






# Adolescents' TV Viewing Patterns in the Digital Era: a Cross-cultural Study

Pautas de consumo televisivo en adolescentes de la era digital:  
un estudio transcultural

-  Dr. Leire Ugalde is Assistant Lecturer in the Faculty of Education, Philosophy and Anthropology at the University of the Basque Country in San Sebastián (Spain) (leire.ugalde@ehu.eu) (<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5769-7759>)
-  Dr. Juan-Ignacio Martínez-de-Morentin is Associate Lecturer in the Faculty of Psychology at the University of the Basque Country in San Sebastián (Spain) (juanignacio.demorentin@ehu.eu) (<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9268-6470>)
-  Dr. María-Concepción Medrano is Professor in the Faculty of Education, Philosophy and Anthropology at the University of the Basque Country in San Sebastián (Spain) (mariaconcepcion.medrano@ehu.eu) (<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7980-843X>)

## ABSTRACT

The deep-rooted changes that have taken place in the media world over recent years have brought about changes in both television itself and in the relationships established with this medium. Consequently, it is important to understand how young people watch television today, in order to design strategies to help them develop the capacities they require to ensure responsible use. With this aim, the present study analyzes the television viewing habits of 553 adolescents (267 boys and 286 girls), aged between 14 and 19, from Ireland, Spain and Mexico. Through the implementation of two questionnaires (CH-TV 0.2 and VAL-TV 0.2), four viewing patterns were detected that can be generalized to all the contexts studied. Two of these patterns clearly distinguish between boys (critical-cultural) and girls (social-conversational), with boys viewing more cultural and information-oriented programs, and girls tending to watch shows with a view to talking about them later with their friends. Two of the variables which best distinguish between the other two patterns identified are the perception of a conflictive climate (conflictive-passive viewing) and the perception of responsible parental mediation (committed-positive viewing). Moreover, preferred television genre was found to be the factor with the greatest discriminatory power in relation to these patterns, while time spent watching television, perceived realism and cultural context were not found to be significant.

## RESUMEN

Los profundos cambios acaecidos en la configuración del contexto mediático en los últimos tiempos han generado cambios tanto en el medio televisivo como en las relaciones establecidas con él. Es por ello que resulta necesario conocer cómo consumen la televisión los jóvenes actuales en aras de crear estrategias que ayuden a capacitarlos en la utilización de este medio. Con este fin, en esta investigación se han estudiado las pautas de consumo televisivo de 553 adolescentes (267 chicos y 286 chicas) de Irlanda, España y México, de edades comprendidas entre 14 y 19 años. Mediante la aplicación de dos cuestionarios (CH-TV 0.2 y VAL-TV 0.2) se han podido detectar cuatro pautas de consumo generalizables a todos los contextos estudiados. Dos de estas pautas, diferencian el consumo entre hombres (Crítico-Cultural) y mujeres (Social-Conversacional), siendo ellos los que realizan un consumo más cultural e informativo y ellas, más dirigido a entablar conversación con sus amistades. En lo que a las otras dos pautas se refiere, la percepción de un clima conflictivo (consumo Conflictivo-Pasivo) o la de una mediación responsable (consumo Comprometido-Positivo) son algunas de las variables que marcan las diferencias. Además, se han detectado aquellos factores que presentan mayor poder discriminativo en la configuración de estas pautas, siendo la preferencia mostrada hacia los géneros televisivos el factor más discriminante entre los estudiados. Sin embargo, la permanencia, el realismo percibido y el contexto cultural no han resultado ser determinantes.

## KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Television, adolescents, viewing habits, television genre, values, parental mediation, family climate, cultural context.  
Televisión, adolescentes, consumo televisivo, géneros televisivos, valores, mediación parental, clima familiar, contexto cultural.



