki had therapist-like qualities. Although there is no evidence of age, cultural background, or socio-economic status influencing their responses, it could be argued that the programmes watched may have influenced their

responses. For example, Emma and Niki, who watched the episode on "*Gothic Teens and Secret Crushes*," were more critical of Ricki than those who watched issue oriented topics addressing with more serious subject matter. Therefore, maybe viewers' perceptions of hosts are affected by the episodes they watch.

Sofi and Mary thought Ricki demonstrated good hosting skills for reasons of being confident, well spoken, and knowing how to interact with her guests to capture audiences. Based on their responses, it seems that these viewers have some understanding of media production in that they were able to recognize the attributes a good host must possess in the television talk show industry.

Mika and Mary attack Ricki for "trying too hard" to be someone she is not. Mika, for example, thinks Ricki tries to be like her African-American guests in that she borrows some of their expressions like "Go Girl." While some of the participants referred to Ricki Lake as being youthful, Mary on the other hand, thought Ricki tries to be like a teenager; she thinks Ricki should just accept the fact that she is a grown woman.

Tracy refers to Ricki as an actor more than a host or person. Ever since she saw Ricki's performance in *Mrs. Winterbourne*, she has found a new respect for the host. Tracy might not have been impressed by Ricki's career before, because she did not think highly of talk show hosts. However, she changed her opinion of Ricki once she saw her performance in a mainstream Hollywood movie.

In short, I maintain that these participants are active viewers of media based on their diverse interpretations about Ricki Lake's role as host. While some of the participants seemed to demonstrate an understanding of media production, by describing some of the qualities needed for being a good host, it is not obvious how factors of age, educational level, cultural background, and/or socio-economic status, influenced their responses

Topics

Daytime television talk shows are comprised of many different of topics. They can range from highly political and controversial issues like "*I Disapprove of Your Inter-Racial Relationship*" to fun and outrageous topics like "*Gothic Teens and Secret Crushes*" (both shown on Ricki Lake in 1997). While the older generation of daytime television talk shows followed a particular pattern, focusing on "a social, political or personal concern, often stimulated by an event in the news" (Livingstone, 1994, p. 39), Shattuc thinks the newer generation of talk shows has lost its connection with the public sphere. She argues that: "Topics moved from personal issues connected to a social injustice to interpersonal conflicts that emphasized the visceral nature of confrontation, emotion, and sexual titillation" (Shattuc, 1997, pp. 137-138). She says:

Gone are the topics that were tied directly to explicit public-sphere debates, such as "Press Actions on Whitewater" with reporters (Donahue, March 16, 1994) and "Strip Searching in Schools," with school administrators (Sally, March 13, 1994). Nor are personal topics generalized into social issues, such as "When Mothers Sell Babies for Drugs" (Geraldo, March 17, 1994), "Custody-Battles with Your in-laws" (Sally, April 22, 1994) and "Domestic Violence" (Donahue, February 1, 1994); rather, they are presented as interpersonal issues in English that is colloquial or imperfect to signify that the discussion is not formal but like conversation among friends. Furthermore, topics are presented as directives, which implies a certain amount of humorous hyperbole, but, more important, there is a level of aggression in their urgency that signals potential conflict. (Shattuc, 1997, p. 156).

While Shattuc argues that the newer generation of talk shows are not as committed to social and political concerns because they are more confrontational and rely on humour, theatrics and sexual titillation to get stories across, I tend to disagree. The difference between the two generations is that the newer generation of talk shows is addressing a younger audience who have different values and perspectives than the more traditional talk shows who tend to appeal to older viewers. For example, the younger generation is more interested in

issues that directly affect them or other people their own age, such as dating, teen pregnancies, gangs and so forth. Issues of domestic violence, or cheating partners, for example, are not of interest to these viewers. Furthermore, while homosexuality is no longer a threatening issue for this younger generation, it is still somewhat of a taboo issue on some of the traditional talk shows like Oprah. Therefore, This section explores viewers' perceptions of topics found on the newer generation of talk shows, topics that have been incorporated to appeal to a younger audience.

Viewers' Perceptions of Topics

Lulu, who is not a regular viewer of talk shows, seemed to enjoy the episode *"I Want My Baby Back"*:

Lulu: Well makeovers I mean they're fine if they're short but if you like talk for a long time about how they weren't happy with their old look and then you talk for 15 minutes about how they felt and then they come out... it's kind of boring... just to watch that... if it's just a short segment then it's fun... and you go "WOW" and you think of ideas of how you could change. But this did hold my interest. I really did feel like I was trying to decide with what little information I got, what would be best for the child.

Lulu is critical of makeover shows because she often finds them boring. She seemed to enjoy the episode we watched, which did not have a makeover segment, because it allowed her to participate in the discussion and partake in the decision making process.

Tracy prefers the more outrageous shows to the serious ones: She was entranced by the show she watched which was *"I'm All That and More..."*

Tracy: This is the kind that I like. I don't like the makeover ones, when they take weird people who dress differently and they make them over to look good. But they don't look good. But I don't like the ones about *"My Man is*

Cheating.” I liked this one. I like men in drag! I don’t like the ones where people are arguing, it’s really boring. I like the really outrageous ones.

Although Tracy enjoyed the episode we watched because it was a fun and outrageous topic, she also talked about the topics that she didn’t like such as “makeovers”, and confrontation/arguments. What Lulu doesn’t like about makeover episodes is that they usually take “ordinary” people and make them over to look mainstream. “Good” for Tracy is the same as mainstream. Being an alternative teenager, Tracy, enjoys experimenting with clothes and trying on different styles. In the same way she is resistant to many mainstream values and mannerisms, she is resistant to makeover shows makeovers represent the very values she is rebelling against. It was not unusual for participants like Tracy to confess and compare their own experiences to what they watched on a talk show.

Although Lulu and Tracy did not like makeover episodes, they were popular among a number of participants:

Peni: I like makeovers and when they’re younger and geeks but now they aren’t... stuff like that... not like serious topics.

Sara: I only like shows that are makeovers.

Wendy: No! I like makeovers and that’s about it.

One of the reasons why these participants might like makeovers is because they are generally fun and in good humour. Peni and Sara for example only seem to like makeover shows or episodes that have celebrities – which are generally lighter topics than issue oriented topics.

Nina, who is a regular viewer of television talk shows prefers the fun and outrageous topics like makeovers, fashion shows, secret crushes and dating games. She says she usually changes the channel if a serious topic is on:

Nina: Yeah, like I like really fun topics like usually if it's a really serious topic I'll change the channel. I like the fun ones like makeovers or fashion shows or surprise ones or ones with celebrities in them. What I like about Ricki Lake is she does a lot of teen stuff a lot of topics that deals with teens. I like the ones about terrible teens.

Although Nina prefers lighter topics, she also seems to like serious episodes if they address teen issues – which is why she says she likes topics about “Terrible Teens.” One of the strategies used by the producers of the Ricki Lake Show to attract a younger audience was in choosing topics dealing with teen issues. They thought teens would be more interested in issues that are about people their own age.

Karen, for example likes topics dealing with teen issues:

Karen: [I like] things that relate to teen issues actually, like teen pregnancies and boyfriends cheating on girlfriends and girlfriends cheating on boyfriends and makeovers, I like the makeovers. Serious topics, but things like this, it's OK to watch and I was able to sit through this [the episode we just watched on Gothic Teens], because it was fun and they had the make-over and the dating game... but other than that I'm not too interested in this issue. I couldn't really care less what other people look like. I like the more serious issues.

Anna also likes serious topics dealing with teen issues:

Anna: I like topics about when they're talking about AIDS's or like reality based... like the important subjects not topics like oh you have a crush... [laugh] I like it when they base it on real events cause then it kind of makes you face reality like sometimes there are fourteen year olds like people my age who have AIDS's or who are pregnant and that's like, “Oh, you know, but it's true...”

One of the reasons why Anna says she likes teen issues that cover topics about AIDS or teen pregnancies, for example, is because it forces young people to think about the consequences of being promiscuous without using condoms. In other words she seems to imply that talk shows can be educational in that they encourage teens to act responsibly.

Mika, also seems to infer that talk shows can be educational:

Mika: I think it's probably good to have shows [e.g., Drinking and Driving] like that so that people sort of realize it and learn about it but sometimes it's not very well done, I don't know. [But I don't like...] like my boyfriend's sister's brother slept with me [nervous laugh]... I don't really like watching talk shows. Oh Yeah! I like makeovers, I like those ones. They're fun. I guess I don't normally like makeovers because they're really dumb like they get people who are wearing the ugliest clothes and like really cheap gross haircuts and... but I like them, best, oh well.

