

EAT. SLEEP. WATCH *DAWSON'S CREEK*:
TEENAGERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEENAGE LIFE
ON *DAWSON'S CREEK*

by

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(Under the Direction of MARIA CAROLINA ACOSTA-ALZURU)

ABSTRACT

Drawing on cultural studies, especially Hall's theory of encoding and decoding of texts (1973), this study examines how a sample of the audience of *Dawson's Creek*, a Warner Brothers' Television show, interpret and relate to the show and whether they incorporate these meanings in their lives. Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with females aged 15- to 21-years-old to discern the reality of representations on the show of teenage life and how these participants engage with the show. Findings suggest the show enables its viewers to identify with the portrayal of the teenage experience, especially when examining the show's characters. Limitations of the study include the diversity of the sample used. Future research suggestions include an examination of how the show's messages are encoded by the show's creative team. In addition, future research should include a more in-depth examination into how *Dawson's Creek* has changed the nature of teenage television.

INDEX WORDS: Cultural Studies, Popular Culture, *Dawson's Creek*, Stuart Hall, Teenagers and Television, Consumption of Television, Encoding and Decoding Texts.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Dawson's Creek is the first in a line of successful Warner Brothers (WB) Television Network shows directed towards teenage audiences. Despite the fact that the WB has achieved so much success and notoriety, few studies have been conducted about *Dawson's Creek*. Drawing on cultural studies, particularly Hall's encoding and decoding theory (1973b), this study examines how *Dawson's Creek's* female teenage viewers interpret and relate to the show, and whether they incorporate these meanings in their everyday lives.

Dawson's Creek

Dawson's Creek, created by Kevin Williamson and executive produced by Paul Stupin, Tom Kapinos and Greg Prange for TriStar Television, premiered in January 1998 and has aired over 100 episodes (Warner Brothers Television Network Web site, 2002). The setting of the show is Cape Side, Massachusetts, a fictional small coastal town. Most of the show's activity centers on the relationship between the two main characters, Dawson Leery and Josephine "Joey" Potter. Dawson and Joey are childhood friends and neighbors who have grown up together, though they have had a difficult relationship for several reasons. First of all, their family lives have been complicated by a variety of hardships. Joey was raised in a parentless household. Her mother died when she was young and her father has been in and out of jail for most of her life. Her only parental guardian has been her older sister, Bessie. For his part, Dawson endured his parents'

temporary separation after his mother's affair with a colleague. These events caused Dawson a great deal of emotional pain.

Pain and hardship aside, Dawson is a focused and determined character who knows what he wants to do with his life. He has a passion for movies and his life revolves around reaching his dream of being an esteemed filmmaker. For her part, Joey is determined to get good grades. This, plus her changing relationships with the other characters, defines her.

Dawson and Joey have a relationship that teeters between friendship and romance. Their timing, however, has never been quite right for a successful romantic relationship to develop. It seems Dawson and Joey each tend to realize their love for each other only when the other is not interested. Much of the tension of the show centers on this complex and changing relationship that triggers many of the show's issues and storylines.

Jennifer "Jen" Lindley, a native of New York state, is another strong female character. Jen struggles to acquire self-respect and self-dignity. Her relationships with men are extremely complicated due to a paradoxical mix that includes a lack of trust in men, fear of intimacy, and sexual promiscuity. Her character has a difficult time distinguishing between what makes a romantic relationship with men successful and what does not. Jen and Dawson have been romantically involved twice during the series. Both relationships have been short lived. Her relationship issues seem to be caused by the fact that she grew up with indifferent parents who sent her to Cape Side to live with her grandmother, Evelyn "Grams" Ryan, after they discovered Jen was sexually active. Grams' husband died early on during the show and since his death, Grams has served as

Jen's only parental guardian. It is important to mention that during the past season, Jen's grandmother became involved in an interracial relationship, a minor storyline that is likely to become more important next season.

Another integral presence on the show is Pacey Witter, Dawson's best friend. During the 1999-2000 season, Pacey began dating Joey after Dawson asked him to "hang-out" with her more. Dawson was worried about Joey after his most recent rejection of her and wanted Pacey to keep an eye on her. Pacey and Joey's relationship ultimately marred Pacey and Dawson's friendship. Losing a best friend was only one of the hardships Pacey has experienced. He is not close with his family and he struggles figuring out his place in the world, often feeling that he is not as good as or as smart as everyone else. For instance, during the 2001-2002 season after graduating from Cape Side High School, all of the teenage characters entered college in Boston while Pacey spent most of the season working as a cook in an exclusive restaurant. His failing to enter college is a major blow to his self-esteem. Therefore, his struggle with feelings of inadequacy dominated the past season.

One of the more often discussed characters in the show is Jack McPhee. Jack has been credited with being one of the first teenage characters to "come out" on national television. However, Jack's sexual orientation is at the center of the character's everyday struggles for acceptance. He faced discrimination in many forms from his days as a high school football player, to the experience of being selected as the "token" gay male in a college fraternity. He and his sister, Andy, moved to Cape Side during the show's second season. Andy now only guest stars occasionally. She faced some psychological problems towards the end of her regular appearances but was able to straighten out some of those

problems and get her life back together. Both Jack and Andy have difficult relationships with their parents. Their mother is institutionalized in a mental hospital and their father is critical about his children's choices, especially those concerning Jack's sexual orientation. Neither of their parents is involved in their lives since their parents have never been able to understand them.

The characters' socio-economic levels range from the upper middle class (Dawson, Jack, and Jen), to the working class (Pacey and Joey). Notwithstanding these differences, all the main teenage characters are in the same social circle – first at Cape Side High School and currently (2001-2002 season) in the collegiate world of Boston, where, as mentioned, the characters have relocated since graduating from high school during the 2000-2001 season.

The main characters' immediate relatives comprise the slate of secondary characters. It is important to mention Gail and Mitchell "Mitch" Leery, Dawson's parents. After Gail's affair, Gail and Mitch separated, but were able to reconcile and have another child. Nevertheless, not long after the birth of their daughter, Mitch was killed in a car accident this past season (2001-2002 season). His death depressed Dawson since Mitch and Dawson were not able to reconcile after Mitch became angry and disappointed when Dawson dropped out of his dream film school, UCLA, because he was not happy and missed his life in Cape Side, particularly Joey. After Mitch's death, Dawson decided to attend film school in Boston as a tribute to his father.

Even with this transition from high school to college, the show has maintained a strong following of teenagers – appealing to this young audience with physically attractive characters and controversial yet timely story lines concerning issues they, as

teenagers, face. For instance in the 2000-2001 season, Joey lost her virginity to Pacey and Andy almost died of an overdose of the drug Ecstasy.

Dawson's Creek has proven time and time again the point that beauty, along with a catchy storyline, sells; and this lesson has been passed from the WB to other networks that are desperately trying to attract this most coveted audience. The show is the WB's first and most enduring success.

The WB Television Network

The Warner Brothers Television Network, a part of Turner Broadcasting System, Inc., debuted in 1995. Its commitment to targeting 18 to 34 year-old viewers was unique (especially in 1995), going against the mainstream trend of trying to capture older, more mature audiences. The WB finished first among all networks in the female teenage demographic for the fourth consecutive season and led all other networks (including the big four) during the 2000-2001 season in program ratings growth (Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. Web site, 2002). How does the WB continue to do this? Jamie Kellner, a founder of the WB Television Network states, "When I was a kid, my father told me, 'Find a need and fill it.' We saw other networks' shares were declining, at a fairly sharp drop, among households with nonadults. And we saw a place to build our business," (quoted in Mifflin, 1998, paragraph 6) and the WB was born.

Since the WB's inception, its targeted group means big business for them, constituting approximately 100 million people (Mifflin, 1998). "With a clear identity and brand (represented by its cartoon frog mascot), the WB can market itself better to viewers and advertisers, while committing to shows that generate passion among its core audience," argues Marc Gunther (1998, paragraph 5). The WB's audience is a devoted

one producing some of the highest program ratings available and making the network's popularity grow overnight. The WB's growth indicates a well thought out and planned venture that took a different approach to mainstream television programming.

Much of the WB's success stems from the important risks the network has taken. The network's hit shows, *Dawson's Creek*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (a former WB show, now on UPN) and *Felicity*, were all turned down by the other four major networks before finding a home on the WB and earning much success. Since the success of these WB shows, many of the major networks have tried teenage-oriented shows. However, these shows have failed to capture the younger audiences who appear to be fiercely devoted to the WB. Some of the unsuccessful teen targeted shows launched since the debut of *Dawson's Creek* include NBC's *Freaks and Geeks*, ABC's *Wasteland*, and FOX's *Undeclared*. Despite the quality and critical praise of some of these shows, they simply have not been able to connect with their targeted audiences. However, *Dawson's Creek* and the WB have not fallen victim to low ratings. They each have made a place for themselves in the teenage and pop culture worlds and have set themselves apart from the rest of the pack.