## 1. Introduction and current context

Television was the subject of much research during the 20th century. The development and gradual spread of this type of screen-based entertainment device to most homes aroused a great deal of curiosity regarding its possible influence, especially on minors. Nevertheless, over the course of the century the media context underwent considerable change. Advances in new technologies and the convergence of different screens have generated a context in which constant interaction with the digital media forms an integral part of young people's lives (Buckingham & Martínez-Rodríguez, 2013). These young people are "digital natives" as Prenksy calls them (2001); they are the "net-generation" (Tapscott, 1998). But the fact that television now has to share the limelight with other screen-based media does not mean that it is no longer watched. In the studies conducted by Carlsson (2010) and Bucht and Harrie (2013) on media use by young people in Nordic countries, the authors found that, even though young people did use the Internet a lot, television viewing was still one of the most popular media pursuits. Similarly, in a study carried out in Aragón (Spain) on parents' perception of their children's use of various different screens at home, Marta and Gabelas (2008:11) concluded that "television continues to be the most popular screen among minors during their leisure time". Thus, even in this new media context, television continues to form part of young people's lives. They watch it mainly for entertainment (Medrano, Palacios, & Aierbe, 2007), although, to a lesser extent, as a source of information also. In two pieces of research which aimed to analyze to what extent today's youngsters watched the news, the authors found that although the social media are the most popular choice, television is the second most common type of screen (Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Condeza, Bachmann, & Mujica, 2014).

Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that the change undergone by the media context is in turn triggering changes in the relationship established between young people and the television screen. As stated in the Green Paper (European Commission, 2013), the familiar consumption models of the 20th century are changing. This is important because family context (Medrano, Aierbe, & Palacios, 2010; Tonantzin & Alonso, 2012; Torrecillas, 2013), family climate (Aierbe, Orozco, & Medrano, 2014), and parental mediation (Radanielina, 2014; Cánovas & Sahuquillo, 2010; Bjelland & al., 2015; Uribe & Santos, 2008) are elements that influence the way in which children and adolescents view and process television messages. Moreover, the development of new technologies is modifying young people's television viewing habits (López-Vidales, González-Aldea, & Medina de-la-Viña, 2011) and triggering changes in the medium itself (Marta & Gabelas, 2008). Digital television is a clear example of this, since it offers viewers access to programs from countries far removed from their own. In a study carried out in Nigeria, Oyero and Oyesomi (2014) found that 90% of children claimed to watch foreign cartoons via satellite, thus exposing themselves constantly to contents from other cultures. Guarinos (2009) found that North American models were more widespread than Spanish ones in the prototypes of adolescents represented in series and television films broadcast in Spain. These results become even more relevant if we take into account the well-reported socializing effect of the media and television (Medrano, Martínez-de-Morentin, & Apodaca, 2015; Pallarés, 2014; Pindado, 2010; Sihvonen, 2015), an effect that is hardly surprising given that there are very few households without at least one television set (Ackermann & al., 2014; Bittman & Siphthorp, 2012; INE, 2014), and that the TV is one of the main devices used in homes and daily life (Torrecillas, 2012).

This media context which characterizes the digital era in which adolescents live has given rise to a certain degree of concern about whether or not young people are sufficiently trained and educated to interact properly with the media (Aguaded & Pérez-Rodríguez, 2012). Thus, digital literacy should occupy a priority place in the education we provide our children in the 21st century (Aguaded, 2013). With this in mind, on 22 May 2008, the Council of the European Union issued a call (Council of the European Union, 2008) for all member states to work towards improving media literacy by including this subject in lifelong learning programs and providing citizens with the tools necessary for developing the competences required to use the media in a critical and responsible manner. There is no doubt that in light of the increasingly changing environment in which we live, it is vital to ensure that the population acquires an adequate level of media literacy (Aguaded, 2013). And we should not forget that television forms part of this context. In a recent cross-cultural study which analyzed the television viewing habits of young people from different countries, Medrano et al. concluded that media narratives should be studied at school in order to avoid passive viewing and ensure that students are capable of correctly decoding the messages conveyed.

We can conclude that, today, any piece of research aiming to study television must take into account the new challenges posed by the transformation undergone by viewers' relationship with this medium within the new media context. One of these challenges is the need to define the current television viewing habits of adolescents. As Casero-Ripollés (2012) points out, young people constitute a privileged group to study since they are digital natives,

subjects who have grown up interacting with and using digital media. It is by studying this segment of the population that we will be able to identify the characteristics of the viewing habits of those who have been raised in a digital environment. Moreover, we acknowledge that it is necessary to offer 21st century citizens the tools they required to make optimum use of the media through media literacy (Aguaded, 2013), then we should work together in order to conduct empirical research that will help us understand those aspects that may improve the quality of this literacy.