Although Mika finds the outrageous topics to be fun on occasion, she prefers serious topics that deal with teen issues.

Emma, Cathy, and Emily also prefer serious topics, but they don't specify that they have to be about teen problems:

Emma: I like the ones that can make you cry like the ones that can make you feel something.

Cathy: I like serious issues.

Emily: The same as they said, serious issues.

Mary, who also prefers serious topics, does not like topics that focus upon baby issues:

Mary: I don't ever watch when Ricki Lake has her baby shows on where she's bringing other mothers on or stuff or when she's bringing quintuplets on and

stuff and those ones. Ever since she had her kid. She had her baby shower shows... and she had people come on and give her presents for her baby... and it doesn't seem all that interesting. And a lot of shows where she's taking care of children and stuff... and I guess shows where they're talking about the dangers of having a kid and those sort of shows, I guess maybe cause I don't have a kid they don't seem so relateable. But then I guess it's not so relateable when I see someone dressed up like a hooker... [laugh] I don't know... [laugh] but it's a different kind of thing...

Baby shows are clearly not a part of Mary's reality. She is young woman who just finished high school and is on her way to university. For Mary, it is far more interesting to indulge in topics about teen prostitutes than in watching episodes of Ricki Lake gawking over her new baby. Perhaps Mary prefers watching topics about teen prostitutes because it is more interesting for her to watch people whose lives are very different than her own.

Eddie also likes serious topics dealing with teen issues:

Eddie: Um, I like the parents and kids ones and I really hate those like the ones those match-making ones. I really hate those ones.

Sara will only watch episodes that have topics which interest her:

Sara: It depends when there's something good on I'll watch it. But I always check if it has a good topic on and if does then I'll watch it. And it's on the same time as Rosie O'Donnell.

For Sara, her preferences in topics are "makeovers" (which she mentions on other occasions) and celebrities. Perhaps because she is only 13 years old, and has had a sheltered upbringing (she is not allowed to date until she is 18 years old), she has trouble relating to issues about terrible teens or dysfunctional relationships. This would explain why she might prefer makeover episodes and the *Rosie O'Donnell Show*, who for the most part interviews famous actors.

Niki's overview of a topic she liked on the Maury Povich show implies that she also prefers serious topics:

Niki: I like the one I was watching this morning... and this guy... it was Maury Povich... he was like bringing back guests who were really hurt or whatever and there was this guy who was in a car accident and he had a twin brother and they showed like his whole life video and thing and there were pictures of him like going through rehab and then finally he was running this race and he got injured... like I don't know, brain damaged or something and he got out of his wheelchair and walked across the finish line... it was like... so nice...

Although Niki seems to prefer serious topics, she likes the ones that have happy endings, and that are not confrontational or exploitative. From our discussions, Niki appears to be critical of talk shows for their exploitative nature. This would explain why she likes shows that present heroes rather than victims.

Sofi likes themes about the occult:

Sofi: I like it like the X-Files when they talk about the occult, but I like really well done themes with really good special effects when they're not really cheesy... like I find that whole "you're fierce, baby, and I want you" so cheesy and I don't like cheesy... you know but I like the occult and kind of mystery...

Sofi, seems to prefer programmes that are well packaged. She compares high budget programmes like the *X-Files* to low budget productions like talk shows. She makes comparisons based on their special effects and use of visual graphics. However, when she compares the special effects on the *X-Files* to the graphics on the *Ricki Lake Show*, it is hard to make sense of her analysis because the two genres are so different.

Linda likes watching the *Jerry Springer Show* which implies she likes outrageous topics:

Linda: I like Jerry Springer a lot! He always has such good topics. Oh yeah, like the best ones... like the reunions....

Jerry Springer is probably the most outrageous and confrontational talk show host to date. It is noteworthy that while most of the Torontonians interviewed raved about Springer, the Vancouverites seemed indifferent.

Summary

The viewers seemed to have definite preferences in their choices of topics. In fact, based on their responses, it could be argued that the topic is what determines whether a viewer will keep watching or not. In other words, if a topic is interesting to the viewer, he or she will continue watching the episode; but if the topic is not interesting the viewer will search for something else to watch. Furthermore, different topics appeal to different viewers: While some viewers prefer serious topics, other viewers prefer outrageous ones. Some of the topics that were mentioned are:

1. *Issue oriented topics*
2. *Outrageous topics*
3. *Teen issues*
4. *Makeovers*
5. *Cheating on partners*

While twelve of the participants said they preferred serious issues, (Lulu, Karen, Emma, Cathy, Emily, Mika, Mary, Niki, Edie, Sofi), the other five preferred outrageous topics, (Tracy, Nina, Linda, Peni, Sara, Wendy). Serious issues are topics about teen pregnancies, promiscuity, drunk driving, and so forth. One of the reasons some of the participants like serious issues is because they can participate in the discussions and be a part of a decision making process. For other viewers the appeal might be to watch people whose lives are very different than their own. Of the viewers who preferred serious topics, none of them

seemed to like confrontational ones dealing with “Cheating Partners.” Outrageous topics address themes like teen crushes, makeovers, “I’m all that and more...” – where eccentric men and women flaunt their bodies, and so forth. Out of all the outrageous topics, makeovers seemed to be the most popular.

Topics dealing with teen issues were well received by many of the participants. It seems as if some of the viewers liked teen issues because they found them educational and informative. Others seemed to like watching them because they could identify with people their own age and they found it interesting to watch lifestyles that were very different than their own.

Based on the findings it is difficult to know whether cultural background and/or socio-economic status influenced their responses. However, there does seem to be a correlation between age and topics ñ overall, most of the participants said they liked watching topics concerning teen issues.

Guests

Guests are the feature presentation of most talk shows. They provide the stories, the dialogue, and the entertainment. Often they are invited by producers to talk about their personal tragedies, tell stories of their convicted criminal activities, confess their most intimate love secrets, or expose a co-worker, neighbour, relative or friend for wrong doing. More often than not, guests are subject to confrontation, surprises and/or humiliation by either someone they know or members of the studio audience. In short, talk shows thrive on the sensationalism of the personal experiences of “ordinary” people for the purpose of entertainment. This section explores viewers’ perceptions of the guests who appear on talk shows.

Viewer's Perceptions of Guests

Why people chose to disclose some of their most intimate and personal secrets on national television was incomprehensible to many of the participants. Nina, for example, is perturbed as to why people go on talk shows. Watching an episode on inter-racial couples and seeing how these couples are coping with friends and/or family members who are not supportive, Nina is trying to understand why people are willing to publicly humiliate themselves on national television:

Nina: These ones here [she's referring to the topic and the guests], I think that some of the people go on to just air their dirty laundry. And like some of these people I think can deal with these things on their own without having to go on television.

For Nina, it seems as if she really believes these people have serious problems and turn to talk shows for therapy sessions. However, what is troubling to her is that they have to resort to national television to get support.

Eddie, who watched an episode on "Kids who are out of control" also seems troubled by the fact that people have to resort to talk shows to seek help:

Eddie: I don't know... I think the problem is... it seems like the problem started way, way before like as she said it was the last resort going on the show... but I don't see why they go on the show for help because I don't think it helps that much, like I don't know, like they should try and get some therapy or something like... but that's pretty extreme... but like she seems to be pretty patient....

Lulu, who is watching the episode about family members who have taken custody of a child while the mother is recovering from some serious crises, is also troubled by why people would want to disclose their problems on national television:

Lulu: As far as I can tell they're pretty similar. They all have the sort of big argument complicated issues that can't be easy to solve – like "OK this is the answer, end of show!" [Laughs] But I don't know why anyone would want to go on that sort of show, you know, I don't think it's going to resolve the issue, I think it's just going to cause more tension, I wonder how many of them actually get resolved like that or if it's more of a problem.

Anna also questions why people go on talk shows, but for her it takes on a whole different meaning:

Anna: He's dazed. You see the problem with this is that the people feel obliged to say yes 'cause if they say no then everyone's going to think, oh my god I'm such a jerk, they're going to think, I came on national TV and I said no... people are going to think that... at least I would... What if you get on and you find your secret crush hates you... oh... [laugh] on national television! Ohhhh bad situation.