Tom Carson (1999, introductory quote) argues, "gloriously expressive 'teenybopercas' like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dawson's Creek* signal a new wave of pulp lyricism. It's enough to renew a man's faith in TV." In this sense, the WB has uncovered a gold mine, targeting and monopolizing this demographic. Youth is at the

heart of the network's philosophy and this philosophy has proven to be a big money maker.¹

Teen Shows/Teen Marketing

So, where did the television trend targeting teenage viewers start? Ultimately that recognition goes mainly to *Dawson's Creek*, but other previous shows made strides towards this demographic. Perhaps one of the more notable cases was the popular 1990's teenage drama, *Beverly Hills, 90210*. This show was credited with beginning what many in the television industry have coined as "Planet Teen," consisting of shows in which it is the relationships between the teenage characters that count, not their relationships with parents and other authority figures. *Beverly Hills, 90210* was concerned with the "crucial business of soul-searching and self-dramatization" (Carson, 1999, paragraph 5). A similar concern can be found in *Dawson's Creek* where the show centers on the relationships between the teenage characters, placing parental and authority figures as background characters. Instead, the show's teenagers, with the aid of their friends and peers, are on a quest to find their places in the world around them. *Dawson's Creek's* focus on the teenage experience helps the show's teenage viewers find some much needed guidance in their quest to find themselves.

Teenage audiences are difficult to define. Today's teenagers are very particular about what they will and will not consume or adopt into their everyday lifestyles. They convey their attitudes to the corporate and entertainment worlds through a variety of means ranging from the movies they see to the clothes they wear. In this way, the teen

¹ The WB commanded a ratings share of 2.3/4.0 (lower than the other 4 major networks during 2001-2002), the station should not be overlooked because it attracts primarily teenagers (Zap 2 It Web site, 2002).

generation, being termed the Echo Generation (Goodale, 1999) or Generation Y (Ebenkamp, 1999), is making its presence felt. Advertisers are getting on the bandwagon and targeting their products towards teens and receiving big payoffs.

The WB has successfully learned the importance of gaining the attention of its young, primarily teenage, viewers. Paul Schulman, president of the media buying firm Paul Schulman Co., argues this group is “a fickle, tough audience to get, and they [the WB] deliver it regularly. Advertisers were fighting to get on [the network]” (quoted in Stanley, 1999, paragraph 10). To be successful in marketing to this audience, Gary Colen argues, “Kids want brands that say, ‘I’m like you,’ rather than ‘you should be like me.’ That’s where we see a lot of companies moving their ad dollars” (quoted in Ebenkamp, 1999, paragraph 11). The WB in general, and *Dawson’s Creek* in particular, appeal to viewers on this level, playing into the mindsets of their audience members by saying: “watch us because we understand you.” That simple message means a great deal to a group of viewers that all too often feels misunderstood.

The WB’s message strategy has paid off because, as Keith Snelgrove, MGM’s senior vice president of worldwide promotions and sponsorships argues, “the teen target is one of the most difficult audiences to reach effectively. They’re the trend leaders [and] they’ve [sic] got the money” (quoted in D’Orio, 1999, paragraph 2). Rather, it should be noted that it is the parents of this generation who have the money and in many cases filter it to their teenage children in the form of spending cash. Teenagers then turn around and purchase many of the products that they see on television, increasing the profits of the companies that advertise on shows like *Dawson’s Creek*. Teenage spending power should not be ignored. For example, twenty-five to thirty-three percent of U.S. retail

spending is done by or for teens and U.S. teens spent \$172 billion in 2001, up from \$100 billion in 1995 (Kato, 2002). Nonetheless, this audience is a much-coveted one.

These advertisers try to sell a variety of products to their target audiences. But perhaps one of the most interesting is the marketing of pop-music. As Goodale (1999) states,

The names on the pop-music scene – Brandy, Jewel, Britany Spears – could be confused for a high-school cheerleading team, as ever-younger stars provide the soundtrack for a teen generation some 60 million strong, nearly three times the size of the twenty somethings of the so-called Generation X. Credits at the end of the WB's hit new college show, *Felicity*, run like a who's who of teen musicians. (paragraph 4)

This strategy is true too of *Dawson's Creek*, where at the end of every episode, the credits of the songs used in the show are acknowledged by stating the artist's name and name of the album in which the selection can be found. Often this acknowledgement leads to increased success for these songs and artists. For instance, the *Dawson's Creek* theme song, "I Don't Want to Wait" by Paula Cole was merely a minor hit when it first debuted, but once the song started being featured in *Dawson's Creek* promos, its popularity on local radio stations soared (Schneider, 1999).

Most executives in the field agree that the phenomenon of using popular music in television shows originated on *Dawson's Creek*. Matt Walden, senior vice president of Arista Records' West Coast headquarters argues, "it makes sense not only in terms of creative content in these shows but also in terms of promoting the shows to that demographic...If it's used well, the music with the visual is a more resonant experience" (quoted in Schneider, 1999, paragraph 6). Many times listeners will buy a CD that features songs from the show because they like the music and want to hear it again or

because they like to reminisce about the episode when they first heard the music. It is of importance to note the first *Dawson's Creek* soundtrack was released in April 1999 and sold over 500,000 units and went gold. The success of the soundtrack is a phenomenal accomplishment matched only by the soundtracks from other powerhouse television shows including *Ally McBeal*, *South Park*, *Friends* and *Touched by an Angel* (Schneider, 1999). There is a definite synergy that exists between these shows, such as *Dawson's Creek* and the musicians featured on them.

The music industry is not the only one taking advantage of *Dawson's Creek's* unqualified success. During the show, the WB Network sells everything ranging from soft drinks to clothing lines. Even the movie industry has jumped on the bandwagon. The show wanted Dawson, an aspiring filmmaker, to have authentic movie memorabilia in his room. Since Dawson's favorite director/producer is Steven Spielberg, posters featuring Spielberg's movies were placed all over the walls of Dawson's bedroom. During the show's first year, producers of *Dawson's Creek* had to seek Spielberg's permission to use these posters. However, during the show's second season, Spielberg made sure that a poster promoting his (then new) movie *Saving Private Ryan* was visible in Dawson's room (D'Orio, 1999).

WB executives remain observant of the network's viewing audiences' behaviors. Bob Bibb and Lew Goldstein, co-presidents of marketing at the WB network, have experienced great success in partnering various businesses with the network's programs. These include alliances with J. Crew clothing and American Eagle Outfitters clothing stores. "Everybody wants the *Dawson's Creek* treatment," Goldstein argues (quoted in

Stanley, 1999, paragraph 28). To an extent, it can be argued that *Dawson's Creek* has transformed the advertising world.

The WB's marketing strategy is to provide teens with a voice. As Thompson argues, "teens today haven't had a language they could relate to. These shows are giving a vocabulary to the teenage wasteland" (quoted in Goodale, 1999, paragraph 8). In other words:

it is a different world. Teenagers not only have an abundance of series about them...they practically have their own network [the WB]...shows like... *Dawson's Creek*...depict a universe in which the high school years are all that matter. (Gates, 1999, paragraph 3)

The high school experience is central to these shows and rightfully so, because the majority of those watching are high school students. The WB network and especially *Dawson's Creek* help provide teenagers with something to which they can relate – what is life really like as a teenager?

Dawson's Creek strategy is a simple one – to convey the teenage world to viewers, though it is through the eyes of the show's writers and producers. Kevin Williamson², creator of *Dawson's Creek*, states, "I want to compliment them [the teen audience]. I believe in them and ... I want [the shows] to be smart and clever and sophisticated" (quoted in Goodale, 1999, paragraph 11). Dean Valentine, former UPN President, argues, "Audiences don't care about strategies. Audiences care about shows. That's why they're watching" (quoted in Goodale, 1999, paragraph 26). Williamson created the show as a reflection of his own teenage experiences in hopes of appealing to

² Williamson's credits also include the highly successful trilogy of *Scream* movies.

today's teen audiences. He believes he has a deep understanding of the teenage experience because he was “ a kid who slept in front of the TV and who grew up at Blockbuster. I just write what I know. And if it is not the world's truth, at least it's mine” (quoted in Miller, 1999, paragraph 21).

