

Examining Preadolescent Television Programming and the Rise of Generation Me

Johanna Rosen

*Cinema & Television Arts
Elon University*

Abstract

Preadolescence is a pivotal time for individuals as they develop their own set of values, attitudes, and beliefs. With children ages 11 to 14 reportedly watching nearly three hours a day of television, TV programming can be enormously influential. This study examined how preteen TV programming has changed over time by comparing and contrasting shows from different decades. This study found the values highlighted in early 21st century programming for preadolescents are more individualistically driven and sensationalized than they were in the 1990s, resulting in a narcissistic preteen culture.

I. Introduction

Amidst the declining ratings in broadcast primetime television, children's television is still thriving (Martin, 2009). Kids, ages 11 to 14, spend the most time watching live TV, averaging three hours a day (Foehr, Roberts, & Rideout, 2010). And while preadolescent TV consumption has remained relatively stable over the last 20 years, what has taken a dramatic shift is the content of this programming.

Television has a major impact on children: "Through television, we have the choice of encouraging others to demean this life or to cherish it in creative and imaginative ways" (Rogers, 1999). Fred Rogers, the host of PBS's *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, said this during the Television Critics' Hall of Fame Ceremony in 1999. Fast-forward 16 years, and the number one value emphasized in preadolescent programming has become fame (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011).

Today's youth are more obsessed with becoming famous than ever before. In addition, research suggests narcissism is increasing, with each generation reaching new levels of vanity (Seigel, 2013). This paper suggests the values highlighted in early 21st century programming for preadolescents are more individualistically driven and sensationalized than they were in the 1990s, resulting in a narcissistic preteen culture.

The current study examined how preteen TV programming has changed over time by comparing and contrasting preadolescent programming from different decades.

Keywords: fame, narcissism, preadolescent television, vanity, new media
Email: Jrosen5@elon.edu

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II. Literature Review

This literature review begins with an overview of the most widely cited relevant study, “The Rise of Fame: An Historical Content Analysis,” conducted by Uhls and Greenfield (2011a). This study asked 60 randomly selected adults to analyze the top two preteen TV shows each year in the United States over a time span of 50 years. For the purposes of the current study, only the last 10 years of the study, 1997-2007, were considered.

The goal of the study was to document significant changes in the values communicated to preadolescent audiences over the decades. A list of 16 values were generated and rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 being not at all important to 4 being extremely important.

The results showed that the top five values in the most popular preadolescent shows from 2007 were fame, achievement, popularity, image, and financial success. In contrast, the top five values in 1997 were community feeling, benevolence, image, tradition, and self-acceptance (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011a). The value of fame rose from the 15th spot in 1997, to the first spot by 2007, while the importance of valuing community feeling and benevolence dropped to the bottom of the list by 2007 (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011a). Greenfield expresses his concern with these results: “When being famous and rich is more important than being kind to others, what will happen to kids as they form their values and their identities?” (Wolpert, 2011)

That same year, Uhls and Greenfield (2011) conducted a follow-up study, “The Value of Fame: Preadolescent Perceptions of Popular Media and Their Relationship to Future Aspirations.” This time they went directly to the source, using preadolescents as their participants. This study used focus groups and mixed research methods to determine how preadolescents interpret popular media and how their interpretations relate to their future goals (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011b). The literature suggests that the terms “preadolescent” and “preteen” can be used interchangeably.

In the focus group, composed of 10-12 years olds, 40% listed fame--the idea of being known and recognized by people who are not perceptually present to any given individual (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011b)--as their number one aspiration. When asked what being famous meant, one girl responded, “Um, fame, being famous to me means like the world kinda knows you, and you know, just like being on the red carpet, and with like cameras flashing.” During the focus group, no child mentioned the need for possession of a particular skill when discussing the concept of fame. Preteens are craving fame without understanding that it should be tied to hard work and skill (as cited in Seigel, 2013). In this case fame is seen as a reward, rather than the result of having a talent.