Anna, who is watching an episode where guests are faced with meeting their secret admirers, is in awe with the concept of being rejected on national television. Although she never says it, it is implied that she is imagining herself being publicly humiliated by her peers.

While Anna is on edge as she is watching the show, she maintains a good sense of humour about it. But Emma, on the other hand, who is also watching an episode on secret crushes, is angry with the thought of people "spilling their guts out" on national television:

Emma: But I don't think you should make someone make a choice of getting into a relationship with someone on national television and that's partly why I don't like talk shows cause they make you spill your guts and pour your heart out in front of 18 million people.

One of the reasons why Emma doesn't like talk shows is because they seem to force people into talking about things and doing things they might not want to do.

Karen, who is watching the episode on "Gothic Youth and Teen Crushes," wonders what it must be like to be confronted with a secret admirer on national television:

Karen: I wonder if she's in shock being on the show in front of all these people. ...it sounds like a script... [referring to her secret love confessing how much he loves her through poetry].

Karen, Sofi, Emma and Anna have all imagined what it must be like to be humiliated in public on national television. This is probably a natural reaction, in that most people fear being publicly humiliated. Therefore, the programme is most likely bringing out these fears.

Sofi doesn't like the way guests are treated on talk shows:

Sofi: Like can you imagine someone being the one who did a hit and run while drunk and then coming on national television... You know how people would just put them down... and you can imagine just walking out on the stage and being booed and it's like horrible... and like what do they know of me they don't know the other half of me....

Sofi is probably reflecting back to the widely publicized incident of a teenage boy who was responsible for the death of his friends because he was driving while intoxicated. As punishment, the parents of the youths who had died, decided to drop charges on the condition that the soul survivor would tell his story to other teenagers. Sofi, who is a Toronto resident, may have heard him speak because he visited many high schools in the Toronto vicinity.

Mary thinks a formula is used by the producers when selecting their guests:

Mary: I think they're good at mixing people on the show. They seem to get well...she seems to get at least one black, one black sort of people, one white, one old and one young. She always has very formula type guests.

Mary is thinking about the production end of the media. Her observation about a formula being used to select guests suggests that she has some understanding of the media industry.

Mika, Niki, Tracy and Cathy are all questioning the authenticity of the guests who appear on the show: Interestingly, these participants were watching very different episodes. Mika, for example, was watching an episode on "*Reunions*", Niki and Cathy were watching the episode on "*Gothic Teens and Secret Crushes*", and Tracy was watching an episode on "*I'm All That and More....*"

Mika: Yeah! [laugh] I don't know... and also I heard that Ricki Lake doesn't have real guests they're all like actors they get on and I like I heard that some talk shows do that, I don't know... sometimes it seems staged.

Niki: And like that woman who walked on she like didn't' even look at the guy she was like told to come out and scream – she like walked in and "aahhh!!!" and then ran away...

Tracy: I sometimes wonder if these shows are staged and if they get actors to play the parts.

Cathy: She [Ricki Lake] even admitted it at one time, [that her guests were acting] it was when she was on Rosie O'Donnell's show, she said she gave, like there was this girl who was going to get married and she offered to pay for like everything and her reaction wasn't good enough so they asked her to repeat it and the next day she had to repeat it.

While the participants are correct in questioning the authenticity of guests, it is difficult to know if this represents their own ideas. How for example, had they come to believe that talk shows use actors as guests? Nevertheless, the participants are actively watching, trying to distinguish between who the authentic

guests are and who are the actors. In 1995, talk shows were notorious for using actors regularly. If a show required a certain kind of guest, the producers would do whatever they could to ensure a good story (Shattuc, 1997, p. 161). Garth Ancier, justifies his position of using “imitation” guests, arguing: “A younger audience implies a different ethical mix, we have had to be extremely tough on the veracity of the stories” (Grant, 1994, p. 18). Furthermore, a certain amount of theatrics is used to add to the hype of these shows and even authentic guests play into the performance (Shattuc, 1997, p. 162).

Linda is not interested in knowing if the guests are “real” people or actors. Instead she is having trouble understanding why these teens would want to dress in such outrageous outfits. She compares these gothic youths to people from mental institutions:

Linda: She [Ricki Lake] gets too freaky. Nowadays you don't want freaks [on the show], like you see them. We live around the neighbourhood and there's a lot around... Yeah. I mean if you saw the mental hospital like there's always something here everyday, I have the sanctuary just around my house... and it doesn't appeal to me I guess, I see it almost everyday.

Linda seems to blur the distinction between people who are emotionally and mentally challenged, and rebellious teens. Perhaps her statement is based on the assumption that she has limited knowledge of the mentally ill, and has difficulty in understanding why people would intentionally want to rebel against mainstream values, which is how she views these “gothic teens.”

Wendy, who also watched the episode on “*Gothic Teens and Secret Crushes*,” related what she watches on television to her own personal life:

Wendy: Oh yeah someone my dad would let me date! (She is ironically reacting to one of the gothic men who just came on stage)

Wendy's reaction is not uncommon. Many of the participants have often made comparisons between what they watched on television and their own personal experiences.

Peni and Sara, the two youngest and less verbose of the participants do not like confrontational guests:

Peni: I like the celebrities.

Sara: I don't like the ones where they fight and stuff. Yeah 'cause like they scream and stuff...

I suspect the reason why they prefer celebrity guests and non-confrontational guests is because they cannot fully identify with some of the problems that are presented, i.e., "Cheating Couples." Both Peni and Sara come from fairly conservative and strict upbringings. They had told me that they were not allowed to date until they turned 18 years old. Therefore, their limited experience in dating and relationships might explain why they are not interested in these topics.

Summary

Of all the recipients interviewed only Emily is not represented. Perhaps because she was in the group of five who were watching the episode on "Gothic Teens and Secret Crushes," she didn't venture into the discussion on guests. Of the remaining respondents, these are the themes which emerged from our discussions of guests on talk shows:

1. *Viewers' discomfort with self disclosure and public humiliation*
2. *Talk shows used as therapy sessions*
3. *Authenticity of guests versus actors*
4. *Selecting guests to create a diverse group*
5. *Comparing television reality with personal experiences*

Some of the participants had difficulty understanding why people would disclose personal information about themselves on national television. While some of them thought people appeared on television for fame, others believed that they were desperately trying to seek help.

Public humiliation was another theme that emerged from our discussions. Some of the viewers, for example, questioned how people coped with being humiliated on national television. While Anna for example wondered what it might feel like to be rejected on national television, Sofi was becoming emotional and feeling angry, imagining what it would be like to publicly confess a very difficult crime and then be attacked by unsympathetic viewers.

Many of the participants seemed to either relate with or empathize with the guests. Wendy, for example, who was watching the episode on "Gothic Teens and Secret Crushes," was imagining how her father would react if she started dating one of these "gothic" teens.

Mary is the only one who made reference to the range of guests who appear on the *Ricki Lake Show*. In her noting that a formula might be used in the selection process, she shows some awareness of the design elements of the show.

Mika, Niki, Tracy and Cathy all questioned the authenticity of the guests. This suggests that they are active viewers, trying to make sense of the episodes by testing the construction of talk shows.

Based on the responses it is difficult to determine if age, cultural background, socio-economic status play a part in influencing their responses. Age perhaps had some influence in their responses in that they would sometimes compare their own experiences or identify with the teens who were on television. Some of the viewers showed signs of media literacy by questioning the authenticity of guests, and by suggesting that a formula was being used for selection of guests.

Studio Audience

The role of the studio audience is unique to the genre of daytime television talk shows in that audience members discuss the topics at hand directly with the host and the guests. Usually, after the guests have finished their confessions, members of the studio audience are invited to either ask questions or comment on the situation. In Livingstone and Lunt's study, *Expert and Lay Participation in Television Debates: An Analysis of Audience Discussion Programmes* (Livingstone & Lunt, 1992), the television audience discussion programme is perceived as a cultural form and the studio audience member is a joint author to the text. The studio audience appears to add an exciting, dynamic, and unpredictable element to these shows.