The contribution made by this study focuses on analyzing the relationships which exist between today's adolescents and the television screen, by exploring the different television viewing variables and the role played by each. Our study is based on the premise that adolescents' viewing habits are influenced by different tastes, which predominate in different age groups (Huertas & França, 2001; Lapuente, 2011; Medrano & Aierbe, 2008), and are fairly similar as regards reception, which is mainly based on imitation (França, 2001). In light of the above, this study had two aims: 1) To identify common patterns among adolescents from three different cultural contexts; and 2) To detect key factors in the configuration of these patterns.

## 2. Material and methods

Participants were 553 adolescents (267 boys and 286 girls) from 4 different cities: Dublin (Ireland), Guadalajara (Mexico), San Sebastián and Málaga (Spain). All participants were aged between 14 and 19. Due to budgetary restrictions common to projects of this kind, the representativeness of the sample could not rely on random selection systems, and the cities and schools selected were chosen due to the fact that researchers from those countries were participating in this project, thus providing access to the sample group. Thus, the sample group was chosen on the basis of "convenience", with priority being given to ecological validity, over and above random representativeness. Schools were selected on the basis of offering optimum conditions for both access and the administration of the instruments. An effort was also made to ensure the equivalence of the student groups studied, by using similar selection criteria for all of them: type of school, age and school year. This orientation was considered appropriate for the sample selection process since the aim of the study was not to estimate population rates but rather to compare different cultural groups.

As regards to the type of school, the sample group was taken from one or two schools for each sub-sample (city), both public and private, or with different socioeconomic levels (although no extreme cases were included). The sample was therefore drawn from 7 schools and was distributed as follows: Málaga – 2 schools, one private one public, with students from 4th grade of secondary school and 2nd year of the Spanish Baccalaureate (higher education) system; San Sebastián – 2 schools, one public one private, with students from 4th grade of secondary school and 2nd year of the Spanish Baccalaureate (higher education) system; Guadalajara (Mexico) – one private school and students from PREPA (equivalent to 4th grade of secondary school) and years 1 and 3 of the Mexican Baccalaureate system; and Dublin – 2 schools, one private one public, with students from the 3rd year of Junior Cycle and the 2nd level of Senior Cycle.

A descriptive-correlational and cross-cultural ex post-facto research design was used, in which a number of different variables were studied, including: identification, family context and the values perceived in television characters.

Data were collected by means of two questionnaires: the Television Viewing Habits Questionnaire (CH-TV 0.2) and the Television Values Questionnaire (VAL-TV 0.2). The CH-TV 0.2 was created and validated by

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Rodríguez, Medrano, Aierbe and Martínez-de-Morentin (2013), and has an internal consistency of 0.84 (Cronbach's Alpha). It consists of seven initial questions which gather socio-demographic data such as: the parent's educational level, profession and current situation, number of siblings, sex and age of siblings, whether they are older or younger than the child, and information about other people living in the household. These questions are followed by 24 items (scored on a five-point Likert-type scale), which reflect a total of 14 variables. This study focused on 10 of these variables, since they were the ones related to the research objective. They are as follows: reasons for identifying with the character, reason for viewing, identification with the character, perceived realism, time spent watching, alternative activities, television genres, conversation, perceived family climate and parental mediation. The Television Values Questionnaire (VAL-TV 0.2) is a Spanish version of Schwartz and Boehnke's PVQ (2003), adapted to the Spanish context by Medrano, Aierbe and Orejundo (2010). The questionnaire measures the values perceived in TV characters, divided into four dimensions: self-transcendence ( $\alpha=0.87$ ), openness to change ( $\alpha=0.80$ ), conservatism ( $\alpha=0.77$ ) and self-promotion ( $\alpha=0.72$ ). The scale consists of 21 items, the responses to which are scored on a Likert-type scale, from one to six.