Justification for the Study

With the ongoing debates in society about the effects of television viewing on impressionable audiences there is a need to analyze teen targeted television shows and their audiences. This study makes a contribution by examining teenage female perceptions of one of the most popular teen dramas, *Dawson's Creek*.

The popularity of shows like *Dawson's Creek* gave rise to discussions about their controversial nature. Much of the discussion surrounding *Dawson's Creek* has taken place in the trade press and not in academia. Critics are concerned about the message the show is sending to its viewers. Some critics argue that shows like *Dawson's Creek* are part of the “Teen-sploitation” movement and part of a hormonal haze that has settled over the entertainment industry (Gates, 2000). Other critics argue, “*Dawson's Creek* is not a bad title, but it could have been called ‘While Parents Cringe,’ [because the show opens] with lots of chatter about breasts, genitalia, masturbation and penis size. Then the title and credits come on and the story begins” (Leo, 1998, paragraph 2). In addition, it has been argued that the show displays the adult world as basically hopeless. “The teens all talk in hip, arch expressions, while the adults sound flat and stupid” (Leo, 1998, paragraph 7). Adults do not carry the same amount of respect that the teen characters display on the screen. Many argue the show may actually cause adults to lose some of their traditional credibility and efficacy (Leo, 1998).

There is a flip side to these arguments. As Robert Thompson, a professor at Syracuse University, states, “many of these shows are extremely articulate. Wouldn’t it be great if many of the kids we worry about getting into drugs and sex would do this kind of talking instead?” (quoted in Goodale, 1999, paragraph 9). From this point of view, shows like *Dawson’s Creek* help start a dialogue about controversial issues that many teens may not want to discuss with their parents.

In a *PBS Front Line* interview, scholar Robert McChesney was asked if *Dawson’s Creek* is a “valid way to spread issues and real life and good content back to the masses.” McChesney responded:

I guess I’d rather have *Dawson’s Creek* deal with real issues than with inane issues. So, I certainly would not discourage them from doing that. But, is that going to ultimately be a successful way to really have a vibrant culture? Probably not. There’s no evidence to think that, if the commercial logic that so dominates the content of these shows was at all in conflict with the idea of doing a show on an important issue, it’s hard to believe that the issues would overwhelm the commercial logic.
(*Frontline* Transcript, paragraph 101)

McChesney recognizes the commercial logic that underlies *Dawson’s Creek* and other shows similar to it. There is a formula that determines the way the show is marketed to its teenage audiences. Is this the right formula to attract viewers? From recent evidence, the answer to this question seems to be yes.

Part of this formula, McChesney and others discuss, deals with the subject of programming. The television industry has been repeatedly criticized for its programming content. Gerbner, et. al. (1994, n.p.) found “The sensational, stereotypical and formulaic nature of television programming is reflective of the biased values of contemporary society.” In this manner, television merely reflects the nature of society. Are television

networks and in this case the WB, simply filling the wants and needs of its primary audience, teenagers? Or are they creating these needs?

The media have been criticized for the role that they play in representing reality. In particular, *Dawson's Creek* has been criticized because its characters act “too old” for the age they are playing. Much of that criticism is centered on the fact that the actors on the show are several years older than the age of the characters they play (many of the actors are in their early to mid 20's). However, given the show's high ratings, this fact appears to be well accepted by *Dawson's Creek* viewers. We need to explore how teenagers perceive the teenage reality represented on *Dawson's Creek* and if /how they include these representations in their everyday lives. This study gives voice to female teenagers who watch *Dawson's Creek* allowing them to explain the set of meanings and cultural experiences they associate with this show.

Dawson's Creek and Me

Dawson's Creek is particularly significant to me. First, the show is filmed in my hometown of Wilmington, North Carolina. Second, I have been a member of the *Dawson's Creek* audience since its first season in 1998, and I have noticed the growing popularity of the show as well as the show's ability to tackle sensitive issues in ways that do not offend its viewers.

I am not a member of the primary targeted audience of the show, but I was able to draw upon a television show when I was a teen that reflected the teenage experience. That show was *Beverly Hills, 90210*, and I watched every episode during its ten-year run. This particular show influenced my views of myself and others in ways that I still cannot

fully conceive even to this day³. I'm interested in how *Dawson's Creek* teenage viewers draw on this show's representation of the teenage world to understand their own reality.

More importantly, I chose this topic as a reflection of my interests in the ideological role the mass media play. The media shape how we view the world around us by providing us with representations of dominant ideas. However, we all interpret these media texts differently and we give these texts meaning according to our own social upbringings. I am interested in exploring how these representations are produced and consumed in viewing audiences, particularly those of young and impressionable female viewers.

³ Please refer to the Epilogue for more discussions about the similarities between *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Dawson's Creek*.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are numerous studies that examine the impact of television viewing on younger audiences. Because no two viewers are alike, it can be argued that television serves different roles for different kinds of viewers. For many teens, television plays a crucial role in the creation of identity. Young viewers often develop their attitudes and behaviors from the television programs they watch rather than from their parents as tradition used to dictate (Mead, 1968). Thus, the role of television in teenagers' lives should be taken seriously.

Studying *Dawson's Creek*

Even though *Dawson's Creek* commands high program ratings and is a marketing tool targeting teenage audiences, scholarship on the show is scant. Through textual analysis, Nixon (2001) examined how *Dawson's Creek* is packaged for the teenage audience, from its storylines to the commercials aired during the show. For example, in an episode entitled, "Sex, She Wrote" broadcast in 1999, some of the commercials included a Coca-Cola ad with the theme song "Boys Will Be Boys," a frizz-free hair product and a low-cost retail store, all relating to the content of the episode aired.

In her analysis, Nixon (2001) was not surprised to find that the show presents "adult" themes to its young audience. "*Dawson's Creek* is seen to be attempting to treat 'adults' themes like sex, in what is essentially a programme made for and targeted towards children and young people" (Nixon, 2001, paragraph 3). She agrees with critics

who argue that the show is not suitable for teenage audiences because “programmes like *Dawson’s Creek* allow young people to watch people ‘their own age’ having sex” and “the programme is rather an extended recollection of adolescence by and mainly for individuals on the far side of that experience” (Nixon, 2001, paragraphs 9 and 10). Nixon argues that the characters on the show act far more mature than what is typical for their age group. Her biggest criticism of the show is its power to shape and mold the minds of its young impressionable viewers.

In her dissertation, Haggins (2000) examined “the interplay between the mythos of The American Dream, the medium of television, and the formation of racial and national identities” (paragraph 1) of teenagers in Pasadena, California. She interviewed teenagers to find out how televised versions of the American Dream affect participants’ views themselves and the world around them. *Dawson’s Creek* was overwhelmingly the televised text of choice among the study’s participants. She found that the show shapes viewers’ ideas of the American Dream, regardless of the viewers’ chances to achieve the “dream.” In this sense, *Dawson’s Creek* can give a false impression of the teenage world to its viewers. Furthermore, the show displays a teenage virtual reality that may conflict with the viewers’ reality.

Teenagers and Television

Television is an ever-present force found in many households. Often there is more interplay between viewers and their television sets than between viewers and other people, especially when one focuses on adolescents and teenagers. Most of these studies, however, are experimental. They look at media effects by defining and controlling variables. Since this thesis is concerned with the teenage meaning-making process, I

review those studies that share this interest. There are several studies concerning the effects of television consumption and how this consumption affects the identity formation of television viewers, in particular, teenagers.

Reading Television

Fisherkeller (1999) conducted a study exploring a group of twelve and thirteen-year-old adolescents' interpretations of how the media educates its viewers concerning their own identities and the reality of the world in which they live. She was interested in addressing the issue that television presents a dream like world, where young and impressionable viewers are shown idealistic lives that many will not be able to achieve due to the social barriers they face.

Fisherkeller's study found that "relations of social power in the actual lives of...young people create contexts that frame what individuals want and need to acquire from television" (p. 204). Teenagers are on a quest to find their identities and television regularly provides a means to find those answers they used (Fisherkeller, 1999).

Television serves a role of providing guidance and direction to these viewers and in the process, it helps them to gain a sense of themselves and their ideas about culture and society. Television content is framed for its viewers according to their perceived wants and needs.

The lessons that one learns from television are different from those that one learns in a classroom or from parents or other authority figures. Television is a visual medium with images that make a lasting impression on viewers, often for years long after the initial exposure to these images. However, Fisherkeller found that the lessons that young viewers learn from their television choices do not necessarily reinforce those lessons they

have learned elsewhere. Drawing on Hall (1973), she argues that it is not clear if impressionable viewers “are merely accepting, resisting, or opposing the dominant ideologies of programming” (p. 201).