The typical studio audience member found on the newer generation of talk shows is different from the "nice middle-class white women who populate Donahue's audience," and the "the tasteful rainbow of women" found on Oprah's show. According to Shattuc, the typical audience member found on the *Ricki Lake Show* is:

...streetwise; they must go through a metal detector upon arrival, and guns are routinely confiscated. Anonymous security guards sit in the audience, ready to spring if anyone becomes too aggressive. It is not that the show is beset by people prone to violence; it actively constructs them. (Shattuc, 1997, p. 159)

After the studio audience members are seated, they are stirred-up by the producers (which may cause aggressive behaviour). Studio audience members are encouraged to act like a Ricki Lake audience and are criticized for acting like a Donahue one. Audience members are chosen to act out situations by reading fake statements and everyone else is expected to react. They are congratulated by the producers once they have mastered the appropriate chants, responses and reactions (Shattuc, 1997, p. 160). Because the dynamics of the studio

audience and their participatory involvement in the discussions are an essential structural element of daytime television talk shows, this section explores viewers' perceptions of the role of the studio audience in the genre.

Viewers' Perception of Studio Audiences

Emma thinks the studio audience members are argumentative and opinionated:

Emma: I don't know, some of them have good points but generally I don't think she knows who she is going to pick but the people who she does pick are really opinionated... like I think people who go, go to talk and to share their opinion... `cause they seem really strong and they are always bickering with people who don't agree with them.

Mary also thinks that the studio audience members are opinionated people. She also comments on them being young and diverse:

Mary: A lot of times they seem, sometimes the comments seem half intellectual, I mean you are only going to see the people who have, you know who are a little bit louder and who have set opinions because they are the only ones who are going to get up and talk. I mean on the *Ricki Lake Show* she seems to have only a really young audience I mean her audience seems always very... they always look very young, they always look, I mean, it's a very diverse crowd too, I mean sometimes they have sort of intellectual things to say `cause a lot of times it seem like they were just put there to talk because they look like they seem to stir up the crowd and stuff.

Because Mary watches a lot of talk shows, she might be more aware of the members in the studio audience. This might explain her observation of them being young and diverse.

Mika also comments on the kinds of the people in the studio audience:

Mika: I don't know it's weird... If you look at the studio audience, it's weird it's like some of the people don't even look that would they even watch the show like sort of... also like if you look at the audience there's a lot of old people in the audience and like a lot of kids like my age and like seventeen year olds and stuff like and who like dress like they wouldn't watch the show....

For Mika, the members of the studio audience are very similar to herself. Based on her observation, she, therefore, assumes that the members do not really watch the *Ricki Lake Show* because she does not watch it often. Perhaps what Mika is trying to say, is that, the members of the studio audience are only there because they want to be on national television. This would explain why she thinks they are participating even if they do not watch the show. Some of the participants have mentioned that they thought people go on talk shows for fame.

Nina thinks that the studio audience is "the best part of the show:"

Nina: My favourite part of the show are the audience comments. I think it's the best part of the show. I don't know I think they're funny and they always get into arguments.

One of the things that Nina likes about the studio audience is that they are argumentative. However, she doesn't seem to take their comments seriously, instead, Nina seems to find their comments amusing.

Eddie has mixed feelings about the members of the studio audience participating. On the one hand she believes in freedom of speech, but she thinks they put too much pressure on the guests to perform:

Eddie: Um, I don't know. I don't know if it's really needed or not. I like the fact that there is freedom of speech, and such, and they can put forward their ideas and such... it kind of puts more pressure on them... I think the audience puts more pressure on the people who are up there, and like, and it doesn't really help to feel more exposed 'cause they put on a different.... I don't know they don't really act like themselves like it's not entirely like them... and the

audience... and it's kind of like they make up sides. It's like... I don't know... It's like the audience is neutral and then there's like other people who speak out from the audience. I think that lots of people aren't open minded to the audience and there's a lot of disagreeing and so I think they just need to keep in mind, and be open minded. Like just kind of feel other people's suggestions and all that to make it work... cause they're just like defending themselves the whole time and nothing gets said or understood or anything, so it doesn't really work.

Eddie seems to suggest that talk shows are produced to facilitate the resolution of the issues being discussed. This makes her critical of the members of the studio audience who put additional pressure on the guests. Based on our discussions, it seems as if Eddie believes more time should be allocated to the host, who has the experience to help. Eddie seems to confuse reality with television reality. In other words she seems to forget that Ricki Lake is a celebrity host and not a therapist.

Lulu is critical of the studio audience because she thinks they take sides before all sides are heard:

Lulu: Well, I don't think it's a very effective way to solve problems to bring people out there [meaning on stage on the show] and I think they've already decided who is going to win because they brought one person out and let them tell their story and when that second person came out everyone was booing. So I mean you can't solve a problem if it's already been decided.

Lulu seems to suggest that she thinks talk shows are meant to resolve problems. Therefore, when the studio audience members interject with their comments, Lulu thinks they are taking away valuable time from the trained professionals, i.e., host or therapist. Because Lulu doesn't have much respect for the "ordinary" person, this would explain why she is critical of the members the audience.

Karen likes the studio audience:

Karen: I like them, I like them.

Although Cathy never says what she thinks about the studio audience, she seems to enjoy imitating them:

Cathy: "YOU DON'T KNOW ME!!" [imitating what the young women say].

Cathy's behaviour is not uncommon. The study's participants would often mimic what they saw on television.

Emily likes to watch the reactions of the members of the studio audience:

Emily: I just like to see the reactions of the people when they find out that their boyfriend is cheating on them or something.

Niki questions the authenticity of the members of the studio audience:

Niki: I think the people are real... the audience members is the question... because like would you just like ask anyone any question... like someone can say anything... what would you do if you were Ricki Lake and were going up to them and let them ask a question like I don't know I wouldn't trust people.

One of the reasons why Niki questions the authenticity of the studio audience members is because she doesn't think Ricki would risk the chance of having someone say something obscene, for example, on national television. Although, Niki is correct in her thinking, she seems to be unaware that the shows are not broadcast "live to air," but are taped and edited.

Sofi thinks the comments of the studio audience members are mean:

Sofi: The audience questions are so mean.

Many of the participants seemed to empathize with the guests. This could explain why participants, like Sofi, express anger when the audience attacks the guests.

Tracy also seems think the comments of the studio audience members are rude:

Tracy: I think really rude comments come out of them, and if I was on the panel, I would burst into tears if somebody made those comments to me like saying oh you're a bitch, you're a whore, you're a slut. I wouldn't burst into tears, I just wouldn't know what to say. Like if I was acting like some of the people on the show then I wouldn't really care, but if I was just me, then I would feel bad if someone criticized me for the way I looked. `Cause like that happened to me before like I was a punk and a Goth and people used to judge me by the way I looked and they wouldn't talk to me and they hated me.

Tracy is imagining how she might feel if she were being attacked on stage. This might explain her negative reaction to the studio audience members. Often, these participants would try to imagine what they would do if they were the ones on stage.

Peni finds the comments made by the studio audience members to be both fake and amusing.

Peni: Sometimes it seems really fake. Like some of the comments they make... and some of them are funny too.

The way Peni uses the term "fake" seems to imply that she is questioning the authenticity of the guests. It was not uncommon for the participants to question the authenticity of the guests or studio audience members.

Summary

Based on our discussion of the studio audience, these are the themes which emerged:

1. *Argumentative and opinionated guests*
2. *Questioning Authenticity: are the studio members "real" people or actors?*

3. *The young and diverse nature of the studio audience*

Many of the participants felt that the studio audience comments were argumentative and opinionated. One explanation for this could be that the participants often empathized and identified with the guests. Furthermore, they often imagined what it would be like if they were on stage. Therefore, when the studio audience members were seen as attacking the guests, the participants felt attacked, and reacted defensively. Another explanation as to why some of the viewers were reacting negatively to the members of the studio audience is because they believe talk shows are produced for the purpose of providing a service to help the community. Therefore, these participants, became frustrated when “ordinary” people from the studio audience interjected with their comments, because they were taking away valuable time from the expert or host, who supposedly have experience in counseling people.

Some of the participants questioned the authenticity of the members of the studio audience. One explanation given is that it seemed unlikely that Ricki Lake or any other host would take the chance of talking to complete strangers on national television. However, although there is a lot of truth in this statement, it suggests that the participant who made the comment is unaware that the show is not broadcast “live to air.”

Another theme that emerged from our discussions was that the audience seemed to be young and diverse. Mary, for example, might have noticed this because she watches a lot of talk shows – the members of the studio audience for the *Ricki Lake Show* are clearly younger. Mika, also noticed that the audience seemed young. In fact, Mika thought the audience members were similar to herself. Perhaps these viewers were aware of this because youthfulness is not the norm for daytime talk show audiences.