Marjorie Cohn, former executive vice president of original programming and development at Nickelodeon, said, “Every kid thinks they are five minutes away and one lucky circumstance from being famous” (Smith, 2009). The Internet age and preadolescent television are not conveying the chance of getting a rare success or the sacrifices and skills that are required to achieve it (Wolpert, 2011). This could inevitably have a negative effect on realistic future goals and accomplishments of the American youth (Alikhani, 2011), setting a generation up for failure and disappointment.

If the messages preteens are seeing on television today are about young people achieving success and fame, it is only natural for kids to want to mimic that behavior (Uhls, 2012). Popular preteen TV shows, such as *iCarly* and *Victorious*, are about characters that are either already famous or actively seeking fame. *iCarly* is about a girl who has reached a certain level of celebrity by starring in her own Web series. *Victorious* follows Tori Vega, a teenager, who has just been accepted into the elite Hollywood Arts High School, as she struggles to be the “main attraction,” as stated in the chorus of the show’s theme song, “Make It Shine.” The issue with this programming is that it teaches children that such achievements are attainable, when statistically they are not (Lufkin, 2012).

Deborah Linebarger, director of the Children’s Media Lab at the University of Pennsylvania, believes that, “Nickelodeon viewers are at a stage when they are developing their sense of self and are particularly vulnerable to these images” (Martin, 2009). Children’s networks should be overly critical and sensitive with the content they are producing because TV content and cultural values interact and affect one another (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011a).

Apparently children learned the lesson, “you can be whatever you want to be” a little too well. This might benefit some, but most will be disappointed. The vast majority of jobs are not particularly exciting or glamorous, but preteen programming hides this reality from its viewers (Twenge, 2006).

Generation Me: Narcissism and Fame

The pursuit of fame is closely tied to narcissism--an affinity to believe one's self to be superior over others (Panek, Nardis, & Konrath, 2013). Societal trends have drifted away from an emphasis on community and the common good, and moved toward the need to perfect oneself to the point of self-aggrandizement (Drinka, 2014). Central values portrayed on the most popular preadolescent shows appear to be influenced by these trends by becoming more individualistic in nature.

The glorification of these values in today's programming may be one influence in the documented cultural rise of narcissism (Wolpert, 2011). Twenge, the author of *The Narcissism Epidemic*, believes that narcissists just want to get attention from others and to be thought of as the best, even if they do not have any particular talent.

YouTube, which was not created until 2005, is now the number one online video destination for American youth, ages 8-11 (Nielsen Online, 2008). Preteens believe YouTube is their ticket to fame (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011b). When a preadolescent participant was asked what his goal was for making YouTube videos, he answered by simply stating, "I want to get a million subscribers" (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011b). He did not seem to care what he became famous for, as long as he attained some level of fame. "Their goal is to become famous even though they do not have anything they could become famous for" (as cited in Marostica, 2012). Being famous does not necessarily cause narcissism, but could lead to it (Seigel, 2013).

Similarly, self-aggrandizing trends are now seen in Instagram. Instagram is a free photo sharing application that enables its users to take and edit pictures and/or videos (Ochs, 2011). Instagram is a widely popular site amongst preteens that is said to cultivate negative reinforcement that "colludes with society's fixation with appearance, status, wealth, and materialism" (Tsilimparis, 2015). Preteens have made it their goal to become "Insta-famous"--a self-made micro-celebrity, known for his or her work on Instagram (Dewey, 2014). Instagram appears to have become less about sharing one's experiences and more about getting "likes" to reach an arbitrary milestone that represents validation (Hapsis, 2013). This obsession for approval and attention generates narcissistic characters who are dominating new media and preadolescent programming.

The literature review suggests that narcissism is on the rise in preteen programming in the early 21st century. Based on the seminal work of Uhls and Greenfield (2011a and b) and others in the literature review, the current study asked three research questions:

- RQ1. Does preteen TV programming from the first decade of the 2000s have more narcissistic tendencies than in did in 1991?
- RQ2. How has the representation of personal values changed in preadolescent programming since 1991?
- RQ3. What are the predominant messages in selected pilots of preadolescent shows in 1991 compared to more recent times?

III. Methods

The current study used a mixed methods approach, adopted from the work of Uhls and Greenfield (2011a). Quantitative analysis was done on a narcissistic scale and a personal value ranking system, and qualitative analysis was done to examine the predominant messages from the selected pilots.