In any case, Fisherkeller argues, television serves as a reference for teenagers striving to find their place in the power and class structures of society. For instance, Dezeray, a thirteen-year-old Latino female; Wolverine, a twelve-year-old African American male; and Sammantha, a thirteen-year-old Euro-American female, “observe and experience power relations as [they] play out in daily constructions of gender, race, class and other identities, whether in their actual lives or on TV” (p. 194). One of the perceived roles of television is to mirror a “reality” of life. Many teen-targeted shows depict a life that viewers have not been able to fully experience yet because of their young ages.

Identity

Finding their place in the social formation is an important part of teenagers’ search for identity. During such explorations, young people create contexts that frame what they need and desire to acquire from television to help them search for identity and find their places in this world (Fisherkeller, 1999). “Young people reflect on the meaning and value of symbols in the media fictions and how these symbols contribute to their sense of themselves and their ideas about culture and society” (p. 203).

It follows that adolescents’ and teenagers’ identities are linked to their media exposure. The media that they consume is varied, complex and fragmented. Fisherkeller (1999) argues:

The multiple contexts within which most young adolescents negotiate questions about their ‘almost adult’ identities are permeated by a myriad of media, including television and film, books and magazines, radio and music recordings, billboards and posters, and computer programs and services. (p. 188)

Television, in addition to other types of media, plays an undeniable role in aiding young viewers in their maturing processes, often at accelerated rates. The media, in particular television, have been criticized for teaching young consumers behaviors that are deemed inappropriate for their ages. Young and impressionable viewers often take what is shown on the television screen to be reality and thus are influenced by characters’ behaviors. In this sense, television’s role in teenagers’ lives becomes almost invisible because its impact is subtle (Potter, 1990).

Potter (1990) used cultivation theory as a framework for his three-wave panel study of middle and high school students over a five-year period and found they hold three possible views of television: “as a ‘magic window’ to reality, as a utility route to information and as an identity source through which one can relate to others as almost real people” (p. 392). As the participants aged, their view of “magic window” declined, while the functions of utility and identity remained relatively strong. Television leaves a lasting effect on impressionable viewers, shaping the way they view the world. Unfortunately this lasting effect is often ignored because “the more we live with television, the more invisible it becomes” (p. 843).

Television infiltrates the everyday lives of teenagers far beyond the viewing experience. Brown and Dykers (1994) examined the concept of “teenage room culture,” “a particular theoretical and methodological approach to the study of how individuals work and play with the variety of available cultural symbols, myths, and artifacts in the

process of creating a sense of themselves” (paragraph 3). They argue that the mass media play a crucial role as a “cultural tool kit” from which teenagers draw to develop their identity.

Identity is linked to feelings of self worth. Harter and colleagues (1979) found that physical appearance is the most important criteria contributing to children’s and young adolescents’ feelings of self-worth, for males and females alike. The means by which they learn this information is based on the television programs they watch. In Harter, et. al.’s study of attitudes shaped by television programs viewed, physical appearance outweighed other factors they tested including social acceptance, scholastic and athletic competence and behavioral conduct. Television program content often shows only the attractive characters gaining the most success while those not up to this defined standard do not gain as much success or good luck. This fuels the perception that it pays to be physically attractive (Harter, et.al., 1979).

Another important influence on the construction of teenage identity is the presence of role models who, many times, are found in popular culture. In Fisherkeller’s study (1999), role models inspired the three students she interviewed. Dezeray looks to Madonna for her inspiration; Madonna helps her dream of a better life than the one she is experiencing now. She sees Madonna as confidently challenging the status quo of appropriate and/or acceptable social behavior. Wolverine admires Bill Cosby for making “the right decisions,” which helps him to reflect on his own father who taught him right from wrong. For her part, Sammantha admires the strong-willed character, *Murphy Brown* who challenges the status quo and transgresses the traditional role of a woman. Despite the fact that role models inspire viewers, Fisherkeller warns, this does not mean

these viewers will be able to reach the same level of success as their role models. Rather, these viewers may be limited in their search for different ways of life. Nevertheless, television role models do give viewers goals or statuses to strive toward.

Teenage identity is also linked to the viewers' choice of favorite character. Cohen (1999) examined factors relating to teenagers' choices for a favorite character on a popular Israeli serial, *Ramat-Aviv Gimel*. This popular series is similar to *Dawson's Creek* in the sense that members of the show's audience develop strong relationships with the show's characters. Cohen argues favorite characters are important to television viewers because of the development of relationships and identification between characters and viewers.

Cohen concludes that a favorite character can be chosen for a variety of reasons, but some of the more obvious include physical appearance, speech characteristics, behavior, emotional reactions and non-verbal expressions. It is important to point out that many of the qualities that viewers like about a particular character are more related to the actor that plays the character than to the character itself. Similarly, Cohen argues, "Television characters do not simply behave, they act out roles based on scripts" (paragraph 12). Character behavior does not take place in the natural setting; instead it is developed in the writer's head.

In sum, a review of the academic literature pertinent to this study underscores a lack of studies about *Dawson's Creek*. In addition, existing studies about teenagers and television have been conducted mostly in the experimental or laboratory settings. Ethnography and interviews are seldom used to study the role of television in teenagers'

lives. This study seeks to change the research tide, exploring television through in-depth interviews, giving voice to the show's audience.

Research Questions

One of the strengths of qualitative interviews is that they allow for new themes to surface. Therefore, this study is open to the emergence of new themes and questions.

My starting research questions are:

1. What roles does the show serve for its teenage female audiences?
2. How does the show influence teenage females' perceptions of teenage life and of the "typical" high school student?
3. How do *Dawson's Creek* viewers identify with the show's characters?
4. How do the show's female viewers perceive the nature of relationships, and how has *Dawson's Creek* influenced this perception?

By exploring these topic areas, I am interested in reflecting on how realistic the teenage experience is depicted in the television show according to the show's teenage viewers. I am interested in examining the audiences' interpretations as opposed to my own because I am not a member of the show's primary targeted audience. In addition, I want to examine the overall impact that the show has had upon its viewers – has the show taught them anything, opened their eyes to new experiences?

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

Cultural Studies

This study is located within the cultural studies paradigm, which encompasses “literary criticism, sociology, history, media studies” (Sparks, 1996, p. 14), and examines the “complex nature of culture in relation to issues of power: the power relations...which affect who is represented and how, who speaks and who is silent, what counts as ‘culture’ and what does not” (Couldry, 2000, p. 2). Johnson (1996) defines cultural studies as the site where “all social practices can be looked at from a cultural point of view, for the work they do, subjectively” (p. 2). He adds, “the ultimate object of cultural studies is not...the text, but the social life of subjective forms at each moment of their circulation, including their textual embodiments” (p. 2). Furthermore, cultural studies, concerned about the relations in and between social groups in society, is mindful of the uneven distribution of power and resources in the social formation. It follows, then, that an essential element of the cultural studies paradigm is the notion of a struggle to establish meanings in a society where meaning is produced and reproduced in a continuous cycle.

The concept of culture is at the center of cultural studies. Fiske (1996) explains that culture in cultural studies “is neither aesthetic nor humanist in emphasis, but political” (p. 115). It is “a particular way of life, whether of people, a period or a group” (Williams, 1976, p. 90). More importantly, culture is the site of a continuous struggle over meaning “in which subordinate groups attempt to resist the imposition of meanings

which bear the interests of dominant groups” (Storey, 1996, p. 3). In this sense, culture is ideological (Storey, 1996), a “dynamic social practice...constantly reproducing itself” (Fiske, 1996, p. 118).

The relationship between cultural studies and Marxism is, many times, misunderstood. Some scholars assume that both are one and the same.⁴ Storey aptly explains that although not all cultural studies practitioners are Marxists, “cultural studies is itself grounded in Marxism” (1996, p. 3). Cultural studies is informed by Marxism’s insistence that the understanding of the social formation is inextricably linked to the examination of ideology, the economic structure and historical background. However, cultural studies rejects Marxism’s narrow determinism of the economic structure, and suggests alternative, more complex interpretations and analyses of the role played by the economic and ideological structures in the social formation.