Based on the discussions about studio audiences it is difficult to make any generalizations as to whether gender, and/or cultural background influenced their responses. However, age and socio-economic status may have influenced their responses the most. Age is implicated because some of the viewers seemed to identify with the members of the studio audience and guests. Socio-economic status may be a factor because some of the viewers seemed to prefer the opinions of the experts or host to the members of the studio audience; in other words, because most of these viewers come from middle class environments, and because most of the guests and members of the studio audience seem to come from a lower economic status, the viewers seemed to have less respect for their comments.

Expert/Therapist

The experts on talk shows usually are high status professionals who offer advice to a distressed panel of guests. They often work in collaboration with the host in summing up the situation and communicating with the audience. This section sums up viewers' perceptions of the experts who appeared on the *Ricki Lake Show* during the discussion/interview.

Viewers' Perceptions of Expert/Therapist

Lulu thinks the expert is actually calming the guests on the episode she is watching, "*I Want My Baby Back*."

Lulu: Well, I think that having that person (the expert) on would start to maybe calm them down [the guests] and make them think about how they were supposed to do it. But they're still disagreeing about what had happened... so maybe they are trying to solve the problems... I don't know, I can't remember exactly what she said but it was sort of what I thought... (pause) I think the therapist is actually helping a little bit.

Not being a regular viewer of the *Ricki Lake Show*, Lulu seemed to enjoy this particular episode because the issues could be resolved. Although Lulu saw the therapist as a positive figure in that she could calm the guests and help resolve the issues, she was having trouble understanding why the guests were acting resistant. Her difficulty in understanding the power struggle between the two classes could be explained by the fact that she comes from an upper middle class background. Furthermore, Lulu had mentioned earlier on in our discussion that she respects authority – which could also explain why she might side with the therapist.

Edie, who watched the episode “*Kids Who Are Out of Control*,” another serious topic, thinks therapists are useful because they are qualified professionals who offer good advice:

Edie: I don't know, she was... she seemed pretty good... I agreed with what she was saying... she understood it a lot and I think it's good when they have those kind of people there and then like, but that other girl and then like what's her name, Alicia – [The girl who was HIV positive and pregnant] and all those perspectives like not from the audience, I think that helps a lot too.

Although Edie thinks the experts provide good advice, she was also impressed by the guest Alicia, who told her own story, about being a promiscuous girl and ended up being pregnant and HIV positive. Perhaps the reason why Edie liked hearing Alicia's story is because she was able to relate to her and identify with her because they were approximately the same age.

Mika is very critical of the therapists on talk shows:

Mika: They don't really seem like real psychologists... like sometimes they say like mean stuff and I went to a psychologist before and they don't ever say like mean stuff. Like there was this show once where this girl couldn't go to school because she said she had school-phobia and stuff and the psychologist came on and started saying “I NEVER HEARD OF THAT

BEFORE AND BLA, BLA, BLA.” and she was getting all mean and it just didn’t seem like what they would really do.

Mika is critical of the psychologists on talk shows because they don’t seem to act like real psychologists. Perhaps, because Mika has visited a psychologist herself, she can see the difference between what she perceives as “real” therapy and “fictional” therapy.

Nina and Anna are critical of the experts on talk shows because they don’t think they add any new information to what the viewer already knows:

Nina: They usually just say what you already pretty much already know, what you just figured out for yourself during the hour.

Anna: Um... not really, (I don’t really like the counselors) because all the counselors I’ve ever seen... they just repeat what Ricki said.

For these participants, the experts seem to just repeat what Ricki has already said. Perhaps, they think Ricki is a good enough counselor and having another one is not really necessary.

Mary doesn’t think the therapists are needed:

Mary: (Laugh) Oh, I don’t like that. Usually they’re like young women who look like they just have really nice... I don’t know I just don’t like them. They don’t usually give anything that seems it’s going to help anyone on the show... It seems like they just restate the obvious... “I believe you guys have a communication problem with the people who you were just shouting at...” I think they are just unneeded. Like I would rather hear comments from the audience or something. Like I guess they... oh, I don’t know what they are trying to do with them... (laugh).

For Mary, the therapists are only stating the obvious. She would prefer to hear the comments from the studio audience. Mary is the one of the only participants who is interested in what the studio audience has to say.

Although Peni likes the therapists, she is disappointed that the guests do not seem to listen:

Peni: It's good that giving advice, but then they usually don't pay attention to them. Like her guests... you can totally tell that they're not going to listen to it.

Sara and Sofi do not like the moral speeches that come at the end of each serious show:

Sara: Yeah. (She is agreeing with Peni) ...and there's then a whole message I don't like in her show like after she gives a message and stuff.

Sofi: And when they try and have morals... I turn off the television...

Tracy thinks the presence of therapists help people open up:

Tracy: I don't think it really changes anybody, I think it just helps people to talk about things they've been holding in for a long time or things they've been trying to talk to their parents about before but they're parents just don't listen. So I think with a talk show there's like a mediator kind of person and it's easier to just settle it or talk about it or something.

Although Tracy thinks therapists can help in the short term, she doesn't think they help in the long term.

Emma has mixed feelings about therapists:

Emma: Yeah, like sometimes it's good because they have those talk shows like with people who have a deformed child and there are people who help them and stuff. But I don't like it when they talk to a bunch of people who they've never met before...who get up and tell you how to live your life...

On the one hand Emma likes the way the therapists handle situations, but what she does not like it when they start preaching at the guests. Perhaps, Emma can relate to being in a similar situation, where someone who did not even know

her was telling her off. This would explain why she feels hostility towards the therapist.

Summary

Based on our discussion of how viewers perceive the role of the expert/therapist, these are some of the themes which emerged:

1. *Experts offer good advice*
2. *Experts do not offer any new advice*
3. *Professional experts versus unprofessional experts*
4. *Experts exhibit moralistic behaviour*

The participants seemed to be divided about the role of the expert/therapist. While some of the participants believed the therapists were useful in that they were able to calm the guests and offer sound advice, other participants were not as enchanted. Nina, Anna, and Mary for example, were critical of the therapists because they did not think they contributed new information to what had already been said. Mika was also critical of the therapists because she felt they were not acting in a professional manner. Having been to a psychologist herself, Mika had different expectations of how therapists should act. Emma also did not like the therapists because she felt they were criticizing people whom they hardly even knew. These viewers may have been divided on the issue of therapist/expert, because they watched episodes that focused on different topics. It seemed that the participants who watched serious topics seemed to appreciate the role of the therapist, and the viewers who watched lighter topics seemed to be less favorable towards them.

From our interview/discussions on the role of the expert/therapist it is difficult to make any generalizations of how age, cultural background, and/or gender may have influenced their responses. Socio-economic status may have influenced

some of their responses, in that, Lulu for example, seems to respect therapists more than she respects the opinions of “ordinary” people. Her upper middle class background may be influencing her opinions of authority figures versus ordinary people. However, it seems as if the episodes they watched might have had a bigger impact on their opinions of experts. For example, viewers who watched an episode where an expert/therapist appeared seemed to value their contributions more than those who watched a lighter topic where there was no expert or therapist needed. Media related issues never entered our discussions.

Visual Style

The *Ricki Lake Show* has developed visual strategies, such as bouncy graphics, and interviews with people on the street, which emulate the popular television show *Much Music* for the purpose of attracting younger viewers. As Shattuc notes, “Programmes focus on visual spectacle: entrances of guests, audience reaction, and a set of rituals, a la game shows (Weddings, proposals, punishments, and contests)” (Shattuc, 1997, p. 158). She says: “The at-home and studio audience derives pleasure from recognizing an original source and judging how well its conventions are mimicked” (Shattuc, 1997, p. 158). Therefore this section explores viewers’ perceptions of the visual style of the *Ricki Lake Show*.

Viewers’ Perceptions of Visual Style

Anna does not respond favourably to the “cutesy” graphics used on the *Ricki Lake Show*.

Anna: Oh... I hate that stuff... the bouncy writing... Like at the start... “Girl you just have to leave this man...” Oh I hate that stuff... I don’t like it... it’s way too cheesy.

Mika also doesn’t like the graphics:

Mika: It’s like overdone. It used to be like they just did a little bit. but now it’s overdone, it’s all crazy and I think it’s overdone.

Lulu seems to like them:

Lulu: I like the graphics... like you know they have the little thing with the bouncing words... I find that interesting because I can do some of that... so I like to see different ideas.

One explanation for the difference in their opinions is that while Anna and Mika are responding to the graphics from a purely visual and personal perspective, Lulu is admiring them from a production perspective. In other words, because Lulu is learning how to create these graphics using computer software programmes, she might be comparing what she sees to what she can produce.

