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Soap opera viewing in a communal context: an ethnographic examination of the viewing experiences of black Zulu-speaking students living in university residences

“In Living Memory of Roland Barthes, who understood that a critic needs also to be a fan.” (Masterman, 1984.)

ABSTRACT

This paper presents some of the findings of an ethnographic audience study of the soap opera viewing patterns and interpretations of Zulu-speaking students living in residences at a South African university (Natal University’s Durban campus) who watch *The Bold and the Beautiful* (an American soap opera) and *Generations* (a South African soap opera). Although the research undertaken covered various aspects of the soap opera viewing experience and the consumption of an international vs a local soap opera, this paper will focus specifically on the nature of the viewing process and the ways in which the respondents relate to both soap operas, and it touches briefly on how the viewing patterns of the students and their motivations for watching compare with audience studies conducted elsewhere in the world.

1. INTRODUCTION

Individual one-on-one interviews were conducted with 40 students: 20 male and 20 female. The students were all first-language Zulu-speakers between the ages of 18 and 25 who lived in the university residences and watched both *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *Generations* a minimum of three times a week. They were all undergraduate students from a variety of academic disciplines. All the students attended daily lectures and scheduled their soap opera viewing in and around this routine. Even though the students came from different parts of the country and had different backgrounds, what made them a cohesive group was their status as students living in the same environment, following similar routines and having similar pressures such as studying for examinations, their age as well as the fact that they were all first-language Zulu speakers.

2. WHY STUDENTS LIVING IN CAMPUS RESIDENCES?

John Tulloch discusses audiences as “socially constructed viewers” who form part of various sub-cultures within society (Tulloch, 1990:210). He examines and defines what ‘sub-cultures’ are in the following way:

Sub-cultures are the meaning systems and modes of expression developed by groups in particular parts of the social structure in the course of their collective attempt to come to terms with the contradictions in their shared social situation. A definitional feature of sub-cultural analysis within sociology has been its distinguishing of the practices and values of certain social groups from those of the ‘dominant’, ‘parent’ or ‘official’ culture. (Tulloch, 1990:211.)

Many of the studies conducted on sub-cultures as viewers of soaps (both daytime and prime-time soaps) have been looking for “the subversive appeals of certain types of glamorous commercial programming to oppressed groups” (Morley, 1980). These researchers tend to define sub-cultures actively. Not all studies into sub-cultural soap audiences have however had this focus. The work conducted by Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1993), for example, had a more objective focus on the ‘critical’ and ‘referential’ readings by different groups (Tulloch, 1990:212). The university students I interviewed are part of their own unique sub-culture. The students living in residences become part of a family-like environment with residents coming together to watch television in a communal TV room. As with a traditional family, their viewing forms part of their everyday lives. The residence TV rooms are in effect a family-like viewing environment. A decision has to be made about what programme to watch and the majority decision wins. The students all mentioned of the fact that no-one dared change channels during advertisement breaks while *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *Generations* were on. This

was true for both male and female students as evidenced in the following interview extracts with Luleka (a female student) and Nhlanhla (a male student):

Michele: Do you ever change channels when watching *The Bold and the Beautiful* or *Generations*?

Luleka: No. Because we find it interesting we even hate adverts – we don't want any disruptions so we don't change channels.

Michele: Do you ever change channels during *The Bold and the Beautiful*?

Nhlanhla: No.

Michele: Why not?

Nhlanhla: I think 70% of the residence likes *The Bold*, so you can't mess around with the channel.

Michele: Do you ever change channels while watching *Generations*?

Nhlanhla: No, I could never do that as there are many people watching *Generations*.

As with a traditional family, the students' viewing of both soap operas forms apart of their everyday lives and they have to make a decision on what to watch based on what the majority wants, as with a conventional family TV room situation.

3. METHODOLOGY

Bagley (2001:436) points out that the problem with popular polarizations in television reception research is that "either quantitative or qualitative methodologies considered separately fail to render a complete understanding".

Bearing this in mind, deciding on a methodological approach when conducting this study was a difficult process. While I recognize the significance of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, I chose a qualitative approach in the form of audience ethnography. I did not however want to ignore the audience figures compiled by the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF) as they are *the* seminal source of quantitative audience figures. During the course of doing the study, I reviewed the audience figures produced (by SAARF) for the past five years. The figures tell an interesting story: both *Generations* (South African) and *The Bold and the Beautiful* (American) are popular with young black viewers between the ages of 15 and 35, and both have consistently featured on the list of the ten most popular shows on SABC1, the channel on which they are broadcast¹

¹ This is according to the audience figures published by the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF) on its official website: <http://www.saarf.co.za/adultstv.asp>.