The Spanish versions of both questionnaires were adapted to create two new versions: a Mexican one and an English one (appropriate examples and language). These new versions were reviewed by four communications experts and four educational experts who, among other aspects, assessed whether or not the questions related to real television viewing habits and whether the value definitions were applicable in their respective cultures. Once both versions had been drafted and approved, the questionnaires were administered on-line to students from all participating schools, with the help of teaching assistants who had received the appropriate training. The teaching assistants completed the survey with students in the schools' IT classrooms, a process which took between 50-60 minutes. In accordance with the capacity of the classroom itself, students completed the questionnaire in either one or two phases.

### 3. Analysis and results

In order to respond to the first aim, a multiple correspondence analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between the principal television viewing variables. Based on the results of this analysis, the variables were grouped into viewing patterns or habits. Figure 1 shows the results of the analyses.

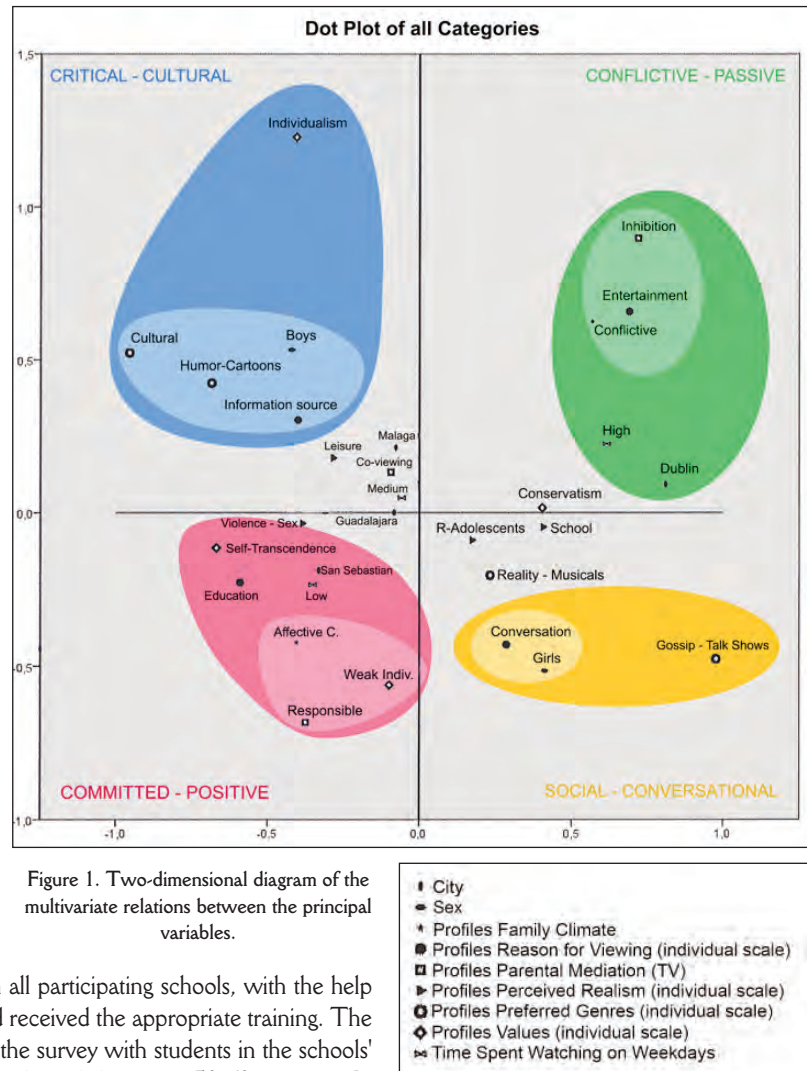


Figure 1. Two-dimensional diagram of the multivariate relations between the principal variables.

Figure 1 shows the location of the different variables studied. In this diagram, physical closeness between variables should be interpreted as attraction or association, while distance represents opposition. Being located in the center of the diagram indicates that the variable in question is subject to neither attraction nor opposition to the others.

Figure 1 indicates the existence of four groups whose location at the edge of the diagram implies a greater degree of association between the constituent elements. One group that can be identified encompasses the following variables: entertainment as the reason for watching television, perception of inhibited parental mediation and a conflictive family climate. This is a multivariate category that describes young people with conflictive families that do not view themselves as capable or qualified to regulate or guide their children's viewing habits. These youngsters also seem to watch television more passively, mainly for entertainment purposes. We could define this type of viewing pattern as "Conflictive-Passive".