To analyze preadolescent programming, this study selected the following four pilot shows based on their high ratings in the desired demographic (Rice, 2011): A) *Clarissa Explains It All* (Frankel, 1991), B) *iCarly* (Schneider, 2007), C) *Salute Your Shorts* (Slavkin, 1991), and D) *Victorious* (Schneider, 2010).

A) *Clarissa Explains It All* is essentially about the main character, Clarissa, taking the audience through her day-to-day life as she deals with typical preadolescent dilemmas, such as family issues, school, friends, and potential love interests. B) *iCarly* focuses on a preteen, Carly, who creates a Web show with her two best friends, Sam and Freddy, that soon turns into a huge success. C) *Salute Your Shorts* tells the adventures of a group of preteens at summer camp. D) *Victorious* is about an aspiring singer, Tori Vega, navigating life at a performing arts school called Hollywood Arts.

Both A) *Clarissa Explains it All* and B) *iCarly* are driven by female main characters navigating the usual trials and tribulations of female adolescents, such as insecurities, dating, and friendships. The other two shows, C) *Salute Your Shorts* and D) *Victorious*, are more ensemble shows, with camp and school providing a place of interpersonal relationships. So A) and B) were compared as one group while C) and D) were compared as another for analysis later.

To answer RQ1, the narcissistic scale was created based on the five qualities that most closely relate to narcissism: fame, hedonism, attention seeking, conceitedness, and how one represents oneself with an image. The current study assessed each of these components on a 4-point scale, with 1 being least narcissistic and 4, most narcissistic.

To answer RQ2, eight personal values—fame, popularity, achievement, image, community feeling, benevolence, family, and tradition—were ranked by the author based on its prevalence. For example, rank score 1 for fame means that fame is the most prevalent theme portrayed in that show.

To answer RQ3, a qualitative content analysis was done to find predominant messages. This analysis specifically looked at four categories: lessons, conflict, appearance, and language, as shown by Table 1 in Appendix.

IV. Results

The results are structured below to address each of the three research questions. The current study found a positive answer to RQ1: There are more characters with narcissistic tendencies in recent times than 1991. As shown in *Figure 1* on the next page, the average narcissistic scores for old programs were 2.6 for A) *Clarissa* and 2.0 for C) *Salute*; and the scores for recent programs were 2.9 for B) *iCarly* and 3.0 for D) *Victorious*. Among the five categories that compose the narcissistic scale, all scores have increased over the time.

Increases in the average narcissistic scores for recent programs were mainly attributed to increases in fame scores. For example, A) *Clarissa Explains It All* and B) *iCarly* were only separated by a 0.3 point in their average narcissistic score, but the former scored a fame score of 0.3 while the latter, a 3.7.

In the *iCarly* pilot, a fan asks Carly for her autograph after her Web show goes viral. Once Carly realizes the immediate attention her newfound fame is generating, she ends the episode saying that she is definitely going to like being famous. This realization, along with Carly's obsession with getting her Web show to be seen by more than 37,000 viewers, led the current author to give *iCarly* receiving a high fame score. *Clarissa Explains It All* produced a much smaller fame score. The only indication that Clarissa has any aspirations of being famous or caring about fame is shown in the beginning of the episode. While Clarissa is introducing herself to the audience, she explains how she wished she had one name, like Madonna: "Madonna would be great," Clarissa says to the camera.

Also C) *Salute Your Shots* can be compared with D) *Victorious*. In the former, which scored a fame score of 0.2, the concept of fame is brought up just once when one camper is bragging to the other kids about knowing Janet Jackson. However, unlike in *Victorious*, these kids show no interest in the idea of fame, rolling their eyes and responding by bluntly saying, "No one cares." On the other hand, the latter generated a fame score of a 3.2 because the entire premise of the show is centered on a group of performing arts students whose ultimate goal is to be famous.

The most consistent rating over time was in the "attention-seeking" category, which proved to be high throughout all the selected programs, ranging from a 3.1 to a 3.6. No matter what decade a show is from, there always seems to be one or two characters craving attention.