The following is the list of questions posed to the students in the interviews. Even though I stuck to the questions fairly rigidly in each interview, I tried to let the students take the interviews in other directions as well if they wanted to. What often happened is that one question would lead to conversation around related issues not necessarily covered in the formal questions. For example, in several interviews, discussions developed around the question of rape, which had been dealt with in both *Generations* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*. All the questions were posed to the students on both soap operas, except where the questions were directed at one or the other, as indicated.

- How many times a week do you watch?
- Why do you watch?
- Where do you usually watch?
- Do you watch alone or with other people?
- If you do watch with people, with whom do you usually watch?
- Do you talk during the soap?
- If so, what do you usually talk about?
- Who is your favourite character and why?
- Who is your least favourite character and why?
- Does the fact that the majority of the characters on *The Bold* are white Americans prevent you from identifying and becoming emotionally involved with the characters? If yes, why? If no, why not?
- Does the fact that *Generations* is a local production make it easier to relate to, and identify with, the characters? If yes, why? If no, why not?
- Do you discuss the soap with friends and/or family who watch? If yes, why? If no, why not?
- If you have missed an episode, how do you go about finding out what happened?
- Do you know anyone who behaves like any of the characters or who reminds you of any of the characters on the soap?
- Do you change channels when you are watching?
- Do you find the soap realistic?
- What do you think about the quality of the production of the soap?
- Which soap do you think is a better quality production?
- Do you form perceptions of what intimate relationships should be like from the soap?
- Soaps emphasize how fragile relationships are. Does this make you more cautious when it comes to relationships?

4. WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHIC AUDIENCE RESEARCH?

Ethnographic audience research is the most recent development in the evolution of audience response studies. It assumes audiences use and interact with television and other popular forms of entertainment in a variety of ways, depending on intercultural,

social, class, race and age variables (Brown, 1994:73). It is essentially qualitative and usually carried out in the form of in-depth interviews with a small number of people, and may be supplemented with some kind of participant observation, which could, for example, take the form of subjects being videotaped while being interviewed and later allowed to watch themselves on video. This type of qualitative empirical research is now recognized by many as one of the most effective ways to learn about the differentiated subtleties of people's engagements with television and other media (see Ang, 1994).

Some academics argue that there has been a terminological usurpation of ethnography by interpretivist media theorists. The basis of the critique of using ethnography in media studies is that anthropological ethnography requires long-term immersion and investigation, the implication being that the informants' points of view cannot be grasped in a series of one-off in-depth interviews, that may not even last more than an hour (see Gillespie, 1995b). This kind of critique of audience ethnography is without foundation, for as Lindlof notes, "[t]he term *ethnography* does not imply any single method or type of data analysis [...]" (Lindlof, 1995:19).

In the case of television audience studies, there are practical reasons why researchers cannot carry out lengthy spells of participant observation, not the least of which are the difficulties associated with gaining prolonged access to contexts of consumption - usually the private sphere of the household (Moore, 1995:4). It follows from this that the best method of research in audience reception studies is the in-depth interview.

As has just been stated, audience ethnographies have become associated with the in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interview (Gillespie, 1995:55). This method has faced criticism from some quarters, the basis of the censure being that observations of actual behaviour are more accurate as a means of establishing actual viewer activity. The problem with the observation technique is that it leaves open the question of interpretation. For example, a subject may be observed sitting staring fixedly at the television screen, but this behaviour could be equally indicative of fascination with whatever is on the TV screen and complete boredom. The distinction may not be readily discernible to the observer. Moreover, if one wanted to ascertain what the actual state of mind of the viewers being observed was, one would probably have to ask them. The observed may lie or misrepresent their thoughts and feelings, but at least through their verbal responses, the researcher can gain some kind of access to the language the observed use and gain insight into the categorizations through which they construct their conscious world (see Morley, 1992).

I personally conducted all the interviews with the students in the residences where they were living. The fact that I had been a student at the same university and am also an avid soap opera watcher provided a great deal of common ground from which to work in the interviews.

I also spent time in the communal television room watching *Generations* and *The Bold and the Beautiful* with the students. In addition I watched the two soap operas with students in their rooms where they gathered to watch with friends. My presence generated a great deal of giggling, whispering and staring. Also, given that the gatherings of people in front of the television set were large, it was impossible for me to monitor everyone's behaviour. It was only during the interviews that I was able to gain insight into their viewing habits. As Morley points out, the interview method should therefore be defended for the access it gives the researcher to the respondents' conscious opinions and statements (Morley, 1992:181).