Cultural studies draws on Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. “The concept suggests a society in which there is a high degree of consensus, in which subordinate classes appear to actively support and subscribe to values, ideals, objectives and cultural meanings which tie them to and assimilate them into the prevailing power structure” (Acosta-Alzuru, 1999, p. 38). The media play a crucial role in the workings of hegemony. In addition to their mass distribution, the media are conduits for certain meanings. They play “a part in the formation, in the constitution, of the things that they reflect. It is not that there is a world outside, ‘out there,’ which exists free of the discourses of

⁴ See James Carey (1997). “Reflections on the project of (American) cultural studies.”

representation. What is ‘out there’ is, in part, constituted by how it is represented” (Hall, 1996, p. 3). Representation, then, is central to cultural analysis since it is the arena for symbolic conflict over which meanings will become hegemonic.

From the centrality of these concepts – culture, meanings, representation, ideology and hegemony – follows the importance of popular culture as:

The arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an area that is profoundly mythic...It is there that we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are represented. Not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time. (Hall, 1992, p. 22)

In addition, popular culture is a problematic concept because “the popular” is not a simple, natural category, but itself already a social construction (Hall, 1981). “The popular” is not defined by the masses, but by the dominant system holding the power. In this sense, popular culture is “an arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured” (p. 239).

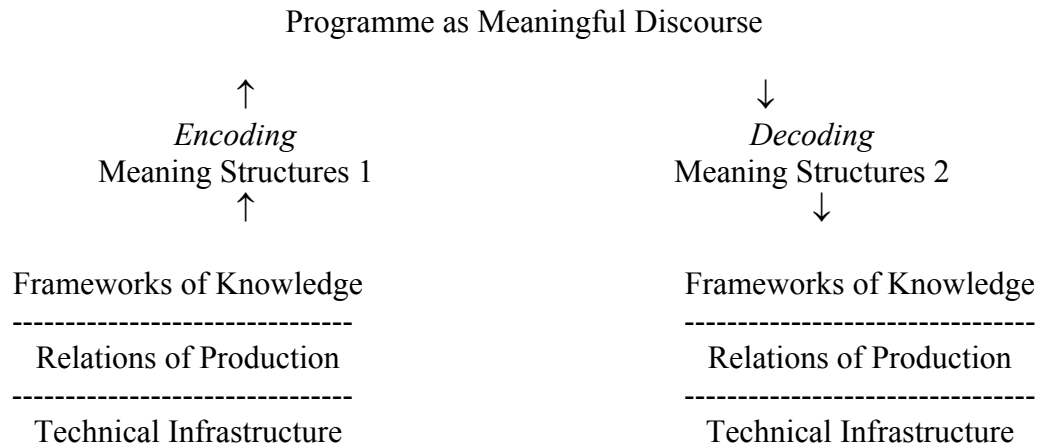
Television is an important medium for the circulation of popular culture. In his book, *Television Culture*, Fiske (1987) argues television is “so popular, that is, capable of offering such a variety of pleasures to such a heterogeneity of viewers, because the characteristics of its texts and of its modes of reception enable an active participation in that sense-making process which we call culture” (p. 19). According to Morley (1992), the two traditional streams of research in the study of television are: media effects/message-based and audience-based studies. In general, media effects/message-based research consists of largely behavioral studies in the artificial experimental setting. The second type, audience-based studies, has been conducted primarily through studies focusing on different audiences and their degrees of openness to the messages they

receive. These two areas have gradually allowed for the inclusion of a third stream: an interpretive approach examining television texts in terms of their social meanings. This thesis falls into this last category.

The text and the audience

The examination of the relative power of the text and the audience is an important research area in cultural studies. Research that adopts the powerful text/passive audience perspective “focuses on the text's ideological effect, views meaning as inscribed in the text, and assumes only one possible reading” (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002, p. 146). In contrast, research adopting the polysemic text/active audience approach “looks at how audiences read the text in different ways” (p. 146).

Hall’s encoding/decoding theory attempts to explain how text and receiver interact, and the process by which culture is produced and reproduced in society, albeit in different manners depending on how the message is transferred and consumed (1973b) (See Figure 1). Hall suggests a four-stage circuit of the communication process: production, circulation, use/consumption and reproduction. Each stage is “relatively autonomous” from the others, but is also determinate, meaning that each stage does have its own limits and possibilities.

Figure 1. Hall's Communication Process.

The process begins in production, where the message is constructed. It is at this stage where encoding occurs, i.e., the assignment of certain meanings to the text. A variety of factors affect this message construction – “routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on” (Hall, 1973b, p. 92). Production is not a closed system; it draws from “topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, definitions of the situation from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part” (p. 92).

The next stage in the cycle is circulation or reception. Before the message can have an impact, it must be decoded and viewed as meaningful discourse. In other words, the message must be realized and the receiver must be “receptive” to it. If the message is deemed as meaningful discourse, it moves to the stage of use/consumption. It is important to note that we do not know how “receptive” the audience will be to the message. Drawing on Hall (1973b), Grossberg argues:

A text does not carry its own meaning or politics already inside of itself; no text is able to guarantee what its effects will be. People are constantly struggling, not merely to figure out what a text means, but to make it mean something that connects to their own lives, experiences, needs and desires. The same text will mean different things to different people, depending on how it is interpreted... The text can only mean something in the context of the experience and situation of its particular audience. (p. 52-53)

In other words, the reader's "situation" will affect how receptive he/she is to a particular message. If the receiver's situation is not affected by a particular message, then the latter will not be accepted as "meaningful dialogue" (the viewer will not be receptive to the idea). If, on the other hand, the message directly affects the viewer's "situation," then it will be accepted as "meaningful dialogue."

The third stage of the process is consumption, in which the message is used and put into practice into the social system. Hall alerts us to the traditional way in which consumption has been measured: positivistic effects and uses and gratifications research. He argues that consumption should not be measured in these behavioral terms. Instead, this stage should be framed by "structures of understanding, as well as being produced by social and economic relations... which permit the meanings signified in the discourse to be transposed into practice or consciousness (to acquire social use value or political effectivity)" (p. 93). In sum, consumption means that the message transmitted becomes part of the receiver's everyday social interactions.

The last stage in the circuit, reproduction, occurs when the transmitted message is replicated by the receiver (reproduced) and carried out in other social interactions.

Hall argues that there are three positions from which the decoding of a message may occur during the stages of reception and consumption. These are "social situation"

positions as they are reflective of the viewers' social setting that a viewer is in (Van de Berg, 1998). In simple terms, these positions are readings, or "the capacity to identify and decode a certain number of signs, but also the subjective capacity to put them into a creative relation between themselves and with other signs" (p. 99). A reading, i.e., the relationship between the text and the reader, does not occur in a vacuum, but in "a field of many discourses, some in harmony with the text, some which are in contradiction with it" (Storey, 1996, p. 16).

Hall calls the first position dominant-hegemonic (or preferred reading), in which the viewer is "operating inside the dominant code" (Storey, 1996b, p. 12). The dominant code is imposed on the masses by those who possess the power in a social/political structure (i.e. hegemony). With such a reading, the viewer "takes the connoted meaning...full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded" (p. 12). This type of reading occurs, "when the viewer takes the connoted meaning from, say, a television newscast or current affairs programme full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded," (Hall, 1973b, p. 136). Dominant readings are a reflection of the hegemonical meanings present in society's messages. These readings require constant enforcement and reinforcement.

Inside the "dominant code" exists the "professional code" (Storey, 1996b). The latter seeks to reproduce dominant definitions by operating within professional codings such as visual quality, news and presentational values, televisual quality, professionalism, etc. According to Hall (1973b), the professional code is a "metacode" through which the dominant code is always articulated.

The second position is that of the negotiated reading, which Storey (1996b) argues is the majority position. This reading acknowledges the hegemonic codes as legitimate, but operates at a restricted, situated level with its own ground rules:

It accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to 'local conditions,' to its own more corporate conditions. This negotiated version...is shot through with contradictions" (Hall, 1973 b, p. 102).

This position is marked by, "a shifting perspective from one position to another and an uneasy lack of conclusion," where a constant process of negotiation takes place (Brocker, 1998, p. 74).

The third position is the oppositional reading. Hall describes it as the ability "to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contrary way...within some alternative framework of reference" (1973b, p. 103). The viewer recognizes the preferred code in existence, but chooses not to adopt it, taking instead an entirely different perspective.

This model highlights that there is no single reading and gives the audience the power to interpret the text differently. However, there is a theoretical debate concerning the degree of freedom that receivers have to interpret the text. Some argue the text is open for interpretation, regardless of most circumstances. Fiske (1987) falls into this category as he argues that texts are polysemic and audiences are free to make meanings at their own will from these texts. He complains, "hegemonic theories of popular culture have overestimated the power of the determinations [of the text] and underestimated that of the viewer" (p. 57).