Regarding RQ2 on personal value changes in preadolescent programming, the current study found that four individual-oriented values, such as fame, popularity, achievement, and image have increased while the community-oriented values, such as community feeling, benevolence, family, and tradition have decreased, as shown in *Figure 2* on page 21. (The figure appears upside down because high rank numbers represent low values.)

These findings mirrored the work of Uhls and Greenfield's (2011a) study that also found fame and achievement to be among the top values represented in preadolescent programming in the early 2000s. Benevolence, family, and tradition, although prevalent in the 1990s, fell drastically to the bottom of the list

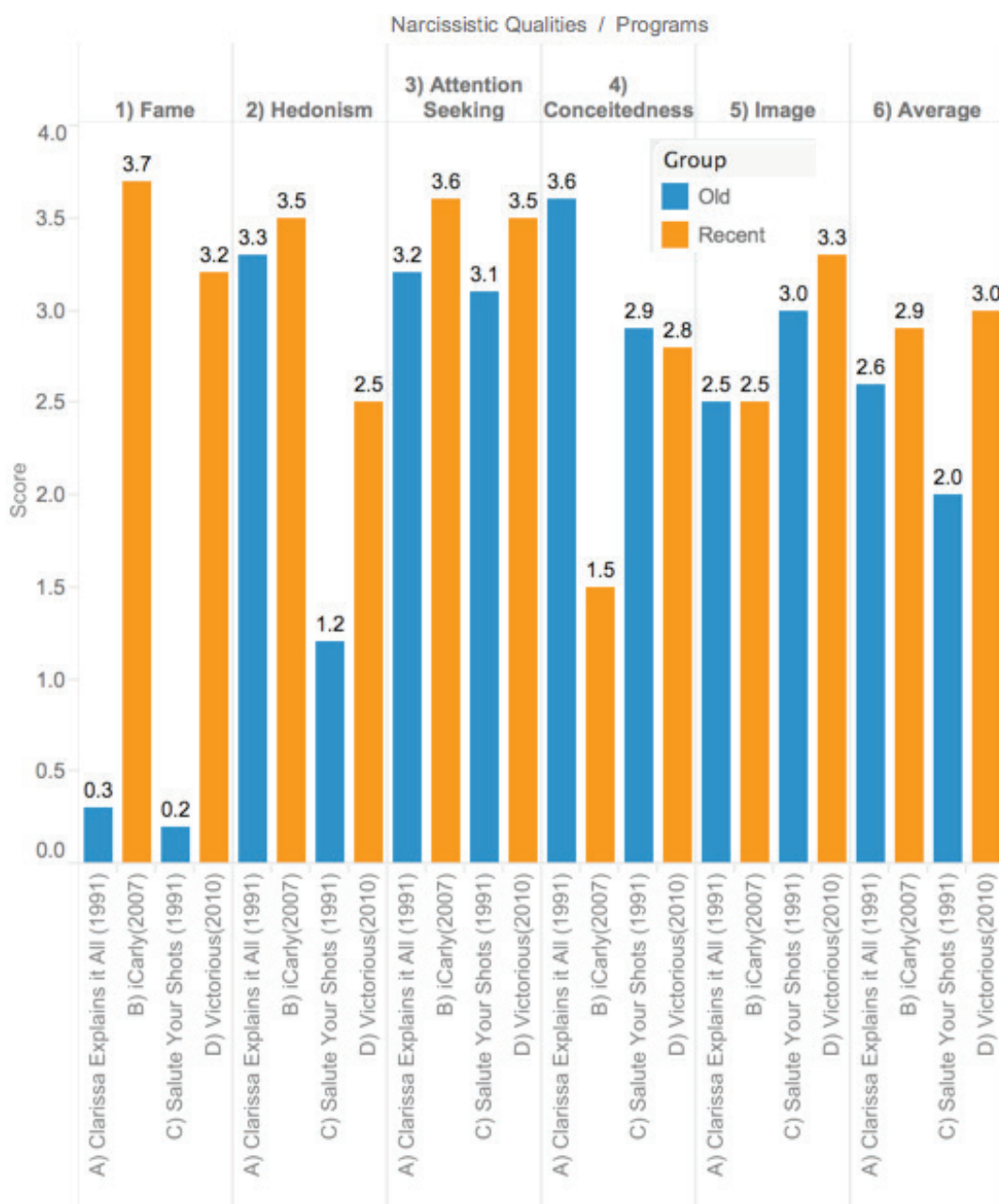


Figure 1. Comparison of programs produced in the 1990s and early 2000s.

by 2010. The real question is: are children actually adopting this new set of values? According to a study conducted by *Psychology Today*, that answer is yes. “Fame is now the number one aspirational value among children nine to eleven years old” (Taylor, 2012).