Nina seems to appreciate the visual graphics in that she can recall some images that particularly appealed to her:

Nina: I like how it's done, once there was something on babies and she had bottles and baby things all over and I liked that.

Edie likes the graphics because it helps her know what the topic is about if she missed part of the show:

Edie: Yeah, well like if you're just turning on the TV and just coming into half of it, it kind of like gives you the theme and you can decide if it's interesting or not... yeah, I think it's catchy and it works.

For Edie the graphics can quickly familiarize her with the topic of the day. Because topics seem to be an indicator as to whether or not these viewers will watch a show or not, being able to know what the topic is about on fairly short notice would be valuable information.

Tracy also finds the graphics useful for similar reasons to Edie:

Tracy: I think when you're flipping through the channels and you can tell it's a talk show, because you see people up sitting in chairs talking to someone. Like I know when I'm flipping through the channels, and I passed it, I would go back

to the channel to see what the topic was because I would know it's a talk show, and I think I'd probably know what talk show it was just because of the different styles every talk show host has.

Mary thinks the graphics are too flashy:

Mary: [laugh], Well no, they sound so forced. I guess they're trying to be catchy so that you know what the show is about in a title but um I think that's why, I think she's a little bit more set up or forced than some of the other people.

Karen likes the graphics because she thinks they intensify the show and inform the viewer about what is going on:

Karen: It's good, it adds intensity and it gives you a little bit of background.

Emma does not like the style. She finds the rhymes and music unappealing:

Emma: Like you mean the little rhymes – like the cheesy rhymes, (laugh) and then they'll be getting in the cheesy music... I don't know it just doesn't appeal to me, it's just ... it just doesn't appeal to me that kind of thing.

Niki and Sofi are not as interested in the graphics as they are in the production style between the big and flashy American talk shows versus the low budget Canadian talk shows:

Sofi: [Camellia Scott], It's just like... aahhh, Ricki... It's like a low budget imitation of Ricki Lake

Niki: Jonovision... but that show is so low budget...

Summary

Based on our discussions of visual style, these are some of the themes which emerged:

1. *Graphics are unattractive*

2. *Graphics are informative*
3. *Low budget versus high budget television production*

The viewers were divided in their opinions about style. While some of the viewers really liked the graphics others found them “tacky.” Some viewers saw the graphics as being informative. In other words, the graphics informed them of the topic of the day if they happened to miss the beginning of the show. The reasons given for not liking them seemed to be based on personal visual preferences. Although most of the discussions centered around graphics, Niki and Sofi commented on the differences between the American talk shows and the Canadian talk shows. They referred to the Canadian ones as being “low budget,” and Niki thought Camellia Scott was a “Ricki Lake wanna be.”

Factors of age, cultural background, socio-economic status and gender did not seem to influence their responses. Although some of their responses showed that they were aware of production techniques in that they noticed the graphics were informative, I am not sure this was the “preferred” intention of the producers. In other words, I suspect the producers were hoping the graphics would attract audiences, but I suspect they did not realize viewers were using them for the purpose of finding out what the topic was to see if they were interested in it or not.

Comparatively Speaking: Teens Talk about Talk TV

Based on my discussions with respondents, it was evident that this group was well versed on the talk genre. During our meetings, they often compared talk shows, expressing their likes and dislikes, preferences of hosts, and topic-specific content matter. This section explores these perceptions of the genre of talk shows.

Teens' Perceptions of Talk Shows

Niki likes the Ricki Lake better than Jenny Jones because she is younger in age:

Niki: I like Ricki Lake better `cause I don't know, `cause, Jenny Jones is like so... kind of adult, I guess and older... and Ricki Lake is kind of like whatever, da, da, da... .

Many of the participants commented on Ricki's youthfulness and seemed to be attracted to her for this reason. Ricki, unlike some of the older talk show hosts, is perceived as simultaneously old enough to function as an adult host, and young enough to understand their needs and interests.

Emma is impressed by Oprah, because she used her show to raise money for charity:

Emma: Like she [A guest on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*] was not kissable or something, so she [Oprah] had Listerine [Sponsor the show] had everyone come on [From the studio audience] and kiss her. And all the money they raised from every kiss would be donated to charity. And Yeah, she's doing a good thing... Yeah, like I doubt Ricki Lake gives any money she makes to charity.

While Emma praises Oprah for her commendable behaviour, she seems to think that Ricki would not give money away. Many of the participants put Oprah in a different category from other talk show hosts. They saw her as a woman with integrity and class. According to Abt and Mustazza, (1997), Oprah became less "trashy" in 1995.

Sofi thinks Oprah's shows are a little more realistic than other talk shows:

Sofi: It's [Oprah] not exactly educational TV... It doesn't give you educational value either... it's still a talk show but it's a little more realistic.

Although Sofi will not go as far as saying Oprah is educational TV, she suggests that she thinks the *Oprah Winfrey Show* is of a higher standard than other talk shows. For many of these participants, educational television is thought to be of a higher caliber of television. By comparing the *Oprah Winfrey Show* to educational TV, Sofi implies that she thinks quite highly of Oprah.

Eddie thinks teenagers prefer watching Jenny Jones because she appeals to a younger audience, and older viewers prefer watching Oprah:

Eddie: Probably like Jenny Jones (is the most popular talk show among teenagers) and I think a lot of the older people watch Oprah.

Many of the participants seemed to think the *Oprah Winfrey Show* was a talk show for adults. Nina for example says this is why she can never relate to her topics:

Nina: I have never really been able to relate to Oprah. It's always been more for adults. All her topics are more for older audiences.

Anna likes the *Oprah Winfrey Show* because she thinks the content matter is good. While she thinks other talk shows may be "trashy" she thinks the *Oprah Winfrey Show* is different:

Anna: Oprah is good. I like Oprah. She has good subjects. But it's not really a talk show...Because for me the definition of talk show is cheesy and a waste of time a waste of money... It's just come to me like I've watched so many talk shows in my life and they have just been so bad... and what's that? Sally Jessy Raphael, uhhh, oh this doesn't make any sense... "A child who accidentally married her father." now how can that happen accidentally? People not knowing who they married.... It's a waste of time... Like if I found out I married my father... what would I do... stick with him? No! No of course not.... He's my father.... and they had 4 children... ugggg. Oh my God... It's your Dad... come on.... It's just like unrealistic... the way that happened, like come on... but Oprah, Oprah... I like her... like she's always been there and

she's down to earth and she's kind of like all generous... It can happen that she's in a bathroom and someone opens the stall while she's on the can and that can happen but she won't be afraid to laugh about it while some people would be so embarrassed about it... like on national television... So I think that once you're on television you shouldn't be scared and then just get out of the way and let me go... give other people the chance... Oprah is so good... she's cool... like the book club and stuff.

One explanation for the difference in opinion between Anna's perspective versus Nina's perspective of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, is that their socio-economic backgrounds are influencing their responses. Anna, for example, who likes the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, comes from an upper middle class background and Nina on the other hand, comes from a lower economic status. Therefore, Anna might prefer the Oprah Winfrey Show because she associates the programme with status and Nina might prefer Ricki Lake and Jenny Jones because they confront issues that deal with teenagers, issues which she can relate to on some level or other.

Mika also prefers the *Oprah Winfrey Show* to other talk shows:

Mika: Well out of all of the stuff that Ricki Lake does... I would give it [the show we just watched, on reunions], a 9 [out of 10]. Actually, because it wasn't as trashy and like a dumb topic. Like it was a decent topic. I can imagine them having that topic on the Oprah show. But Oprah would never have anything like "my boyfriend slept with my sister... sort of thing". [she raises her voice].

Mika might prefer the *Oprah Winfrey Show* for similar reasons to Anna. Because she comes from a middle class background where both her parents are academics, Oprah might be regarded as a higher caliber of talk shows.

Lulu, another participant belonging to an upper middle class background, says she rarely watches talk shows because she cannot relate to the issues. She finds them confrontational and very foreign to her own life experience:

Lulu: I don't know, most of these problems I don't really experience, so I find that there's nothing there... I don't really want to watch people argue about something that I can't relate to.

Perhaps it's because Lulu comes from an upper middle class environment that she cannot relate to the subjects presented on talk show. Generally speaking, talk shows tend to have guests who are from lower socio-economic backgrounds. However, although Lulu cannot relate to the topics because of the differences in between her background and the guests, other participants enjoy talk shows for these very reasons. Some of the respondents have said that they like watching talk shows because they can learn about lifestyles that are very different than their own.

