

Expanding the Comfort Zone by Reflecting Diversity in Television Programming

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ABSTRACT

From a social perspective, the inclusion of gay characters and gay-themed programming in network offerings serves to broaden the marketability of the networks while also acclimating mainstream America into accepting the gay/lesbian sexual orientation as an acceptable lifestyle. At the same time, television networks may be walking a fine line between welcoming gay and lesbian viewers with programming developed for them while maintaining comfort in and commitment from their traditional audiences. Using Rusbult's Investment model as a theoretical base, this study compared the attitudes of heterosexual viewers with those of gay/lesbian viewers towards a popular prime time network series featuring gay characters. Sexual orientation was relevant for understanding differences in viewer attitudes, but viewer satisfaction, entertainment alternative quality, and investment size were predictive of program commitment regardless of sexual orientation.

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Introduction

The challenge to understand viewer attitudes and preferences is a primary focus of network executives as they target audiences with certain demographic characteristics, particularly those that represent primary target markets to advertisers. Demographic groups including teens, Asian-Americans, Latinos, and African-Americans, and gays and lesbians have been identified as potentially lucrative target audiences (Gobe 2000; Halter 2002) and these markets are reflected in the programming selected by major and cable networks. Though it is important to offer programming desired by specific audiences to build viewership and, ultimately, advertising revenue, networks and advertisers walk a fine line between targeting markets with growth potential and maintaining commitment from traditional markets. Though the basic principle applies whenever specific segments are targeted, this is particularly true when developing programming for both gay and lesbian and heterosexual viewers.

From a social perspective, the inclusion of gay characters and gay-themed programming in network offerings serves to broaden the marketability of the networks. Branchik (2002) stated that television shows such as *Will and Grace* and *Queer as Folk* bring gay viewers to network programs as well as their associated commercial sponsors. Indeed, the courting of the gay/lesbian market has received a great deal of attention in recent years. Magazines such as *Out* and *The Advocate* have reported phenomenal increases in their number of advertising pages per issue. Large, mainstream corporations including Kodak, IBM, Ikea, Subaru, Levi's, Absolut Vodka, and Ford (Seckler 2005; Ricker and Witeck 2003; Atkinson 2003) have all targeted gay and lesbian consumers with varying degrees of success. Articles and books about marketing to gay consumers have suggested a few key steps organizations/businesses can take to be identified as a gay-friendly company, including advertising in gay-themed media (Witeck and Combs 2006; Seckler 2005; Kates 1998). To attract these advertising dollars, networks must provide programming that appeals to the gay and lesbian segment. American Express, General Motors, and Anheuser-Busch are among the brands sponsoring gay-themed broadcasting (Lisotta 2006b).

Though gay and lesbian characters have been represented in programming for decades now, gay and lesbian characters are increasingly common on television shows, particularly in supporting roles. This season, for instance, CBS's "The Class" includes one gay supporting character and one gay-vague character (Maloney 2006). Many shows feature gay or lesbian lead characters (for a complete listing of gay and lesbian characters, see www.glaad.org). *Will and Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, *Boy Meets Boy*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* are just a few examples of popular programs with gay lead characters. Here Networks is a relatively new pay-channel that seeks to position itself for the gay and lesbian market (Spencer 2005). "Dante's Cove", a soap-opera with several gay characters, is an example of the programming Here offers its viewers (Maloney, 2006). These shows have illustrated success in attracting not only gay/lesbian viewers but also heterosexual viewers (Zeman 2003; Włoszczyna 2003).

For traditional networks, the challenge is to offer programming sufficiently targeted to particular markets without pushing the boundaries so far as to alienate viewers who do not share the same demographic characteristics. For instance, Chaffin (2006, p.14) quoted Frank Olsen, who launched Q Television Network (a cable network targeting gays and lesbians), as saying, "The advertisers were always worried about how many customers they would lose for every one they attracted." Does this challenge apply to cable networks as well? Spencer (2005) notes that 30% to 35% of Here subscribers are straight. The failure of Q Television Network illustrates the risks associated with programming for a small, niche audience (Lisotta 2006a). The differences in appeal can be seen in the subscriber bases of the two networks. Here is available in 50 million households while Q was available in just 3 million (Lisotta 2006a). Logo, the third cable service targeting gays and lesbians, reaches 20 million households. Thus, even cable networks are faced with the dilemma of developing programming of interest from a diverse group of subscribers.