Another group worth highlighting is that which reflects a preference for cultural shows, comedy programs and cartoons, and is predominantly male. This group indicates a more critical and reflexive pattern of television viewing. It is also more common among boys. Watching television as a source of information is also associated with this group, although to a lesser extent. Adolescents who watch television in this way could be described as having an active or even proactive attitude to television viewing. The category individualism (as the value perceived in respondents' favorite character) is a satellite element of this group. The distance between this category and the group described above is considerable, which suggests that we should be cautious when estimating the intensity of the association between this category and the other variables. Nevertheless, as shown in the figure, the category individualism is not associated with any other group. We can therefore conclude that individualism is the values category, which best describes the television viewing pattern outlined above. In this sense, it is important to complete the description of this group by noting that it is made up of people whose favorite characters are open to change (as a counterpoint to conformity, security, etc.) and are oriented towards self-promotion. We have termed this second television viewing pattern the "Critical-Cultural" pattern.

There is also a third group which encompasses affective family climate, responsible parental mediation and a weak degree of individualism as the value pattern perceived in respondents' favorite characters. To a lesser and more peripheral extent, other elements of this group also include short viewing times on weekdays, viewing for educational purposes, and self-transcendence as the value perceived in respondents' favorite character. The core elements of the television viewing pattern constituted by this group are a good family climate and committed educational mediation by parents in an effort to regulate and orient their children's viewing habits. Although the values attached to respondents' favorite character are not particularly well-defined, they tend towards self-transcendence and a moderate degree of openness to change, while the values of self-promotion and conservatism are rejected (although only to a moderate extent also). We termed this viewing pattern "Committed-Positive".

Finally, the fourth group identified comprised young people who watch television in order to talk about the content of the shows seen. This viewing pattern is associated with girls and the category "gossip-talk shows" is located on its periphery. It therefore describes a viewing pattern related to the social sphere. As well as evincing an interest in issues inherent to people's social and emotional life, those in this group also tend to share the viewing experience

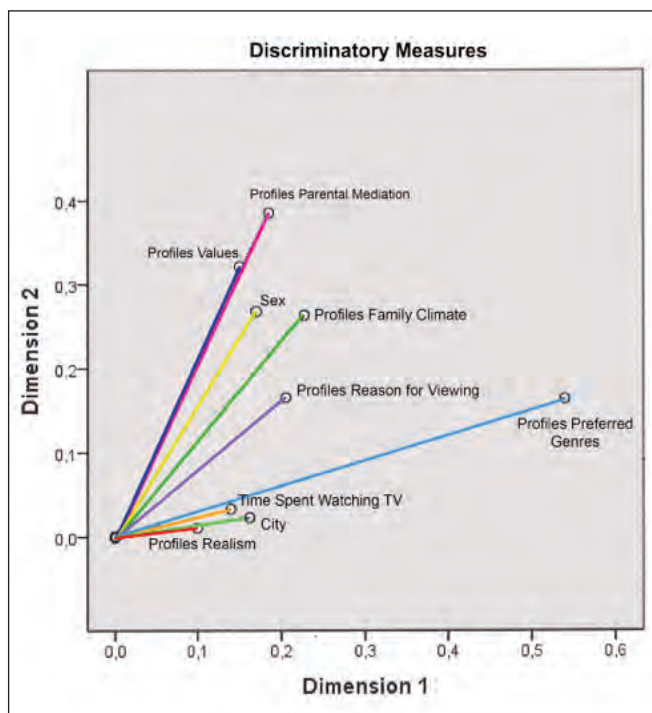


Figure 2. Discrimination coefficients for the different indicators and variables.

through an equally social activity, i.e. conversation. Most of the young people in this "Social-Conversational" viewing pattern were girls.

Once the common viewing patterns shared by adolescents from the various different cities studied had been identified, the role played by each of the study variables in their constitution was analyzed. Figure 2 shows the results of this analysis.