Mary thinks the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Leeza Show* are generally more realistic than the *Ricki Lake Show* or *Jenny Jones Show*.

Mary: Um, I mean on shows like Ricki Lake or Jenny Jones, the only thing I've ever learned was things like breast implants or something. Like they talk about the medical aspect of it or something... But usually they don't give much information on the medical aspect. On Oprah I guess, and Leeza and those shows they give a little more facts and stuff. They give a little more different statistics about kids dying or so you know things... around the house like the green part of the potato is poisonous or something like that. But that's it, you learn sometimes facts but I don't think that you learn about life from those shows.

Mary's comparisons of the two generations of talk shows suggests that the more traditional talk shows like the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and the *Leeza Show* provide more factual information than the newer talk shows like the *Ricki Lake Show* and the *Jenny Jones Show*. She referred to the older generation as being more educational because they provided the viewer with facts. For many of the participants, factual information is often equated to education. In other words, for

some participants, education has more to do with the acquisition of factual information, than it has to do with the consideration of concepts.

Emily likes watching the *Jenny Jones Show* and the *Ricki Lake Show* because these programmes deal mostly with teen issues:

Emily: At first I used to watch the Jenny Jones for the whole hour, and at first when the *Ricki Lake Show* would be on, I would flip to it to see what the show was about and if I didn't like it, then I would go back to Jenny Jones and then maybe after Jenny Jones was finished I'd go back and watch the last half hour of the *Ricki Lake Show*.

Karen and Linda both like the *Jerry Springer Show*:

Karen: We even get off the phone, like if I'm on the phone with someone and the phone rings, I'll pick it up and say, [talking really fast] "I want to watch Jerry, I'll phone you back." And I hang up on them. But if it's Ricki Lake, then I'd talk and watch at the same time.

Linda: I used to watch Geraldo. Jerry Springer is good. I like Jerry Springer a lot. He always has such good topics... Oh Yeah, like the best ones... like the reunions... But I think everybody you know, like if you'd go and do a tally like on Jerry Springer or Ricki Lake, I think they'd pick Jerry Springer over Ricki Lake, she gets into too much freaky stuff.

The Jerry Springer Show was watched more frequently by the participants who lived in the Toronto area. Many of these viewers liked his outrageous topics and were avid viewers of his show.

Sara thinks that Jenny Jones is more popular than Ricki Lake because she has more topics that relate to teen issues:

Sara: I think Jenny Jones is more popular among teens cause she has better topics. Like there are more makeovers and those kind of stuff and like less fighting sort of stuff... just like having fun.

Tracy thinks adults take talk shows more seriously than adults:

Tracy: I think, well just talk shows are about people watching too many people watching talk shows... and yeah, I do think some people take them seriously and I do think some people care about what happens to the people after. But my friends don't take it seriously, teenagers don't take it seriously, adults might. But my friends don't. We just laugh at it. Like if we're flipping the channels and something we like is on the TV like Ricki Lake, we'll watch it and laugh at it. Like we don't take it seriously or anything. We're not religious Ricki Lake watchers [giggle].

Many of the participants seem to make a distinction between adults and youth when talking about talk shows. However, for most of the participants, the distinction was between talk shows that appeal to adults like the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, and the talk shows that appeal to teenagers like the *Jenny Jones Show* and the *Ricki Lake Show*.

Summary

Based on our discussions of viewers' perceptions of talk shows, these are some of the themes which emerged:

1. *Ricki Lake versus Oprah Winfrey*
2. *Adult versus youth*

A lot of the discussion was centered around the comparisons between the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and the *Ricki Lake Show*. Some of the participants thought the *Oprah Winfrey Show* was a talk show for adults and the *Ricki Lake Show* was a talk show for teens. Other participants thought that the *Oprah Winfrey Show* was of a better quality or standard than the other talk shows. And while some participants found it difficult to relate to the subject matter on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, other participants preferred it.

Apparently, neither cultural background nor gender seemed to affect viewers' responses, but it could be argued that socio-economic status and age may have influenced respondents. For example, viewers who tended to come from a higher economic status tended to watch talk shows less regularly than viewers from a lower socio-economic status; higher economic status respondents also generally preferred the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, widely regarded as a higher quality talk show.

Age could also be perceived as an influencing factor among respondents, who were generally attracted to talk shows that deal primarily with teen issues. Some of the participants also said that they liked Ricki Lake because she was young. Importantly, one of the viewers thought that adults tended to watch talk shows differently than youth. This viewer felt that while adults seem to take shows seriously, she and her friends watch them for a laugh.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

Motivations for Research

Talk Ricki! A Qualitative Study of Teens' Perceptions of the Ricki Lake Show and other Daytime Television Talk Shows was prompted by my desire to learn how teen audiences were responding to the newer generation of talk shows. Initially, my knowledge of the *Ricki Lake Show* was limited to the ratings which indicated that Ricki was the fastest growing daytime television talk show in 1996, second to Oprah. Indications were that the *Ricki Lake Show* was targeting teens and young adults (Zoglin, 1995, pp. 43). I also knew that producers Garth Ancier and Gail Steinberg referred to this audience as being more interested in topics that directly affected people their own age (Waldron, 1995, p. 154). In short, my information was limited to the media hype criticizing this newer generation of talk shows, and to views held by concerned watchdog organizations, like the American Family Association, insisting that the content of these programs might induce negative behaviour by influencing young people's attitudes. But what was missing from the picture was what the viewers themselves had to say about the genre.

The more I read about the *Ricki Lake Show*, the more interested I became. The more I researched the field of audience studies, the more determined I was to pursue the subject. I soon learned that a number of studies had already been done on viewers' responses to media such as Morley's (1980) *Nationwide Audience*; Hobson's (1982) *Crossroads: The Drama of the Soap Opera Viewer*; Liebes' (1984) *Ethnocentrism: Israelis of Moroccan Ethnicity Negotiate the Meaning of "Dallas:" Cultural Differences in the Retelling of Television Fiction*; Ang's (1985) *Watching Dallas*; Buckingham's (1987) *Public Secrets: East Enders and its Audience*; Radway's (1991) *Reading the Romance*; and Press's (1991)

Women Watching Television. I also learned that there was a void in the literature pertaining to teen audiences, particularly regarding young women and their responses to media. Most of the existing literature on young viewers focused on children. Furthermore the studies focused primarily on media effects rather than viewers' responses.

Therefore, in response to this new generation of talk shows that were targeting teen audiences, the publicity surrounding the genre of talk, and our limited knowledge of teen women's responses to media, I set out to learn if the participants were vulnerable recipients of media or if they were active participants capable of producing and negotiating meaning. Furthermore, I set out to learn how factors of age, cultural background, socio-economic status, and gender might be influencing their responses.

Discussion on Findings

Based on my findings, it was evident that this group of respondents were active participants. These teenage girls were critical viewers of the genre capable of expressing their own ideas based on their experience and background knowledge. Unfortunately, because of the limited number of participants, 17 in all, it was difficult to draw any conclusions based on their diverse nature, taking into consideration factors of age, cultural background, socio-economic status, and gender. However, on the basis of this sample, it could be argued that age and socio-economic status had more of an effect in influencing their responses than did cultural background or gender. While eliminating boys from the sample group made it more difficult to evaluate the dynamics of talk show gender construction, simply studying teenage girls benefited this small study because it narrowed the range of the inquiry, illuminating socio-economic status, cultural background, and age.

While talk shows are sometimes thought to be constructed for a female audience (Shattuc, 1997, p. 3), this study tends to show that these participants

identified themselves as teenagers (age identification) and not as young women (gender identification). Most of their comments about the genre focused on the distinctions between adult talk shows, i.e., the *Oprah Winfrey Show* or teenage talk shows, i.e., the *Ricki Lake Show* and the *Jenny Jones Show*. Other comments made were that, while adults take talk shows seriously, teenagers do not, and that one of the reasons why they watch talk shows is because they like issues relating to teens.

Factors of socio-economic status also seemed to affect their responses in that viewers from a higher economic level seemed to watch talk shows less than those from a lower economic bracket. Furthermore, participants from the latter group tended to prefer the newer generation of talk show compared to the former group who preferred watching the *Oprah Winfrey Show* to the *Ricki Lake Show*.