It is with this challenge of reaching the gay/lesbian market while simultaneously maintaining a traditional market that this study sought to compare attitudes toward a gay-themed program between heterosexual and gay/lesbian viewers. Because

many programs with gay and/or lesbian lead characters are on cable networks and, therefore, less accessible, and fewer major network programs include lead gay and/or lesbian characters, the program *Will and Grace* was chosen as the vehicle for study. This paper addresses the following questions: What attitudes exist toward the program *Will and Grace*? How, if at all, do these attitudes differ based on sexual orientation? What variables explain viewer satisfaction with *Will and Grace*? What variables explain program commitment to *Will and Grace*?

Some research efforts have investigated the role of sexual orientation and advertising and these are briefly reviewed in the next section of the paper. Rusbult's Investment Model, a general theory of relationship commitment used as the theoretical base for the present research into viewer commitment and satisfaction is also discussed in the next section.

Background and Hypotheses

Attitudinal Differences and Sexual Orientation

While popular literature supports the notion that film references, television programming, and advertising highlighting gay and lesbian characters are more acceptable than ever before (Branchik 2002; Lisotta, 2006a), the literature suggests that attitudes may vary based on the sexual orientation of viewers. It is important to note that sexual orientation is certainly not the only variable which can be useful in explaining the appeal of specific examples of programming. Many socio-economic variables would also play a role; though those variables are not included in this discussion. Why is attitude toward programming a relevant variable to assess? McGrath and Mahood (2004) illustrated the relationship between attitude toward the ad and attitude toward television programming. They found that ad placement in television programming to which consumers held a positive attitude resulted in more positive attitudes toward the advertisements in question. It is this relationship between advertising and television programming that increases the stakes associated with television programming.

How might gay/lesbian-themes affect attitudes toward the program? Herek (2002) noted that significant differences existed between heterosexual women and heterosexual men with regard to attitudes toward gays and lesbians, with men showing greater negativity. Bhat, Leigh, and Wardlow (1998) found that heterosexual consumers responded negatively to images of gays in advertising while gays and lesbians responded positively as expected. Despite these results, gay and lesbian characters in television programming appear to be more widely accepted than do gay/lesbian endorsers in advertising (Branchik 2002). Thus, the first hypothesis anticipated positive reactions to *Will and Grace* among both groups (heterosexuals and gay/lesbians) but expected that attitudes would be more positive from the gay/lesbian group than from the heterosexual group.

H1: Attitudes toward *Will and Grace* will be more positive from gay and lesbian viewers than from heterosexual viewers.

Rusbult's Investment Model

While attitudes toward a program with gay/lesbian themes is a key question, networks also seek to develop relationship with viewers. In other words, they seek to establish viewer loyalty for programs. Rusbult's Investment Model, as a general theory of relationship management, is useful for explaining the development and maintenance of viewer loyalty. Rusbult's Investment Model has been recognized as a generic theory of relationship management (Rusbult, Johnson, and Morrow 1986; Rusbult, Zembrot, and Iwaniszek 1986; Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous 1988; Farrell and Rusbult 1992; Tuten 1996; Tuten and Sleeth 2002), as it seeks to explain individuals' commitment to a wide variety of relationships. It has been used to explain commitment and problem-solving behaviors in several types of relationships including romantic relationships between both heterosexual (Rusbult 1979a, b; Rusbult, Zembrot, and Gunn 1982; Rusbult, Johnson, and Morrow 1986; Sprecher 1988) and homosexual couples (Rusbult, Zembrot, and Iwaniszek 1986); friendships (Rusbult 1979b); consumer to brand-name product relationships (Geyer, Dotson, and King 1989); employee to employee relationships (Tuten, Gray, and Glascoff 2001); and employee to management relationships (Farrell and Rusbult 1981; Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous 1988; Farrell and Rusbult 1992; Tuten 1996).