It is important to realize that for the ethnographic researcher complete knowledge of his/her subjects or informants is an unattainable fantasy. Bearing this in mind, it is important to note that ethnographic discourses are of necessity coloured by the subjectivity of the researcher, who acts as an observer and interpreter of events. According to Moores (1995:4), however, this does not mean that we should disappear down a self-reflexive cul-de-sac. He maintains that it is "quite permissible to recognize the partial nature of our knowledge without losing a determination to reconstruct the consumers' point of view" (Moores, 1995:4).

Ethnographic audience research acknowledges the differences between people despite their social construction, and pluralizes the meanings and pleasures that they find in television. It thus contradicts theories that stress the singularity of television's meanings and its reading subjects (Fiske, 1994:63).

It must be borne in mind that ethnographies are discourse, and cannot as such, magically give us direct and unmediated access to the real. What they do have, however, is a greater potential for engaging with the production of meaning in everyday life (see Moores, 1995). Seminal ethnographic soap opera studies conducted by Ang (1985), Liebes and Katz (1993), Gillespie (1995) and Morley (1980) served as models on which the methodology of this study was based.

5. SOAPS OPERAS: GLOBAL PRODUCTS

Margaret Mead wrote in 1974 that "[t]elevision more than any other medium gives models to the American people – models for life as it is, or should, or can be lived" (Mead, 1974)². Nowhere is Mead's comment more valid than in the genre of daytime soap opera. American soaps penetrate not only the American collective consciousness, but global consciousness as well, given their penetration into countries outside America. *The Bold and the Beautiful*³ is seen by over 200 million viewers throughout the world,

² This quote is taken from: (Trust, 1995:3).

³ *The Bold and the Beautiful* will also be referred to as '*The Bold*'.

which gives one an idea of the extent to which American daytime soaps have penetrated the worldwide television market.

The interviews revealed that for the respondents, it makes no difference where a soap opera is set, what language the characters speak and to what race group they belong. As long as viewers can relate to them on an emotional level, there are no barriers.

One of the key questions I asked the students I interviewed was whether it made a difference to them that the characters in *The Bold* and *the Beautiful* were white Americans, seemingly removed from their own lived experiences. All forty of the students said in their interviews that it made no difference to them whatsoever, which serves as an indicator of the power of soap operas to disguise real disparities between social and cultural groups. The following interview extracts serve to highlight this.

- Michele: Does the fact that the majority of the characters on *The Bold* and *the Beautiful* are white Americans living in Los Angeles stop you from identifying with the characters?
- Fred: Not necessarily. It doesn't really matter whether they are South African or not, people are pretty much the same.
- Sibusiso: I think people are people. It doesn't matter where they live, even though the place you live in will influence you in one way or another.
- Leslie: To me it doesn't make a difference.
- Mpume: They [*Generations* and *The Bold*] have the same story. There is always something to relate to.

The conversations in which the students engaged about *Generations* and *The Bold and the Beautiful* revealed the nature of the identification they felt for various characters. Archie Moroka (*Generations*) and Ridge and Eric Forrester (*The Bold and the Beautiful*) captured the imaginations of the male students for similar reasons. All three were admired for their success in business and their lifestyles. The nature of the identification was that the male students wished to emulate them in their own lives – become like them and accomplish the same things.

6. COMMUNAL VIEWING AMONG STUDENTS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

One of the main aspects of the students' viewing of *The Bold* and *Generations* that I wanted to explore was the social communal television room in the residences where they watch, and I compared the findings with similar studies conducted elsewhere in the world. Babrow (1990:343) notes that students globally make up a substantial portion of the soap viewing audience. He also states that “[A]ll argue that communication,

whatever its form, must be understood as a contextually bound social accomplishment” (Babrow, 1990:343). This is particularly true of the students I interviewed. Their entire viewing experience takes place in a structured social context with their peers, which is what makes their viewing distinctive. The way in which the students interact when they are watching shapes in part the meanings they attach to *The Bold* and *Generations*. Interaction and discussion are immediate and intense. Lemish (1990:344) describes the collective experience of social or public soap viewing by students on an American university campus as a social collective with viewers sharing opinions, feelings and information with total strangers⁴.