However, Condit (1989) argues, “the pleasures audiences experience in receiving texts are necessarily complicated,” (p. 103). This “pleasure” is complex because of a variety of factors in a given rhetorical situation, such as “audience members’ access to oppositional codes, the ratio between the work required and pleasure produced in decoding a text, the repertoire of available texts, and the historical occasion” (p. 104). In other words, the readers’ background will affect how and if they accept the message.

Moreover, in contrast to Fiske’s tenet that texts are polysemic, Condit argues that polyvalence is a more appropriate term than polysemy. She defines polyvalence as a situation where “audience members share understandings of the denotations of a text, but disagree about the valuation of those denotations to such a degree that they produce notably different interpretations...where audiences [assign] different values to different portions of the text and hence to the text itself” (p. 106, 108). They do this because:

They neither find television simply pleasurable, simply an escape, nor simply obnoxious and oppressive. The audience’s variability is a consequence of the fact that humans, in their inherent character as audiences, are inevitably situated in a communication *system*, of which they are a part, and hence have some influence within, but by which they are also influenced. (p. 120)

In other words, viewers will place greater emphasis on particular portions of the text depending on their own background, proving that polysemy is not a completely determining theory. In sum, Condit concludes that audience members “are neither simply resistive nor dupes” (p. 120).

Summarizing, this study is located in the cultural studies tradition. It embraces a conception of culture “that stresses lived experiences, legitimizes popular culture as a valid research topic, and focuses on conflicts over meanings” (Acosta-Alzuru, 1999, p.

43). This thesis is also informed by the theoretical debates about the relative power of the audience in relation to the text.

Method

In all of the sciences and their associated quantitative and qualitative research methods there exists questions of epistemology, or “the concern of how we know what we know, and how we make claims that knowledge is true or not true” (Brunskell, 1998, p. 37). However, it should be noted the assumptions surrounding qualitative and quantitative studies are different. The biggest differences between the two are: quantitative studies operate in an artificial setting, usually a laboratory under controlled conditions; whereas, qualitative studies prefer to study phenomenon in their natural setting. Berger (2000) argues that qualitative research focuses on individual interpretation and “sees the universe in a grain of sand” (p. xvii). He also refers to the methodology as being for the “data-free man,” where the researcher is interested in depth and not breadth in gaining insightful and rich data. This study adopts qualitative methodology, and several of the assumptions of such research will be discussed further in this section.

First, in the field of qualitative research, it is more effective to understand phenomenon in their complexity. Qualitative inquiry is concerned with conducting research in natural settings away from the artificial environment of many forms of quantitative scholarship. The qualitative researcher serves as “an instrument of data collection who gathers words or pictures, analyzes them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and describes a process that is expressive and persuasive in

language” (Creswell, 1998, p. 14). The researcher’s place in qualitative methodology is to become part of the setting.

Secondly, the “reality” is not defined by quantifiable and operationally-defined terms or conditions. For purposes of this study, the teenage experience is not defined by a single definition and therefore, by no single epistemology; instead the “reality” of the experience is defined by the participants’ voices. Their definitions of what constitutes the reality of the teenage experience vary based on their own social circumstances, i.e. their social upbringings. Reality in such terms becomes a subjective concept and not one that can be defined by conditions or definitions in a controlled setting. Rather “reality” is defined in its more complex, natural form. The “definitions” of reality stem from the perspective of the interview participant and not from a controlled, pre-determined condition.

Third, qualitative research is reflexive, which involves “the capacity of researchers to reflect upon their actions and values during research, whether in producing data or writing accounts” (Seale, 1998, p. 329). Since the qualitative researcher is a tool in the research process, it is important to reflect upon their role in the research process. The ability of the researcher to draw upon reflexivity serves as a means to provide rigor to qualitative scholarship. Concerning my own subjectivity and reflexivity in this study, I draw upon my own experiences with television as a teenager, in particular with the television serial, *Beverly Hills, 90210*. I will discuss this more in the epilogue.

Similarly, this study complies with Creswell’s criteria for qualitative research projects (1998). First, the nature of the research questions is appropriate since these questions are broad and focus on the meanings that participants associate with *Dawson’s*

Creek. Second, *Dawson's Creek* is a topic that needs to be explored in order to understand a bigger issue: the show's ideological role in the lives of its young viewers. Third, topics that are to be studied in detail merit qualitative approaches. Most of the research about teenagers and television is experimental and quantitative; therefore, they paint a general picture of their object of study. It is essential to undertake studies that give us in-depth knowledge of this topic. Fourth, this thesis strives to answer questions in a natural setting. Fifth, a qualitative study should be undertaken "to emphasize the researcher's role as an active learner who can tell the story from the participants' view rather than as an 'expert' who passes judgment on participants" (Creswell, 1998, p. 18).

Since I am interested in examining the participants' perception and reception of *Dawson's Creek*, I chose qualitative, in-depth interviews. As Seale (1998) argues, qualitative research deals with "how people actively constitute phenomenon in their everyday interactions" (p. 68). Specifically, I am interested in how female teenage audience members view the teenage world as depicted on the show, and whether they incorporate *Dawson's Creek's* messages of the show into their everyday interactions.

Kvale (1996) defines the interview as a conversation with the goal of producing knowledge; an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest. An effective interview is an art and takes time to perfect. The interview is a conversation, but not an equal one because the interviewer remains in control of the discussion. The in-depth interviews used in this study helped to provide rich and detailed information that may not be readily available by using other method.

I interviewed ten females between the ages of 15-20 who watch *Dawson's Creek*.⁵ Nine participants were Caucasian and one African-American. All participants live in northeast Georgia. All attended public high schools: nine in northeast Georgia and one in North Carolina. She now attends college in northeast Georgia. The participants' socio-economic levels ranged from middle class to upper middle class.

Seven interviews were conducted at the participants' homes, either in their bedrooms or in common areas. Three were conducted over the telephone with the use of a telephone-recording device. Recruitment was done through snowball sampling. I started with a pilot study in the summer of 2001 that consisted of one participant, an avid viewer of *Dawson's Creek*. This pilot study helped me to get a feel for how the interviewing process works and it was instrumental in determining the themes to be discussed in the interview. In addition, the pilot study's participant was the first seed of the snowball sampling.

The interviews conducted in this study are semi-structured. The requirements for this type of interview are to "be knowledgeable about the interview topic and to be familiar with the methodological options available, as well as having a grasp of the conceptual issues of producing knowledge through conversation" (Kvale, 1996, p. 13). There is no common procedure for the qualitative research interview. What must be kept in mind is that the interview seeks to obtain statements where participants describe as precisely as possible what they feel, experience and how they act. I had an interview guide (see Appendix D) with the different themes that I wanted to cover with each participant. However, participants were allowed to digress and bring out new themes.

⁵ "In current interview studies, the number of interviews tends to be around 15 ± 10 " (Kvale, 1996, p. 102).

After each interview was conducted and I left the interview site, I would immediately write down notes and comments about the participant. These notes covered the participant's level of comfort with the interview setting, the room's set-up, and various other comments that would help me with my interview analysis. Interviews were transcribed in Microsoft Word and transferred to the qualitative data software NUD*IST. I developed thirty-four coding categories to help me organize my data. The categories were developed after I read through each transcript a few times and noted common themes that emerged from each. Then the findings were reported. As Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel (2002) note, reporting interpretive or qualitative research faces a few challenges. Despite the fact that it is not possible to quote all findings from the study, it is important to "quote sufficient evidence to support the researchers' interpretations" (p. 150). I want the participants in this study to have a voice and be heard; therefore, the quotes used from the interviews express the participants' sentiments towards representation of teenage life on *Dawson's Creek*.

While focus groups could have been utilized in this study, in-depth interviews were the desired method. As stated, the goal of my study was to examine the participants' perceptions of the representation of the teenage experience on the show and I sought to speak with each participant in a one-on-one setting. Focus groups could have provided some rich and insightful data into the subject, but they also have a tendency to be dominated by one or two members who express their opinions continuously, often not allowing others' voices to be heard. In addition, some focus group participants do not feel comfortable with discussing sensitive issues in a group setting. By using in-depth

interviews, I am able to gain more detailed information about these very topics. I wanted to hear all voices in this study, not just a few in order to fully engage with the topic.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In-depth interviews provide deep and interesting insights into a particular topic, often uncovering more information than the interviewer had originally anticipated. This is what happened in my experiences with conducting in-depth interviews about *Dawson's Creek*. The teenagers I spoke with had strong opinions on a variety of topics ranging from drug use to sexuality. *Dawson's Creek* incorporates controversial and timely issues into weekly storylines that attract a wide range of viewers. These interviews allowed me to gain insight into the mindset of participants, helping me to understand their perceptions about *Dawson's Creek*.