Derived from Interdependence Theory (Thibaut and Kelley 1959), Rusbult's Investment Model expands and formalizes Interdependence Theory by identifying three basic variables that determine commitment to a relationship: satisfaction, alternative quality, and investment size (Farrell and Rusbult 1981, p. 80).

Commitment to a relationship (Geyer, Dotson, and King 1989) is defined as the tendency to continue using a relationship and to feel psychologically attached to it. An individual's satisfaction with a relationship reflects a comparison of rewards and costs. An individual's alternative quality represents a perception of the availability of other equal or better relationship choices. An individual's investment size in a relationship is the amount of psychological or material resources applied to the relationship. In the case of a relationship with a television program, investment size might include time spent comparing entertainment choices, money spent on such research, length of viewer patronage, and status associated with program viewing (Geyer, Dotson, and King 1989). An individual's investment size (considering both intrinsic and extrinsic resources) serves to increase the individual's commitment by increasing the costs associated with switching.

Using Rusbult's Investment Model (Rusbult 1979a), this study examined television program commitment as a function of the rewards and costs associated with viewing and choosing the show (satisfaction), alternatives to the show as a source of entertainment (alternative quality) and psychological resources applied to the relationship with the show (investment size). Due to its gay-friendly theme, gays and lesbians might associate greater rewards with *Will and Grace* while heterosexuals might associate more costs with supporting the show. Thus the other hypotheses were:

- H2:** Gays and lesbians will report greater rewards associated with viewing *Will and Grace* while heterosexuals will report greater costs.
- H3:** Rewards will be positively related to program satisfaction while costs will be negatively related to satisfaction.

- H4:** Viewer satisfaction, entertainment alternative quality, and investment size will predict program commitment regardless of sexual orientation.

Methods

Procedures and Measures

The hypotheses presented above were investigated using an online questionnaire to collect data from a sample of consumers including both heterosexual and gay/lesbian consumers. Respondents were part of the E-poll panel (see www.epoll.com for recruitment and panel management information). Participants were asked if they had ever watched the *Will and Grace* television program and only those respondents answering yes continued the questionnaire.

The questionnaire included measures of attitude toward *Will and Grace*, which were adapted from Dotson and Hyatt (2000), and measures of program commitment, satisfaction, rewards associated with watching the program, costs associated with watching the program, entertainment alternatives to watching, and perceived investment in the program all of which were adapted from Rusbult, Zembrot, and Iwaniszek (1986). Measures of the length of time viewing the program and the importance of advocacy-based programming as well as demographic questions were also included in the questionnaire. Scale variables and Cronbach's alphas for each are provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Scale Variables and Cronbach's Alphas

Program commitment, 5-point Likert Scale (adapted from Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Iwaniszek 1986), Cronbach's Alpha = .92

- I am committed to watching *Will and Grace*
- I often watch *Will and Grace*
- It is important to me to watch *Will and Grace*

Attitude toward the program, 5-point semantic differential scale (Dotson and Hyatt 2000), Cronbach's Alpha = .92

- Biased -Unbiased
- Convincing - Unconvincing
- Believable - Unbelievable
- Unfavorable - Favorable
- Bad - Good
- Unpleasant - Pleasant
- Low quality - High quality

Length of time viewing the program

How long have you been watching *Will and Grace*? (1 = Not long to 5 = Many years)

Continued overleaf

Viewer satisfaction, 5-point Likert Scale (adapted from Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Iwaniszek 1986), Cronbach's Alpha = .97

In general, I like the program, *Will and Grace*

Overall, I am satisfied with the *Will and Grace* program

All things considered, there are many good things are associated with watching *Will and Grace*