The students in Lemish’s study reported that they had watched soaps while living at home, but that viewing in a social context at university added a new dimension to their soap opera viewing experience. As it is, soap operas “provide the raw materials from which roles and social relationships are formed” (Babrow, 1990:344); this is simply intensified in a communal social viewing context.

The students interviewed were different from Lemish’s group, in that they were used to watching soaps as a group with family, friends and neighbours, as many of them lived in areas where not every household had its own television set, and it is common practice for friends and neighbours to gather together to watch. The difference for them was that at university they were without the influence of family and were watching with friends, which allowed them a greater degree of freedom to discuss certain issues (such as sex), which they would not be comfortable talking about with their parents or grandparents or even siblings present. Even those students with television sets in their rooms never watch alone. They either invite friends to watch with them or go down to the TV room to watch with everyone else.

The discussions I witnessed between students in the residence television rooms and in individual rooms where groups were gathered to watch were often extremely forthright and heated, with students not being afraid to disagree with one another. In the advertisement breaks, the atmosphere was sometimes more like a forum for public debate than a social gathering. The interviewees reported in their interviews that discussions would often become intense, particularly around sensitive issues such as rape, AIDS or sex. They indicated in their interviews that discussions sometimes centred on what would happen next and arguments would break out.

What came out of the interviews was that if a favourite character behaved badly or did not get what he or she wanted, the students would express disappointment and be upset,

⁴ Lemish’s study is quoted in Babrow (1990:343)

especially if they were being taunted by other students who favoured the character who *did* get what they wanted at the expense of another's favourite. This was particularly evident where Brooke and Taylor from *The Bold and the Beautiful* were concerned, with students taking sides regarding which one of them should get to be with Ridge Forrester.

Lemish's study took place in the student union viewing rooms and in the lounge of a sports complex: "viewing environments that stimulate sociality, viewing environments where soap operas provide a social glue" (Babrow, 1990:346). There were other activities going on in these environments while the soaps were on. The students I interviewed watch in the residences where they live. Given that students gather in the television room with the sole purpose of watching television, everyone present is there with the same intention: to watch either *The Bold* or *Generations*. The students made it clear that nothing else was watched at the times that these two soaps were on air, and that no-one would dream of suggesting that they watch something else. There is in a sense a tacit agreement between the students that everyone gathered to watch the two soaps takes their viewing seriously or they would not be there – it is similar to a club with membership rules.

The study conducted by Babrow (1990) focused on students who watch soaps in bars. What he discovered was that not all the students in the bar during the screening of the American soap *All My Children* were there to watch, unlike the students I interviewed, who gathered in the television rooms with the sole purpose of watching *The Bold* and *Generations*. Given that some of the patrons in the bars were there to eat and drink, Babrow notes that there was a great deal of noise while *All My Children* was on, and that for some it just seemed to function as background noise.

The respondents I interviewed took their viewing extremely seriously, and there was no discussion about anything other than the two soaps while they were on. During crucial scenes, there was no talking at all. The students showed a higher degree of involvement than those researched by Babrow. For Babrow's students, the watching of *All My Children* appeared to be a secondary activity, the foremost one being to socialize. For the respondents in my study, the social aspect was an offshoot of their soap viewing, and not their primary reason for gathering together. As Babrow points out, "[E]xtant research suggests that entertainment is a major motivation for student soap opera watching and that entertainment is related to program-focused sociality" (Babrow, 1990:350).

Even the students I interviewed who had television sets in their rooms reported that they never watched alone. Given that they were used to watching communally even in their homes, the concept of watching a soap alone is completely foreign, so even when they have the choice to watch alone, they do not.

Much has been written on the talking and socializing that take place before and after soap viewing, (for example Brown (1994) and Hobson (1994), but given that in western countries soap viewing is generally an individual rather than a group activity, the nature of communal soap viewing has not been explored extensively. The pleasures derived from communal soap viewing are in some cases “unanticipated consequences of soap opera watching (Babrow, 1990:350)⁵.

Watching as a group was such a crucial aspect of the viewing pleasure of the students I interviewed that even if they had their own television sets in their rooms, they *never* watched alone. The opportunity to talk and argue with friends and discuss what would happen next are not pleasures they are used to deferring; they are immediate. Even though they stated clearly that *Generations* and *The Bold* formed part of their general discussions with peers outside the viewing times, one of the primary pleasures they derive is from interaction while watching.