Watching *Dawson's Creek*

Dawson's Creek is just a teenage drama. Since its beginning, the show has maintained a strong hold over its viewers. The study's participants are no exception. The reasons why each participant started watching the show vary. However, there are some common themes that help to explain why they started watching – the initial promotional and advertising campaigns by the WB and also word of mouth comments between friends. Also, a few started watching the show by accident – they happened to be flipping through television channels and happened to fall upon the show and became hooked on its first episode.

Ann said, “Yes, I saw it advertised a bunch and me and my friends were like talking about it at school, so we all watched it.” Kristy mentioned that she started

watching it because of the show's advertising campaign which made her think "it was new and something to watch, I guess." Even though many of the participants recalled seeing some sort of advertising promoting the show, they could not recall any specifics.

In addition to promotional advertising, word-of-mouth promotion by friends had an impact on why some of the participants started watching. Many mentioned that particular episodes triggered conversations within their social circles. Carly started watching because she heard a great deal about the show from her friends. She said, "I had seen it a couple of times with my friends and then I got hooked on the episodes." Kim did not start watching the show seriously until this past season (2001-2002). When I asked her what stimulated her to watch the show she said, "I don't know. It was on and they [her friends] were talking [about it]." However, Kim mentioned that some of her friends do not watch the show anymore: "Maybe it was a maturity thing. They left it back in middle school." This is a common theme mentioned in several interviews, since this older *Dawson's Creek's* audience is outgrowing the show's storylines.

Despite the planned and unplanned promotion of the show, there were those participants who started watching by accident. Michelle was "looking through the channels and it was like the first ever [episode] and I was just watching and saw it." However, she remembers seeing a preview of the first episode, however. Elizabeth⁶ could not pinpoint an exact reason why she started watching the show. She did mention that she watched the first episode "because I was just curious and I kept watching it and I

⁶Elizabeth is the only African American participant in the study. It is my impression that she is an overachiever who seems to be far removed from the teenage experience in general. As I read her interview transcript, I found it interesting that she used the word "them" to refer to teenagers, of which she is one. She is from a similar socio-economic background, but is not from the same ethnic background. She watches the show strictly for its entertainment value.

liked their [the characters] general conversations with each other...it's interesting, it's like really well put together...What else do I do at 8 o'clock?"

The participants' level of involvement with the show also varies. The most devoted viewers are highly involved with the show. For them, the program is more than another teenage drama. Instead, the show becomes a way of life. Those less involved appear to watch the show strictly for entertainment purposes: a teen drama, having little influence over these participants' lives.

Elizabeth watches episodes when she is at home, but does not worry if she misses one due to a meeting at school or an activity at her church. She said, "I try to get home to see it, but I don't tape it if I miss it." Elizabeth does not visit the show's Web site, nor did she even know one existed until I asked her. She said she does not call anyone before, during, or after an episode. Most of the time, Elizabeth watches the show on her own, but her mother sometimes watches with her. In a similar fashion, Kim also watches the show alone in her room and does not do much beyond that to enhance her viewing experience e.g.: visit the show's Web site.

Stacy, an avid television viewer, tries to watch every week, but "if I miss it, I don't die." If she misses an episode, she simply puts it behind her and watches the next show in her regular weekly line-up. Stacy said that her mother watches many of the shows she watches including *Dawson's Creek*, *Friends*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Roswell* and *CSI*. She said she has a "daily thing," meaning that she has a line-up of television programs that she watches each night. Stacy mentions she watches several WB shows, but not as many as she once did because *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

has moved to the UPN. Stacy does not watch re-runs of *Dawson's Creek* because she has already seen the episodes.

Sally watches the show with friends, but seems to have little involvement with the show beyond this – she does not tape episodes, watch re-runs and does not own any *Dawson's Creek* memorabilia. In contrast, Amanda watches the show with her friends and if they are not together, “then we are definitely on the phone during commercial breaks talking about it.” Often, in school, there are next day conversations between her and her friends about what happened on the episode the previous night. Despite the fact that she appears to still be very involved in her viewing experience, she admits that she does not watch the show every week like she once did, nor does she tape re-runs.

Kristy also watches every week with friends and owns archives reaching back to the first aired episode. In addition, she owns both *Dawson's Creek* soundtracks and has made copies for several of her friends. She is a highly involved viewer as will be discussed in further detail in this chapter. In addition, Kristy pays exclusive attention to the show when watching episodes, and “talking is for the commercials.” Ann, one of Kristy's good friends, also tries to watch every week. When she is unable to watch an episode, she worries: “I get like out of date, like everybody talks about it, so if I didn't like watch it, I'm like, lost.” In particular she means that Kristy will discuss episodes at length with her and she hates to feel uninformed going into these discussions.

Carly does not like being interrupted when she's watching *Dawson's Creek*. She does not take phone calls during the episodes and always tapes the episodes she will miss. A devoted fan, she likes to watch the show with her friends whenever possible. “During school, I watch it with my friends, but at home, I just watch it by myself. I watch it

religiously every Wednesday.” However, she does not watch re-runs and does not own any *Dawson’s Creek* memorabilia. She occasionally visits the show’s web site to read sneak previews of upcoming episodes.

Michelle watches the show by herself, but some of her friends will call her afterwards to talk about what happened in that night’s episode. She used to tape episodes that she would miss and would watch re-runs, but does not anymore. Her tastes have changed, “it started to get really dumb. Like the first season was good, the second season I didn’t like.” Now, she prefers *Roswell*, another WB television show.

Michelle’s close friend Jessica is a fervent TV viewer who watches a variety of shows – *Seventh Heaven*, *That ‘70s Show*, *Roswell* and *Malcolm in the Middle*. *Dawson’s Creek* is also in her line-up of weekly television viewing, and it seems to be the show that she is most devoted to. “I didn’t go all out with buying everything that had to do with *Dawson’s Creek*, but I watched it all the time,” and she still does. Like Carly, Jessica does not take phone calls during the show, “I watch it by myself, and usually I don’t let anybody call during *Dawson’s Creek* time because I want to watch it.” She said that she used to call Michelle afterwards – the two are best friends – but Michelle is not as involved with the show as Jessica. “I used to call her afterwards and tell her what happened because she doesn’t really watch it that much. She likes *Roswell*,” she said.

Jessica admitted, though slightly embarrassed to do so, that she owns a *Dawson’s Creek* journal. She was very careful to point out that she does not typically buy memorabilia from the show, so the journal is an exception. She quickly pointed out she only uses it because she loves to write. She visits the official *Dawson’s Creek* web site

occasionally for sneak previews, but does not tape episodes anymore because, “I got tired of finding tapes.”

Some of the participants take the *Dawson’s Creek* viewing experience to a new level as compared to other shows they watch. Ann showed me a T-shirt that read, “Eat. Sleep. Watch *Dawson’s Creek*.” She displayed the T-shirt proudly and explained it was from the *Dawson’s Creek* Club she belonged to in high school. The shirt was yellow and the type on it was blue. On the front right side the following was written, “*Dawson’s Creek* Club 7:18 pm 2000-2001” with the picture of a boy and girl in a sailboat. Ann explained that Kristy designed the shirt, and that 7:18 was the designated time to meet to watch the show, “we were always late.” When the club met, often many members were dressed as their favorite characters. The club had several designated theme nights and coming dressed as their favorite character was just one of them. Several of the club’s members were quoted in their high school yearbook last year. In the article, the club’s vice-president summed up the club’s purpose: “The club is basically just a bunch of good friends who get together to socialize, to watch the show and see how it pertains to real life.” All club members feel there is some degree of reality in what they are watching on the show.

Ann told me that her experiences with the *Dawson’s Creek* Club have stayed with her throughout a great deal of her teenage life. She just finished her first year of college, and mentioned that she wore the *Dawson’s Creek* club shirt to her college’s freshmen orientation. The shirt enabled her to find friends with a mutual interest in *Dawson’s Creek*. People approached her with exclamations such as – “where did you get that shirt?” or “that’s so awesome!” – sparking immediate conversations.

Friends are important in Ann's life. *Dawson's Creek* has provided an enduring link among her friends who are now dispersed in different colleges and universities. For instance she mentioned she keeps in touch with a lot of her high school friends by a listserv that Kristy set up for the club members. In addition, when they all come home for holidays and vacations, the group tries to reunite to watch the show.