Rewards, 5-point Likert Scale (adapted from Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Iwaniszek 1986), Cronbach's Alpha = .93

It is enjoyable to watch *Will and Grace*

It is rewarding to watch *Will and Grace*

In general, I associate positive feelings with watching *Will and Grace*

Costs, 5-point Likert Scale (adapted from Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Iwaniszek 1986), Cronbach's Alpha = .93

I have negative feelings about the program, *Will and Grace* (reverse scored)

I experience negative consequences when I watch this show (reverse scored)

Entertainment alternative quality, 5-point Likert Scale (adapted from Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Iwaniszek 1986), Cronbach's Alpha = .90

All things considered, I have good entertainment alternatives to watching the *Will and Grace* program

During the timeslot in which *Will and Grace* airs, there is another program I consider equally acceptable considering what I look for in choosing a television show to watch

It would be easy for me to find an acceptable alternative to watching *Will and Grace*

Investment size, 5-point Likert Scale (adapted from Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Iwaniszek 1986)

All things considered, there are benefits I would lose if I did not watch *Will and Grace*

Importance of advocacy programming

How important to you is it that *Will and Grace* provides support through its characters of issues that are relevant to you? (1 = Not at all important to 5 = Extremely important)

Participants

Of the original 774 respondents to the Web-based survey, 68.7% (532 individuals) acknowledged having watched *Will and Grace* at some time. Of those, 61.5% self-identified as heterosexual, 28.0% as gay or lesbian, 4.5% as bisexual, and 6.0% refused to answer. The analyses presented in this paper include only the heterosexual and gay/lesbian respondents, because inclusion of all four categories would have presented statistical problems due to the small number of respondents in the bisexual and refused-to-answer groups. The following discussion focuses solely, therefore, on the 476 participants (heterosexual and gay/lesbian) of whom 43.9% were female and 56.1% were male. Age distributions indicated that 17.2 %

were 18-24, 28.5% were 25-34, 25.8% were 35-44, 16.1% were 45-54, and 12.4% were 55 and older. Income appeared to be well-distributed among the sample with 38% in the \$25,000-49,999 range and all categories represented. Most respondents had completed some college (28.4%) and an additional 22% had completed a four-year college degree. Viewing of *Will and Grace* for many years or a long time was indicated by 46.9% of the group.

Results

Hypothesis 1 proposed that attitudes toward *Will and Grace* would be more positive for the gay/lesbian viewers than for the heterosexual group. The mean scores for each attitude measured are included in Table 2 (overleaf). The scores indicated a positive attitude toward *Will and Grace* overall but significantly more positive scores from the gay/lesbian viewers on all nine dimensions, thus providing support for Hypothesis 1. For these scale variables, the values were obtained by averaging responses for the respective item sets (seen in Table 1) with all scores based on a scale of 1 to 5. Higher scores on all but two of the scale variables indicated positive attitudes, while higher scores on the measures of cost and entertainment alternative quality indicated perceptions of higher costs and many alternatives, respectively.

It was particularly interesting to note that on average, gay and lesbian viewers had watched the show for more years than heterosexuals and felt more invested. Further, gay and lesbian viewers reported that it was important that television programming advocate on issues that were relevant to them while heterosexuals did not find this important. Heterosexuals also reported perceiving significantly greater entertainment choices than did gays and lesbians. Satisfaction with and attitudes toward the *Will and Grace* program were generally high and particularly so for the gay and lesbian viewers. Program commitment was stronger among the gay and lesbian viewers but lower than would be expected based on such high satisfaction scores.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that the gay/lesbian segment would report greater rewards associated with watching the program than the heterosexual segment, and that the reverse would be true on the measure of costs. A t-test between the two groups supported this hypothesis. Table 2 illustrates a significantly higher rewards mean score for gay/lesbians than for heterosexuals (4.16 vs. 3.27). The data in Table 2 (overleaf) also show a significantly higher mean on the costs score for heterosexuals than for gay/lesbians (2.03 vs. 1.46). Differences in both cases were significant at the .05 level.