7. HOW SOAPS ARE STRUCTURED TO FACILITATE SOCIAL VIEWING PLEASURE

The very nature of soap operas makes them ideally suited to the kind of social viewing described in this paper. For example, the fact that soaps move so slowly makes audience interaction possible and facilitates the shared construction of meaning. “Slow repetitious unfolding makes the noise and distraction of audience interaction less threatening to requisite understanding and appreciation” (Babrow, 1990:357) than other genres such as dramas, action series’ or sitcoms.

One of the pleasures described by the students when watching soaps is that of predicting how events will unfold. They said that there was a great deal of discussion and argument over what would happen next, particularly with *The Bold*. The suspension of a plotline and dramatic tension “provoke the viewing imagination, there may be pleasures in both successful and unsuccessful predictions about the resolution of that line” (Babrow, 1990:357). The dramatic tension between Brooke and Taylor on *The Bold* is illustrative of this aspect of pleasure. The students were passionate about which one of the women should end up with Ridge Forrester, but even when they proved to be wrong, it did not detract from their pleasure.

Michele: Do you talk during *The Bold and the Beautiful*?

Siyabonga: Yes, we do talk among ourselves; we discuss what is going to happen because we are always left in suspense. We go through the various possibilities of what could happen. Sometimes we even argue!

⁵ Lemish’s study is quoted in Babrow (1990:350).

Michele: Can you give an example of something you argue about?

Siyabonga: For instance, when there was a debacle between Brooke and Taylor over Ridge, there was a lot of noise about who Ridge would go for at the end of the day, so there was great anticipation about what would happen.

Ntsiki from *Generations* was another character who evoked strong responses from the respondents. The following interview extract reveals this.

Michele: Do you talk to other guys⁶ while you are watching *Generations*?

Siyabonga: Yes.

Michele: What about?

Siyabonga: We talk a lot about Ntsiki. There are people on campus that we call ‘Ntsikis’ because they behave like her, always making trouble, not allowing people to live in peace.

Siyabonga’s response illustrates how pervasive soaps can be in the lives of the people who watch regularly. Characters like Ntsiki, who is the archetypal ‘villainess’, have become so much a part of the lives of the students who watch that she has become synonymous with a particular type of person. According to Siyabonga, a person who displays certain character traits is referred to as an ‘Ntsiki’. Her name is used in a descriptive sense to define a particular kind of person. When you call someone an ‘Ntsiki’, people know you mean an evil, conniving manipulator.

8. WHY DO THEY WATCH?

The following is a summary of the reasons students gave for watching *The Bold* and *Generations*

REASONS	EXAMPLES
Recreation	To relax and escape from daily stress
Time to waste	Nothing better to do
Learning	Insight into relationships and other ways of life
Curiosity	Wanting to see how <i>Generations</i> compares with <i>The Bold</i>
Identity	Relating to characters
Quality	Comparative analysis of <i>The Bold</i> and <i>Generations</i> : Acting, sets wardrobe, content
Entertainment and excitement	The suspense and tension of guessing what will happen next and how
Social interaction	Feeling excluded from conversations if you don’t watch
Realism	Portrayal of situations one could encounter in real life

⁶ Siyabonga lives in an all-male residence.

Interestingly, the reasons the students gave for watching *The Bold* are consistent with the findings of most soap opera audience studies, whereas the reasons they provided for watching *Generations* are different. In spite of the fact that the interviews revealed an involvement and interest in *Generations* and its characters, they also revealed a *greater* degree of emotional involvement with *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

Although it is impossible to quantify the level of attachment in concrete terms, it was evident from the tone, length and intensity of the students' responses to my questions. Questions on *The Bold* elicited lengthier and more emotionally charged responses, unlike the responses to questions on *Generations*, which tended to be more stilted and less emotionally charged. It was as if the students had appointed themselves critics as well as viewers of *Generations* – it is being watched not just as a soap, but as a *South African* soap, which means they hold it up to a higher degree of scrutiny than they do *The Bold*, as evidenced in the following interview extract with a student named Nelly.

Michele: Does the fact that *Generations* is a South African production make it easier to relate to the characters?

Nelly: Yes and no. Some of the things they [*Generations*] do are too artificial for South Africa and it's like they are trying to be more like *The Bold*. I think they [*Generations*] should be more true to the way things happen in this country.