A qualitative study was done to find answers to RQ3 on the predominant messages in selected pilots of preadolescent shows, focusing on four categories of lessons, conflict, appearance, and language (Refer to Table 1 in Appendix for more detail). Through the qualitative analysis, the researcher determined that the overall messages communicated to preteens were more playful and meaningful in 1991 than the later times.

The predominant message in programming has evolved from caring about others in

1991, to caring about oneself in more recent times of 2007 and 2010. In A) *Salute Your Shorts*, the word “I” was muttered less than 10 times in the first 10 minutes of the show while it was said more than 30 times in the first 10 minutes of B) *Victorious*. This suggests that preteen television has transformed into a

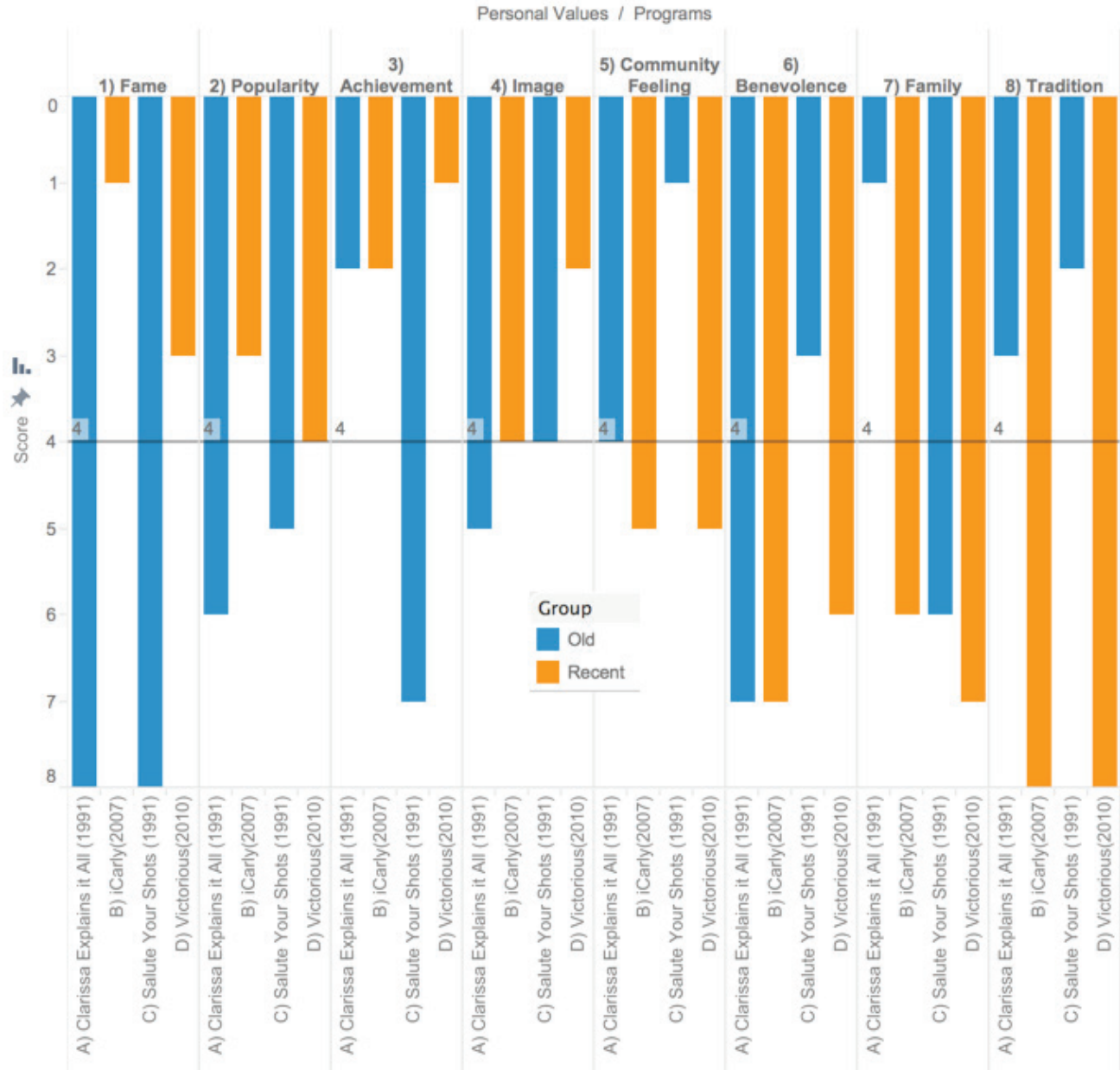


Figure 2. Rank number of each of eight personal values.

preoccupation with one's self. The former stresses the importance of putting family and friends first, while the latter focuses on individualism.

In *Salute Your Shorts*, phrases such as, “you are roasted, toasted and burnt to a crisp” and “your breath smells like a wet diaper” are thrown around by the cool crowd at camp. Although these are not the most benevolent phrases, they are harmless and received in good fun. More importantly, *Salute Your Shorts* teaches preteens the importance of putting others ahead of oneself. Michael, the new kid at camp, agrees to raid the girls' bunk to fit in with the crowd. The raid does not go as planned, and an innocent bystander ends up getting blamed for the entire incident. Despite Michael's bunkmates saying, “You got away with it, just keep your mouth shut,” Michael decides to step forward and admit that he was the one responsible for the raid. After Michael accepts the blame, the girls, instead of getting mad, respect him for coming forward.

The same thing was found from the comparison of C) *Clarissa Explains It All* and D) *Victorious*. In the former, Clarissa uses colorful language when describing her irritating brother, “that dork-pie has been a burn on my butt ever since he was born.” This kind of language is melodramatic enough to the point where

it cannot be considered offensive. In this pilot episode, Clarissa is plotting against her “dork-pie” brother but puts her personal vendetta on hold to help out her friend with his football tryout dilemma.