Firstly, it is important to mention that sex played a key role in the definition of the different viewing patterns, since one group was found to be comprised almost exclusively of boys, while another was found to be comprised almost exclusively of girls. Nevertheless, city of residence did not seem to be particularly related to the set of viewing patterns detected. It should be remembered that this factor was not involved in the construction of the axes or dimensions, since it was considered "illustrative" in nature. This is because previous analyses carried out in this research project have found that television viewing habits are subject to a gradual process of globalization. We cannot, therefore, talk about viewing habits typical of any one region, and must instead talk about globalized viewing habits that are present to a greater or lesser extent in all regions and cultures studied. Empirical support for this idea is provided both by the presence of all the cities studied in the central area of the diagram shown in figure 1 (which indicates no specific relationship with any of the television viewing patterns identified) and by their low discriminatory power in figure 2.

As regards the other variables, their relevance may be interpreted in accordance with their location (central or peripheral) on the two-dimensional diagram in figure 1. Thus, the variable with the greatest degree of discriminatory power is preferred genre, followed by (in order) perceived parental mediation, values perceived in favorite character, sex and perceived family climate. Reason for viewing was found to have only moderate discriminatory power.

Time spent watching television, on the other hand, along with perceived realism of the content and city of residence, was not found to be discriminating factors in the viewing patterns identified.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

In response to the first aim, we have identified and typified four viewing patterns which are applicable to adolescents from all the contexts studied. The first pattern was termed "Conflictive-Passive", and consists of a conflictive perceived family climate, inhibited parental mediation and viewing for entertainment purposes. It encompasses young people who watch television both to entertain themselves and as a means of evading the conflictive climate they perceive in their families, who in turn provide no instruction and impose no restrictions on their viewing. This pattern was most prevalent in Dublin. This may be explained by the characteristics of the schools from which the data was collected, since in Dublin, they were located in districts with high levels of social conflict and economic precariousness.

The second pattern was termed "Committed-Positive", and encompasses young people with families who try to provide training and guidance in relation to screen use. These adolescents are mainly interested in characters that evince a degree of social commitment and value freedom of thought. This indicates the positive influence that responsible mediation may have on the way adolescents process the messages they receive (Radanielina, 2014), as well as the importance of type of mediation and parenting style in the way they interpret said messages (Cánovas & Sahuquillo, 2010; Bjelland & al., 2015; Uribe & Santos, 2008). Furthermore, the relationship observed by Aierbe et al. (2014) between family climate and parental mediation is also reflected in the results, with a positive association being found between the perception of an affective climate and responsible parental mediation.

The third pattern identified was "Critical-Cultural" viewing, a group mainly made up by boys and characterized by a preference for humorous cultural programs and cartoons. This pattern pertains to adolescents who view selectively and actively. They watch television to keep abreast of events (although this is not their only motivation) and have a slight tendency to identify with characters representing the values of self-promotion and openness to change.

The fourth viewing pattern, "Social-Conversational" is mainly represented by girls. This viewing pattern is defined by a tendency to watch gossip and talk shows, and the main motivation is to have something to chat about.

Sex is an important factor in the analysis of television viewing habits. Social stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are clearly reflected in the patterns defined as mainly male or female. However, we should highlight the fact that the indicator most closely associated with girls is conversation, while interest in gossip and talk shows was found to be less intense.

As regards city of residence, unlike in relation to sex, no specific relationship was found between viewing habits and any of the cities studied, with the exception of Dublin. This indicates a possible homogenization of television

viewing habits in the diverse cities studied. The distance between cities (both physically and in relation to television broadcasts) has shrunk over recent years, with adolescents in San Sebastián (Spain) now being able to watch the same programs as those in Guadalajara (Mexico), for example. This in turn means that similar image and behavior patterns have tended to emerge in different parts of the world, something that raises new research questions and issues that should be explored in future work.

When the discriminatory power of the variables studied was explored in response to the second aim of this paper, preferred genre was found to be the indicator with the greatest discriminatory power. Several different studies have found that adolescents' tastes and preferences in relation to television are clearly different from those reported by other age groups (Huertas & França, 2001; Lapuente, 2011; Medrano & Aierbe, 2008). We can therefore conclude that these preferences are a key discriminating factor in adolescents' television viewing habits, with particular differences being found between sexes, as described above.