Hypothesis 3 suggested that with Rusbult's Investment Model as a theoretical base, rewards would be positively related to viewer satisfaction while costs would be negatively related to viewer satisfaction. The results of a regression analysis illustrated that rewards and costs were both significant predictors of viewer satisfaction when controlling for sexual orientation (β (rewards) = .82; β (costs) = -.15, $p < .01$; adjusted $R^2 = .84$). Further, rewards were positively related to viewer satisfaction while costs were negatively related. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Table 2
Scale Variable Mean Scores by Sexual Orientation (N = 476)

Variable	Sexual Orientation	Mean
Program commitment	Gay/ Lesbian Heterosexual	3.71 2.65
Attitude toward the program	Gay/ Lesbian Heterosexual	4.07 3.44
Length of time viewing the program	Gay/ Lesbian Heterosexual	4.12 2.87
Viewer satisfaction	Gay/ Lesbian Heterosexual	4.30 3.60
Rewards	Gay/ Lesbian Heterosexual	4.16 3.27
Costs	Gay/ Lesbian Heterosexual	1.46 2.03
Entertainment alternative quality	Gay/ Lesbian Heterosexual	2.59 3.34
Investment size	Gay/ Lesbian Heterosexual	3.13 2.22
Importance of advocacy programming	Gay/ Lesbian Heterosexual	4.25 2.48

These scale variables refer to measures about *Will and Grace* shown in Table 1. Scales were all 1 to 5 with 5 representing higher scores. All differences were significant at the .05 level.

The predictive ability of regression modeling for gays and lesbians only and heterosexuals only were examined. The only significant variable predicting viewer satisfaction for gays and lesbians was rewards ($\beta = .95$, $p < .01$); costs did not remain in the model (adjusted $R^2 = .89$). Rewards and costs (β (rewards) = .77; β (costs) = -.19, $p < .01$) both remained in the model for heterosexuals with an adjusted R^2 of .81. Thus, it appeared that, despite differences in attitudes toward *Will and Grace* between the two groups, rewards and costs could be useful in understanding viewer satisfaction.

Hypothesis 4 suggested that viewer satisfaction, entertainment alternative quality, and investment would show strong predictive ability for program commitment. A

regression analysis was conducted to identify the variables best used for explaining the variance associated with program commitment. This analysis was conducted using three strategies. First, a hierarchical regression analysis was used to control for differences found based on sexual orientation. Therefore, this first model represented a look at viewer satisfaction for the general market as shown in Table 3. The predictive ability of the model was strong with an adjusted R^2 of .80 as shown in Table 3. The result of a regression analysis based on only gay/lesbian responses is shown in Table 4 and for heterosexuals in Table 5. Table 4 shows similar results for the gay and lesbian group with one key difference – in addition to the Investment Model variables, advocacy-based programming was also a significant variable in the model (adjusted $R^2 = .82$). Interestingly, entertainment alternative quality was not a predictor for program commitment when examining only the heterosexual viewers (adjusted $R^2 = .76$).

Table 3
Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Program Commitment (N = 476)

Step	Variable	β	R	R^2	R^2_{adj}
1	Sexual orientation (H v. G/L)	.00			
2	Investment size	.38			
	Viewer satisfaction	.34			
	Length of time viewing the program	.25	.89	.81	.80
	Entertainment alternative quality	-.15			

Note: All coefficients were significant at $p < .01$. In this analysis, advocacy-based programming, costs, and attitude toward gays were also significant in the model; however, these variables added less than 1% of variance explained in the model and were deleted.

Table 4
Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Program Commitment among Gays and Lesbians (N = 150)

Variable	β	R	R^2	R^2_{adj}
Viewer satisfaction	.35			
Investment size	.32			
Length of time viewing the program	.18			
Entertainment alternative quality	-.17			
Importance of advocacy programming	.15	.91	.83	.82

Note: All coefficients were significant at $p < .01$.