In the latter, Tori is nervous about starting her new school and says to her sister, “these kids are all artsy and creative and talented and I’m just normal.” Her sister responds in a sarcastic manner saying, “It’s okay, there is nothing wrong with being average.” Whether or not this was intended to be funny, all it did was put a negative connotation on being normal. It could make a viewer think that if they did not have a special talent, there must be something wrong with them. Later in the episode Tori’s sister says she was great in the showcase but quickly turns it back to herself by saying, “But I would have been amazing.” At the end of the episode Tori develops a crush on a boy who has a girlfriend. Instead of considering the girlfriend’s feelings, Tori manipulates a class exercise and gets the boy to kiss her. Instead of the class acting appalled, the students react by clapping and cheering for Tori. This conveys the message that manipulating a situation for personal gain is encouraged and acceptable.

In *iCarly*, Carly and her two best friends exploit their teacher on the Web and instead of getting reprimanded they get instant fame and popularity. This circumstance, which the whole show is based on, highlights the message that it is okay to make fun of people, particularly superiors, in order to advance your own desires. Each episode of *iCarly* is paired with a clever title including the word “i.” Some examples are as follows: *iWant More Viewers*, *iWant a World Record*, and *iAm Your Biggest Fan*. Although the creator of the show may argue that the “i” just stands for Internet, the researcher believes that starting each episode with “i” frames this show in an individualistic manner and promotes the idea of self above others. All Carly and her friends seem to care about is being viral Web stars and inevitably do not seem to care who they have to put down in order to make that dream a reality.

V. Conclusion

The current study found two recent preteen TV programs have become more narcissistic in comparison with the other two in 1991. The study also found that individual-oriented values, such as fame, popularity, achievement, and image have become more prevalent over the time and the community-oriented values, such as community feeling, benevolence, family, and tradition, have diminished. Qualitative analysis showed that the overall messages communicated to preteens were more playful and meaningful in 1991 than the later times, when cheating and manipulation of others were accepted when they contributed to their achieving personal goals.