This tends to affect the suspension of disbelief synonymous with soap viewing, as the students are not merely watching the story unfold, but they are simultaneously checking whether or not the characters and stories are credible in the context of the South African society with which they are familiar. The result is that they will more readily accept stories on *The Bold* than they will on *Generations*, where they are constantly asking themselves 'Could this happen here?'. This is not to say that there is *no* emotional involvement with the characters on *Generations*. The interviews revealed that there is definitely a level of emotional involvement, it is just not as strong as that displayed for *The Bold*. Liebes and Katz (1993:152) identified "hot and cognitively cool types of involvement" where soap audiences are concerned, indicating levels of intensity of involvement. Using this as a scale of measurement, I would classify the involvement of the students with *The Bold* as 'hotter' than their involvement with *Generations*.

9. CRITICISM OF LOCAL PRODUCTIONS

Every day, approximately four million viewers tune in to watch *Generations* in its prime time slot at 20:00 pm on SABC 1, while approximately 2,5 million people tune in to watch *The Bold and the Beautiful* on the same channel in a much earlier time slot (18:00 pm).

It is difficult to compare viewership figures of two soaps in different time slots. What is relevant is that both feature consistently in the top ten shows on SABC1, the channel on which they are broadcast, and *The Bold and the Beautiful* appeals to a broader cross-section of the South African population than *Generations*, which attracts a largely young black viewership⁷.

The audience figures however tell us nothing about how the audience interpret what they watch, and their level of involvement in what they are watching. What I discovered during the interviews with the students is that there is a greater level of emotional involvement in *The Bold* than in *Generations*, and that they watch *Generations* partially in an attempt to assess and evaluate how a local soap opera compares with American soap operas. I also discovered that *The Bold and the Beautiful* is the benchmark against which they measure all other soap operas.

A telling fact revealed by the interviews was that the students said *Generations* was in many respects unrelated to their own lived experiences as young black South Africans, and that it was in many ways Americanized. This is a sentiment shared by two of the soap's stars, Sello Maake ka Ncube (Archie) and Lillian Dube (Masibobe), both of whom have left the soap because they feel it does not reflect the lives of black South Africans. In a 2001 article in one of the country's leading newspapers, *The Sunday Times*, ka Ncube is quoted as saying "This soapie's too white for me! The characters speak like white people. Even the depiction of life is influenced by white values. The script isn't real to black people in South Africa today" (quoted in *True Love*, November 2002:122).

The soap's producers would argue that the viewership figures indicate the public's approval of *Generations*. There is no disputing that young black South Africans watch the soap, but the figures do not reflect the nature of the pleasure they derive from watching. As shown by the interviews I conducted, even though the students were watching *Generations* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*, the nature of the involvement and pleasure differed. What one also has to bear in mind is that *Generations* occupies a prime time slot even though it follows the format of a daytime soap opera, and it has no competition from any other daily shows in the same time slot on any of the other channels. As John Fiske (1994:62) points out, however, the sad truth is that producers do not necessarily care what meanings and pleasures audiences derive from the shows they produce, as "their concern is solely with the headcount and the demographics".

My intention with this study was not to validate the importing of American television shows into South Africa, or to denigrate local productions. When I recruited students,

⁷ Information taken from the South African Advertising Research Foundation's Audience Rating figures.

my only criteria were that they watch both soaps a minimum of three times per week and that they be black Zulu-speaking students living in a university residence on the Natal University Durban campus. The fact that it emerged from the interviews that they were more critical of *Generations* than of *The Bold* was not something I anticipated or prefigured when I began conducting the research. Similar findings have resulted from other soap opera studies, such as Daniel Miller's examination of an American soap opera in Trinidad (1995).

The viewing context was an essential part of the pleasure of watching for the students, and they were not used to viewing any other way. Their talk around soaps began while watching and was continued afterwards, unlike so many studies, which indicate that soap viewing occurs in isolation and discussion occurs after the viewing moment (Hobson, 1994).

Peter Conrad describes a soap opera as "a world of fidgety existential dubiety, a multitude of happenings – of arbitrary and inane comings and goings" (Conrad, 1982:75). His description of the soap opera world is alarmingly similar to the way in which many of us would describe our daily lives, which is why soaps hold so much appeal for viewers. Soap operas are in many respects like a parallel universe, which exists in the same time and space as our own.

When Liebes and Katz (1993:x) embarked on their cross-cultural analysis of viewers of *Dallas*, they noted that decoding is an interaction between the culture of the viewer and the culture of the producer. What they set out to do was analyze different cultural groups' responses to one soap opera, *Dallas*. What I set out to do was examine one cultural group's responses to two soap operas: one set in their own country and one American. What I discovered was that like Liebes and Katz's (1993:x) respondents with *Dallas*, the students use *Generations* and *The Bold and the Beautiful* to "map their social relations within a nation or a family... [and] decode such material critically" (Liebes & Katz, 1993:x).