Other variables with notable discriminatory power were (in order of intensity) perceived parental mediation, perceived values, sex and perceived family climate. All these variables were found to be important predictors of the way the adolescents in question watch television. Not unexpectedly, the perception of a conflictive family climate is associated with inhibited perceived parental mediation, while an affective family climate was related to responsible mediation. The key role played by family context in helping adolescents correctly process the messages conveyed by television, as well as in encouraging them to establish adequate media

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habits and relationships (Medrano & al., 2010; Tonantzin & Alonso, 2012; Torrecillas, 2013). It highlights the importance of focusing on and intervening in the family environment when attempting to establish parenting patterns conducive to good television use. Moreover, the results indicate that the values perceived by adolescents in television programs depend on the relationship established between diverse variables. The type of values perceived is therefore an indicator of the type of viewing engaged in.

Finally, the correspondence analysis revealed that time spent watching television, perceived realism and cultural context were not discriminating factors. This result is as surprising as it is important. It should be remembered that the relevance of these three variables in television viewing has been amply reported by many different studies; however, in our study, these factors were found not to be decisive in the configuration of television viewing patterns. Indeed, Medrano (2005) previously pointed out that, with the exception of certain prejudices, there is in fact no relationship between time spent viewing television and the impact of this medium on the viewer. Now, our data indicate that there also seems to be no direct relationship between time spent watching television and type of viewing, at least not at a general level, with this variable being located on the periphery of the viewing patterns with which it is associated.

For their part, the data provided by the multiple correspondence analysis support the idea of a possible homogenizing trend in adolescents' television viewing habits. Our results confirm the existence of viewing patterns common to all the contexts studied, made up by specific relationships between variables that mediate how messages are received and processed. Knowing which variables may mediate the development of healthier viewing habits provides valuable information for defining which aspects should be included in media education. This study identifies

the following variables as viewing habit predictors: firstly, preferred genre, followed by perceived parental mediation, sex, perceived family climate and values. In this sense, the data reveal that the aforementioned variables, and consequently the type of viewing engaged in, influence the type of values that adolescents perceive when watching television.

Preferred genre was found to be one of the variables that best predicted type of viewing, with the differences that arose within this area being modulated to a large extent by sex. This variable may be an interesting one to consider from a two-way educational perspective. Firstly, it would be interesting to use those television genres that are perceived as attractive by adolescents in the educational field, to work on media literacy and to encourage a critical interpretation of the content conveyed. And secondly, it would be a good idea to foster students' curiosity about and interest in those television genres that educators consider interesting for young people. Another useful exercise would be to encourage students to think about why girls and boys tend to prefer different genres. Resources such as film clubs or the joint viewing of previously-selected television programs and their subsequent analysis through class debate may be good strategies to apply here.

Perceived parental mediation and family climate were also found to be important discriminating variables. It is therefore very important not to overlook this field when designing educational projects aimed at improving media and information literacy. Thus, establishing training courses designed to provide families with guidelines for mediating television use and to increase their awareness of the importance of this task should be a vital component of any program aimed at fostering healthy television viewing habits among adolescents.

Another aspect of educational interest is the social stereotypes observed in some of the variables studied. Girls reported a type of viewing pattern that reveals a marked preference for those television genres whose content is considered to be less appropriate, such as gossip or talk shows. Sex is therefore an important discriminating factor in the configuration of viewing patterns. This should be borne in mind from an educational perspective in order to work with both sexes on those aspects considered to be important during adolescence.

The study has certain limitations that should be taken into consideration when interpreting these conclusions. The fact that the questionnaires used were self-reports implies the risk of respondents being influenced by the social desirability bias. Also, the use of a convenience-based sample group generated a contrast with Dublin, a city that, while not exceptionally different from the other cities studied, does nevertheless have somewhat higher levels of social conflict. Nevertheless, this very circumstance prompts the question of whether or not socioeconomic factors and social conflict levels may themselves be more decisive in determining the composition of standardized viewing patterns than the cultural characteristics of the cities studied. This question remains open for future research. In any case, it should be remembered that, since we used a convenience-based sample group, the results presented in this paper should be viewed as indicators for guiding future research, rather than conclusions applicable to any context.

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