Preadolescence is a pivotal time for individuals, when they are developing their own set of values, attitudes, and beliefs; and it is naïve to think that they will not be influenced by what they see on TV. To revisit Fred Rogers (1999), it appears that television, at least from 2010 and onward, is less about cherishing life than it is about sensationalizing it. It is a conundrum that preadolescent television has yet to solve.

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Appendix

Table 1. Messages in Four Pilot Shows



| Predominant Messages | Salute Your Shorts (1991) | Victorious (2010) | Clarissa Explains It All (1991) | iCarly (2007) |
|----------------------|--|--|---|---|
| Lessons | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People respect you more for telling the truth. • Being part of the cool crowd isn't everything • Put others ahead of yourself | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be confident • Step out of your comfort zone • Stand up for oneself • Be a star • "Normal is boring" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Payback doesn't always go as planned • Friends always have your back • Everyone has an embarrassing sibling | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making fun of people leads to instant fame and popularity. • It's easy to create your own web show and become famous . |
| Conflict | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Michael is being picked on for being the new kid at camp. • Michael raids the girl's bunk to try and impress his bunkmates. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tori must fill in for her sister at the Hollywood Arts' showcase • Tori is the new student who is having a hard time fitting in. • Tori doesn't get along with mean girl, Jade. • Tori kisses the Jade's boyfriend | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarissa's friend tries to avoid trying out for the football team. • When Ferguson presents Clarissa's training bra in show and tell she hatches a plan to send Ferg-face into outer space via helium balloons and a straight jacket. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carly and Sam pull a prank and get caught and receive punishment • Freddy is in love with Carly • A video of Cary and Sam making fun of their teacher accidentally goes on the web and instantly becomes viral inspiring them to create their own web show. |
| Appearance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes place at a camp-mainly outdoors • Normal, average looking kids at summer camp. • Bunks- no electricity, authentic • Kids at camp of all different shapes and from all different backgrounds. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20- year old actors are playing 14-year-olds. • Wearing tight, flashy clothing on stage. • Saturated colors • Mean girl- heavy eye makeup, all black leather. • Graphics- twitter-like site used as a transition for between scenes. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarissa talks to the audience by directly addressing the camera • Graphics of little doodles to help explain Clarissa's thoughts • Average looking girl, unkempt eyebrows and hair, no makeup, wacky, unmatched clothing. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graphic of an editing screen, showing a mouse clicking on different clips, are used as a transition between scenes. • Wearing age appropriate modern clothing in school. |
| Language | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "You are roasted, toasted, and burnt to a crisp." • "It's awful waffle time" • "you got away with it just keep your mouth shut." • "you're going to be dead meat" • "i can hock a loogie 8ft in the air and catch it with my tongue." • "being brave usually means getting your adult teeth knocked right out." • "i suppose you already know who my father is?" • "nobody cares" • "Your breath smells like a wet diaper" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I" (30 times) 10 minutes of the show. • "Oh my god" (5 times) • "These kids are all artsy and creative and talented and I'm just normal." • "You're not normal, you're special. • opening: "you don't have to be afraid to put your dreams in action you never gonna fade you'll be the main attraction not a fantasy just remember me when it turns out right • "tomorrow you'll be ever-body's fascination." | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "This is Ferguson my ugh brother, morning Ferg-face" • "sometimes I think he was just envious of my natural grace and good looks." • "some kids have all the luck, they always get pizza for dinner." (Connected to feeling neglected) • "Sam you can't leave, think of me." • "Clarissa if you don't come down right this minute, I'm sending your father up." • "Mom can i drive the car to town?" "What do you think you have feet for?" "to work the pedals" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Wow, they love us" • "Let's do a web show...we can do whatever we want, say whatever we want." • "I" could stand for Internet or could represent the "me" generation. • "if you liked our show tell your friends." • "Our very first web show was watched by over 37,000 people." • "Can I get your autograph" • Next episode titled- "i want more viewers" • "i think I'm going to like being famous." |