10. SOAPS AND THE CREATION OF PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Pekka Isotalus conducted research into the parasocial relationships formed between viewers of soap operas and their favourite characters and viewers of news and their best-liked newscasters. Isotalus provides the following definitions of a parasocial relationship:

Parasocial relationship has been referred to as an illusion of a face-to-face relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1986), as an illusion of an interpersonal relationship

(Watson & Hill, 1984), as media simulated interpersonal communication (Cathgart & Gumpert 1983), as pseudo-interaction (Hanson 1988), as an imaginary social relationship (Alperstein 1991), as having a quasi-friend (Koenig & Lessan 1985), or as pseudo-friendship (Perse 1990)....To sum up, parasocial relationship can be taken to indicate the receivers' imaginary relationship with a given media personality (Isotalus, 1995:59).

The *Bold and the Beautiful* is enormously popular in Finland. "Finnish viewers took a fancy to *The Bold and the Beautiful* with a force that resembled a national movement" (Isotalus, 1995:59). According to Isotalus (1995:59), the relationship between Finnish viewers and *The Bold* and its characters is an affective one.

Together with the characters, the viewers experience the joys and sorrows of their life, and they eagerly expect to know their latest news. Sometimes the viewers seem unable to distinguish an actor from his or her role (Isotalus, 1995:59).

The kind of affective relationship described by Isotalus (1995:59) is true of the South African students interviewed for this study. The interviews revealed an intense involvement with the lives of the characters in both *The Bold* and *Generations*.

The fact that the actors on *Generations* were familiar to the students from other shows and dramas appeared to lessen the parasocial nature of the relationship between the viewers and characters on the soap, whereas the fact that the actors on *The Bold* were one with the characters they portrayed on the soap (in the minds of the viewers) seemed to increase the affective relationship between the viewers and their favourite characters.

There are definite similarities between the viewership of *The Bold* in Finland as described by Isotalus (1995:59) and that of the South African students I interviewed. In both countries the soap is enormously popular and has penetrated the national consciousness.

One of the male students I interviewed said that he arranged an intimate dinner in his residence room for him and his girlfriend based on something he saw one of the male characters do on *The Bold*, in the hopes that he would achieve the same successful result as the character on the show. This illustrates an element of parasocial behaviour described by Sonia Livingstone in her book entitled *Making sense of television: the psychology of audience interpretation* (1995) in which she points to the variability in the nature of the relationship between text and viewer. She states the following:

Viewers may identify with particular characters, seeing themselves as in that character's shoes; they may regard a character as a role model, imitating that character's behaviour in order to gain some of the rewards that the character is shown to enjoy... (Livingstone, 1995:22).

Another aspect of the parasocial nature of the television viewing experience referred to by Livingstone is one in which a viewer “may recognise aspects of a character as similar to a significant person in their own lives, engaging in what Horton and Wohl (1956) term ‘parasocial interaction’” (Livingstone, 1995: 22). This kind of relationship featured strikingly in the interviews with the students conducted for this thesis. One of the questions asked of them in the interviews was whether or not they knew anyone in their own lives who reminded them of any of the characters on *Generations* or *The Bold*. Many of the girls said that Brooke Logan on *The Bold* reminded them of girls they knew who would go out of their way to steal someone else’s boyfriend. One female student called Nomandla, for example, said that she had a relative who reminded her of Taylor Forrester on *The Bold*, as this person was kind and loving just like Taylor.

Michele: Do you know anyone in your life that reminds you of any of the characters on *The Bold and the Beautiful*?

Nomandla: Yes. Taylor reminds me of my mom. She is also kind and caring like Taylor.

A male student called Rush identified strongly with Ridge from *The Bold and the Beautiful* because of his success with women. He said he had a neighbour who reminded him of Ridge, and whose behaviour he tried to emulate.

This kind of identification is an important part of the soap viewing experience, which augments the pleasure derived from watching.

11. VIEWING OF SOAPS AND LONELINESS

The most striking difference between soap opera audience studies conducted in Europe and America is the viewing context. Much of the research done on those continents reveals that soap viewing is often a solitary activity. Even when people are not living alone, they often partake of their favorite soap on their own. Many researchers have revealed that soap opera viewing is an activity that wards off loneliness, and is engaged in by people who are lonely. The relationships these viewers enter into with their favourite soap characters act as a substitute for real human interaction. John Tulloch noted this phenomenon in his study of elderly soap opera audiences. The elderly he interviewed showed a keen interest in being interviewed. According to Tulloch they are often alone in small domestic units, have fewer opportunities for group conversation about their favourite shows, and (when confident about the interviewer) will want to talk (often during the show you are watching with them). Often they will call the interviewer back later on to say something they had forgotten to say on the first occasion (Tulloch, 1994:180).