Table 5
Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Program Commitment among Heterosexuals (N = 326)

Variable	β	R	R^2	R^2_{adj}
Investment size	.39			
Viewer satisfaction	.25			
	.31	.87	.76	.76
	.12			

Note: All coefficients were significant at $p < .01$.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that the challenge to develop programming that appeals to both heterosexual and gay and lesbian markets is one that networks can successfully meet. The attitudes expressed in this study toward *Will and Grace*, the choice of gay-themed programming for this study, were positive for both the heterosexual and gay/lesbian groups. Attitudes measured included program commitment, attitudes toward the program, length of time viewing the program, viewer satisfaction, rewards, costs, entertainment alternative quality, investment size, and the importance of advocacy programming. All attitudes were positive towards *Will and Grace*, but there were significant differences on all variables between gay/lesbian viewers and heterosexual viewers. Attitudes from the gay/lesbian group were significantly more positive than those from heterosexual viewers.

A comparison of perceived entertainment alternative quality indicated that gay/lesbian viewers believed there were few alternatives available to the *Will and Grace* program while heterosexual viewers indicated a belief in the availability of many alternatives. This finding suggests that there is an opportunity to develop a strong gay and lesbian viewer base by developing other programming of interest to this market and that the entertainment needs of this market are not yet being met. Further, based on the positive attitudes toward the gay themes in *Will and Grace*, it is entirely possible that additional gay-themed programming could attract a loyal gay/lesbian base while also appealing to heterosexual viewers. This is perhaps not surprising given the relatively strong appeal (30-35% of subscribers are heterosexual) of the Here network to heterosexuals (Spencer 2005). Gay and lesbian viewers responded strongly and positively to the statement that it was important for television programming to address issues that were relevant to them while heterosexual viewers seemed to feel that advocacy programming was not important in program choice.

The results also suggest that Rusbult's Investment Model has great promise as a theoretical base for understanding viewer commitment to television programming. Commitment to the program in the present study was measured by positive responses to the three statements "I am committed to watching *Will and Grace*;" "I often watch *Will and Grace*;" and, "It is important to me to watch *Will and Grace*." The scale variable derived from these statements was positively related to the measures of viewer satisfaction, entertainment alternative quality, and investment size (along with rewards and costs), in a manner exactly as expected by Rusbult's Investment model, thus helping to validate its application in an area for which it was not originally proposed.

The study does suffer from limitations. It is difficult to separate the value of gay/lesbian-themed programming from other desirable qualities in a program. The selection of *Will and Grace* as the stimulus in this study enabled the researcher access to a fairly large sample of gays/lesbians and heterosexuals with knowledge of the program. However, it would be useful to include several programs with gay and/or lesbian lead and supporting characters in future studies to further assess the relationship between the inclusion of gay/lesbian themes, attitudes toward the programs, and viewer loyalty. Questions that arise from this study could be addressed. For instance, does the simple inclusion of a gay or lesbian lead or

supporting character constitute a gay/lesbian theme in the program or must the plots addressed in the program specifically address issues of relevance to gays and lesbians? Are there differences in the perceived entertainment alternatives available for gay and lesbian cable subscribers versus non-subscribers? The study also allocates substantial weight to the influence of sexual orientation, assuming to some extent that gay and lesbian viewers may have similar preferences for television programming, regardless of other characteristics. Other limitations include the choice to include only those with previous knowledge of the program. The study could also have included measures of the degree of familiarity with the program to determine whether program involvement was relevant in understanding the viewer attitudes. In addition, while the choice of Rusbult's Investment Model was found to be useful, the measures could be better refined for use in broadcast research. Future research involving Rusbult's Investment model as a predictor of program commitment could utilize data from Nielsen ratings and data retrieved from DVR programming instead of/in addition to viewer survey responses. Including such behavioral data could also address limitations related to the frequency and extent of program involvement. Still, the findings suggest that while gay and lesbian attitudes toward *Will and Grace* were more positive than those of heterosexuals, television programs including gay themes can, nonetheless, reach and satisfy both groups.

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