Overall, the viewers were active and critical readers of the text. They were conscious of the construction of the genre and could make distinctions between one talk show and another. While the viewers were not always interested in hearing what the members of the studio audience had to say, they were generally sympathetic to the guest speakers. Often the participants would identify with the guests and become upset by the attacks made by members of the audience. Issues of self-disclosure and authenticity were predominant themes. Viewers tried to understand how people could disclose themselves on national television; and they questioned whether the guests and members of the studio audience actors.

Different topics appealed to different viewers. While some viewers preferred serious issues, others preferred the more outrageous ones. Overall, makeovers were among the favourite topics, and cheating partners ranked as the least interesting topic. While there seems to be no signs of loyalty to hosts, topics seem to be the determining factor of whether a viewer will keep watching an episode or not.

Viewers generally questioned the necessity of the experts. Most of them thought they were not contributing any new information and only repeating what the host had already said. While some viewers found them to be unprofessional, others were bothered by their quick assessments when they hardly knew the people at all. However, there were viewers who believed the expert/therapist was helpful in resolving problems.

Most of the discussion on the visual focused on graphics. While some of the participants found the graphics to be informative others found them to be tacky and distasteful. Only one viewer appreciated the graphics as a computer design element because she was learning how to create them herself.

Again, based on the findings, it is clear that these young women are active viewers of media. Being active participants implies that viewers can draw from their own interests, experiences and understanding of the world in a way that is unconstrained by the structure of the text (Condry, 1989, p. 44; and Livingstone; 1990, p. 32). However, we must not forget that the concept of activity in watching television is becoming a powerful and reassuring characterization of the viewer, despite its being poorly defined. This concept is a reaction to a breaking away from the "effects tradition" of media studies where audiences are perceived as passive consumers of television texts (Livingstone, 1990, p. 36). Therefore, while recognizing the active viewer as a participant who can produce and negotiate meaning, we need to also be wary of romanticizing the viewer. Without knowing how well viewers understand media power and dominance in terms of the motivations and biases of producers, it is difficult to understand fully how viewers are making sense of the media. In other words, while nonfiction television gives the illusion of being factual, it is entertainment, packaged as a product to sell advertisements which influence viewers.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that, when engaging in qualitative research based on small samples of interviews, few generalizations can be made. For this reason, this study's determinations of how factors of age, socio-economic status, gender, and cultural background affected viewer responses are only anecdotal and should not be considered exploratory. Because there is a limited amount of research on teens' responses to media, this study's findings are an important, if small, contribution to the literature.

Another limitation is based on the method I chose to find participants for the study. While I had the intention of using what is known as the "snowball technique," I soon learned that it was not an effective way to find teenage participants. Although there were a number of the participants who told me they had friends who watched the *Ricki Lake Show* and who would probably agree to participate, it was not as simple as that. Most of the friends of friends were uncomfortable having me come to their homes. As a result I had to find the participants through other means, mostly by asking my friends if they had teenage daughters who watched the *Ricki Lake Show*. My experience in this regard may be useful to future researchers of teenage audiences.

Another limitation is a function of the group interviews. One of the problems with group interviews, especially larger ones, is that it was difficult to keep track of who responded to which question, making transcription difficult. Even though it started out in an orderly fashion, the participants would often interrupt one another and the discussions would go off on different tangents. In these groups there always seemed to be one participant who was dominating the discussion. Karen, for example, dominated the discussion in her group, Emma dominated hers, and Peni seemed to be the spokesperson for Sara. Interestingly, the dominant girl usually lived in the house where the interviews were taking place. I also found that it was difficult to know if the participants were being honest in their responses, or if they were being influenced by their peers. In other words, it

seemed as if the group might be playing “follow the leader.” Rarely would you find conflicting opinions among a group of friends. According to Richardson and Corner, these problems I encountered are typical of group discussions:

There are special difficulties with group work which suggest that research of this kind should involve a substantial element of one-to-one discussion, particularly in the early stages. These difficulties include problems of speaker identification; the variables of domination; inhibition and consensus introduced by group dynamics (and frequently productive of ‘fragmentary’ types of utterance whose subsequent use by the analyst as independent and complete statements would be most questionable) and also quite severe limitations on the opportunities for using ‘follow-up’ questioning to elicit supplementary or clarifactory comment. (Richardson & Corner, 1992, p. 488)

However, according to Richardson and Corner, in spite of all the disadvantages of working with groups, there is a positive side. Groups, for example, can inspire open discussions, arguments and questions which might not have happened with only a researcher and one participant. (Richardson & Corner, 1992, p. 488). In my own research, it was because of the group interviews that I first learned this age group was well versed on all talk shows because the open conversations spontaneously disclosed the viewers’ media knowledge base.

Conclusion

Given the diversity of participants’ responses they clearly fall in the definition of active viewers. However, I was uncomfortable with merely classifying them as active viewers, and concomitantly assuming that the media could not manipulate them. Although these viewers were capable of discussing and critiquing the genre on a personal level they seemed to lack knowledge in a number of other areas:

a) Procedures used in creating a television show with a studio audience. For example, some of the participants questioned the authenticity of the members of the studio audience. They doubted that a host could take the risk of having a

complete stranger behave unacceptably on national television. If these viewers were more aware of the procedures involved, they would know that the show was edited before going to air, thus allowing genuine spontaneity in the audience at taping time.

b) Participants did not always have much awareness of the distinction between the view of the world presented on television and the real world. As an example, many of the participants seemed to blur the reality between real therapy and TV therapy. Often they were unable to distinguish between a professional therapist and a professional actor. For example, participants often seemed to regard the host as a trained therapist. Some of the participants believed the purpose of talk shows was to help people, and also believed that complex problems could be resolved on national television in a one hour episode. If these viewers had more knowledge in the construction of television production, perhaps they would be more critical in their observations and know that the world of television is only a representation of the real world and should not be addressed in a literal manner.

c) Finally, participants seemed to be unaware of the commercial motivations for making these programs. For example, in our discussions of visual style, some the participants stated that they found the graphics helpful in identifying the subject of discussion. However, they did not speak about the visual design of the show from the perspective of the producers' motivations and seemed unaware that one of the prime motivations for the visual and artistic design of a programme is to capture an audience for advertisers.

Although these participants are active viewers who filter the media through the lens of their own experience, they do not always seem to be able to distinguish life as presented on talk shows from real life. Some of the concerns people have expressed about teenagers being given an unrealistic view of life by talk shows may have some validity. We need to recognize that the active viewer is not necessary a literate viewer, and that media-literacy skills are learned rather

than instinctual. Media literacy aims at helping students to develop an informed and critical understanding of the nature of the mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact of these techniques, for the purpose of reading the messages behind the media's texts. Media literacy can help viewers become wary of consumer propaganda and also help them distinguish between theatre and real life. In short, becoming media literate can turn a partially active viewer into a fully active one.

Therefore, a possibility for future research in the area of teen responses to television talk shows could include a comparative study of viewers who have been educated in media literacy to those who have not. The findings could make a valuable contribution in knowing whether media literacy skills help viewers interpret the television programmes they watch in a more critical way.

Other areas of research that can also be investigated are gender-related issues and socio-economic status. No boys were interviewed in this study but there are many interesting questions that could be asked about the responses of teenage boys to television talk shows. For example, do teenage boys like the same topics as teenage girls, such as makeovers and teen crushes, or are there other topics that interest them more? Who are their favourite talk show hosts? How would their analyses differ? There was a strong indication that viewers' responses differed as a result of socio-economic status. This is another area that is well worth exploring. How do viewers from different backgrounds interpret and respond to similar episodes?. Is one group more analytical than another? More judgmental? More empathetic? This study provides a basis on which a larger study could be designed to investigate these questions.

Finally, I would argue that because teens are watching the genre of daytime television talk shows, they should be brought to the classroom for educational purposes. Educators can use them either to evaluate viewers' media awareness skills or to raise ethical and philosophical questions. By looking at the responses of teenagers' views on the genre, skilled media educators can begin to

understand where viewers are having trouble distinguishing between fiction from reality. Furthermore, while topics such as teen pregnancies, drunk driving, shoplifting, and gangs can be used for discussions on societal values, issues of disclosure on national television can be used to introduce matters of ethics. Therefore as an alternative to lambasting the genre of talk shows for corrupting the youth, educating the youth might be more useful. By listening to teen responses, discussing the issues, and instilling media literacy skills, educators can help young viewers to be critical viewers of the media, wary of consumer corruption and capable of assessing right from wrong.

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