The aged viewers also displayed a tendency of writing to the producers of shows to let them know which aspects of the soaps they liked and which they wanted changed. It appears as though this letter writing takes the form of a dialogue that serves as a substitute for real conversation. The letters reviewed by Tulloch reveal that these viewers often tell the producers about themselves (Tulloch, 1994:181).

The students I interviewed did not reveal that they participated in this kind of activity. They enjoy the analysis and discussion of their shows with their friends and the people with whom they watch. For them, it is not about stemming the tide of loneliness.

Another reason cited by both male and female informants for initially watching was peer pressure. So much of the daily conversation amongst their friends revolved around *Generations* and *The Bold and the Beautiful* that they felt they had to start watching in order not to feel left out. A male student called Balungile said that he started watching *The Bold and the Beautiful* because so many of his friends (particularly female friends) spent so much time talking about it that he felt left out.

Michele: Why do you watch *The Bold and the Beautiful*?

Balungile: I watch it because it's something I feel I have to watch because so many people I know watch it (especially girls). It is discussed all the time and I just feel left out if I don't know what they are talking about.

This kind of pressure has been documented by researchers in soap audience studies, for example Hobson's (1994) study on 6 women who work together and watch the same soap opera.

In a paper entitled "Chronic loneliness and television use", Elizabeth Perse and Alan Rubin explore the connection between chronic loneliness and increased television viewing. They provide the following definition of loneliness: "the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way" (Perlman & Peplau, 1981:31). Loneliness is not inevitably a result of social isolation. Instead, loneliness grows out of a cognitive assessment that the quantity and quality of social interaction is lacking (Peplau, Russell, & Heim, 1979 as quoted by Perse & Rubin, 1990:38).

Perse and Rubin comment on the fact that the need for social interaction is basic in humans. When this need cannot be fulfilled in 'natural' or 'normal' ways, "people turn to media" (Perse & Rubin, 1990:39). Using the media as a substitute for actual human interaction has been documented in various studies, with particular reference to soap opera viewers. Perse and Rubin tested this hypothesis in their study. They concluded

that “chronic loneliness reflects greater ‘Pass Time’ soap opera viewing motivation, reduced ‘Exciting Entertainment’ and ‘Social Utility’⁸ viewing motivation, and perceiving soap opera to be more realistic” (Perse & Rubin, 1990:47). Instead of focusing on the elderly, the sample analyzed consisted of 460 undergraduate students at a large midwestern university, who each completed a self-administered questionnaire. A total of 71,3 % of the respondents reported that they watched daytime soaps though an analysis of the sample only partially supported their hypothesis (Perse & Rubin, 1990).

A striking fact that emerged from the interviews for this study, which stands out in sharp contrast to Perse and Rubin’s paper, is that none of the respondents interviewed cited loneliness as a motivation for their viewing of either *The Bold and the Beautiful* or *Generations*. With the latter, curiosity was the major reason given for viewing. They were watching because they wanted to see how a local soap opera would compare with the soap operas they had been watching for years. Their major points of comparison were *The Bold* and *Days of Our Lives*. Once they started watching, however, most indicated that they continued to watch because they had become involved with the lives of the characters.

The predominant reason for watching *The Bold* given by the respondents was a desire to see another culture and way of life, and there was a large proportion of students who said that they watched the soap in order to learn about romance and relationships. Many of the male informants said that soaps taught them how to treat women. The word ‘educational’ kept on coming up in the interviews with reference to *The Bold*, whereas it never came up with reference to *Generations*.

12. CONCLUSION

Bearing in mind that the aim of this paper was to provide several insights into the nature of the viewing experiences of the students interviewed, I would like to leave the reader with the following thought by way of conclusion. Ethnographic work (in the sense of drawing on what we can perceive and experience in everyday settings):

acquires its critical mark when it functions as a reminder that reality is always more complicated and diversified than our theories can represent, and that there is no such thing as ‘audience’ whose characteristics can be set once and for all (Ang, 1994:110).

⁸ *Motivations for viewing as defined by Perse and Rubin (1990)*

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