I spoke to Kristy a few days later and asked her to give me more details about some of the things that I discussed with Ann. She mentioned the T-shirt, but also showed me two scrapbooks from the first two years the club was in existence, each consisting of things that the club did, including the newsletters that Kristy produced titled, *Up the Creek*. In these newsletters, there was information on the location and directions to the next meeting of the club and sneak previews from the *Dawson's Creek* official web site about upcoming episodes. She also used to produce an electronic newsletter for the listserv called *Virtual Up the Creek*, so that former club members could keep up with the club's activities. In addition, Kristy has a *Dawson's Creek* poster signed by the club's original ten members.

"We were hard-core," she said about the club's members. She added that the club's membership has grown in both popularity and size over the past three years. In the club's third year of existence, membership tripled from the initial number of ten members. With few exceptions, most of the members are from the same social circle. There are even college students who make an hour and a half trek to the meetings each week. The club's members are devoted to the show. The *Dawson's Creek* experience resonates in the daily lives of each of these teenagers, making it more than just a television show: a way of life.

Teen Life on *Dawson's Creek*

The Characters

In discussing the show's representation of teenage reality, it is useful to first discuss the characters and their associated "issues" as seen by the participants. Teenagers in this study were very opinionated about the cast of characters. They were often able to see the characters' attributes in many of their friends and peers.

Dawson, despite the fact that he is the show's main focus and its namesake, is not well accepted by several of the participants. Jessica does not like how Dawson "goes crying back to Joey," while Michelle mentioned she does not like him because "there is just something about him...every time I see him, I am like uhhh!" Ann has noticed that Dawson has evolved over the past few seasons and "he's become a lot more mature and lost the yucky long hair and all that. I hated that. But, I like him a lot better than I used to...he's a lot less whiny."

It seems ironic that the show's main character is one of the least liked. Many of the participants said Dawson was too emotional which they considered to be a bad quality in a male. The participants perhaps think that if a male shows emotion, that ability signals a weakness; they prefer rugged and athletic characteristics in the opposite sex. Dawson's qualities were likened to that of a weak individual. It is important to note that Dawson is one of the most career- and goal-oriented characters on the show. He wants to pursue a career in filmmaking and is very determined and focused in this area. Yet, the participants, who instead focused on his emotional side and nothing else, overlooked this.

On the other hand, Pacey is one of the least goal-oriented characters on the show. He seems to be on a quest to find himself, whereas Dawson is not, because he is sure of

where he is going in life. Pacey, on the other hand, is not sure from day to day where his life will lead him. However, he is considered to be a funny and down to earth character that has been through a lot, but has kept a positive outlook on life. “He’s a good guy with good intentions and he gets dealt life’s blows a lot, but he’s a good guy” (Elizabeth). Stacy also likes Pacey the most because “he is just funny.” Sally said that Pacey was her favorite character because “He’s a smart-ass and always in trouble. He’s funny.” Michelle declared that Pacey “is really likeable. It is like he cares, but he doesn’t. He is just a freewill kind of character. I don’t like Dawson at all.” Michelle contrasted Dawson and Pacey and views them as opposites – Pacey as fun loving and Dawson as serious. It is precisely this contrast which makes Pacey a better-liked character. Pacey’s laid-back attitude is a quality that most of the participants in this study admire in the opposite sex.

In discussing some of the characters, it became apparent that there was some resentment among participants towards Joey. This topic was explored a little further with Elizabeth who said, “I kind of feel like calling it *The Joey Show*. She’s the central character and everything intertwines back to her.... So, I kind of feel like you are drawn to her and her little explorations.” Often the focus on Joey draws attention away from other characters on the show, which Elizabeth sees as a bad move on the show’s part since she believes that there should be more discussions on the show concerning the other characters.

The mention of the overemphasis on Joey is not surprising. Her character is depicted as a serious student who has been forced to grow up fast because of the

unfortunate circumstances of her upbringing. Joey works hard for everything, including high school so she could receive the financial aid she needed to attend college.

Joey also comes across as being unrealistic. For instance, Ann stated that Joey is “too dramatic now...or something...she’s always crying...” and not typical of most teenage girls. Michelle thinks that Joey’s character sends a message that encourages young girls to be something that they are not and that they need to change in order to fit in. “I don’t think that is a good message at all. I think that girls should stay the way they are and just gain more confidence. I think that they are not doing a good job portraying that with Joey’s character at all,” Michelle told me. She sees Joey’s character as being potentially dangerous to young, impressionable viewers deforming their views of what it is to be a teenager and how one should behave.

Instead of admiring Joey, many participants expressed negative feelings towards “people” like Joey who are more concerned about their grades than about their social lives. Joey was perceived as obsessive and one who “tries to be smarter than she really is” (Michelle). Stacy also said that Joey is “annoying,” and explained that if Joey were to attend her high school, Joey would have a difficult time fitting in and would be an outcast.

In contrast, Jessica wishes she could be more like Joey because this character is very focused and makes good grades. Jessica, a popular student in her high school, explained how she is just barely scraping by with B’s and C’s in most of her classes. When I asked her if she thought it was better for a female to be smart or pretty, she said, “I’d rather be smart like her [Joey] because you know I am probably not going to get into

good colleges or anything like that which I would have later on, so, yeah, I would rather be the smart girl.”

Joey is not the only character that elicits negative reactions. There were noticeable “problems” with Jen. Jessica thinks, “she’s kind of slutty,” but added, “deep down she’s a good person.” Ann mentioned, “I don’t understand [Jen]. I think she changes all the time in ways that don’t make sense.” Similarly, Kim mentioned that Jen is not a typical teenager because of her behavior: “I think some of her wanting to party, and stuff is a quality I see in other people, but not to that extreme. Sleeping with guys and drinking is not typical of my friends.”

Elizabeth believes that Jen is:

really-two sided. She’s a really strong person actually ...she also puts up these defenses. She, um, has a lot of her own beliefs and she is not afraid to go after them, but on the other sense, she is really insecure about herself because she lets herself be manipulated so easily by men and so easily by her feelings. I don’t know, she’s really smart and she seems to have a lot of common knowledge, but she just doesn’t apply them. So, I guess, she might be the most real person on there.

In this way, Elizabeth equates Jen’s conflicted personality with her character’s realism (as it is defined by Elizabeth). In other words, the presence of conflict and drama appears to be essential elements in teen’s lives (especially for Elizabeth).

Sally was negative and more focused on physical appearances in her opinions of Jen. “Her hair. Her hair bothers me. She’s also very strange. She seems like she’s never happy. Anytime things get good for her, she wants them to go bad. She wants everything to go wrong it seems.” Mirroring this comment, several participants view Jen

as being a character who is hurting inside and who is more comfortable being unhappy than being happy.

Notwithstanding Jen's behavior and her negative outlook on life, many participants can relate to Jen and her constant struggle to figure out her place in the world. Through her trials and tribulations, she struggles to gain self-respect and self-esteem, two plights common among teenagers. Kristy said, "She has a lot of problems. Poor girl always gets screwed. I think she has a lot of self esteem problems it seems like especially when it comes to relationships and staying in them."

In addition, participants feel Jen has evolved into a more respectable female over the past few seasons. "I think she has a lot of like emotional issues to deal with and she wasn't raised in a stable environment...she kind of rebelled as a result of that. She's calm now more. She's gotten older and learned to deal with herself" (Carly). Stacy admitted being bothered by Jen's reckless behavior. However, she sees improvement: "For a while, it was annoying the way she was always. I mean I get it but let's move on please. It is annoying. It got annoying after a while, but I think it was good [to show that at first]. I like how she is now." In sum, many participants believe that Jen has grown up and learned life's lessons the hard way.

Jack

Jack, arguably Jen's best friend, is probably the most controversial character on the show. The females interviewed were not uniformly comfortable with the issues surrounding his sexuality: "I was really upset when I found out he was gay because he's so cute" (Ann). Jessica resented Jack's "coming out:" "They shouldn't have made him gay! It makes me mad. He's like the hottest one of all of them! Isn't that always the

way it is! [Laughs]. That's why I stopped watching a lot of these shows. They don't do it so bad with this show as with other shows like *Buffy* when that chick turned lesbian – they took it way too far.”

Others believe that “making” Jack gay was an impulse that the show's creators now regret. Kristy felt that Jack's “coming out” was handled “as best as they [the writers and producers] could, I guess.” She also thinks that Jack's “coming out” was a result of a reluctant choice by the creator and writers of the show. Jessica also felt Jack's homosexuality was a spur of the moment decision by the show's writers and producers. She said, “I think they did something wrong that they couldn't think of anything, so they make him gay really quick and I think now they don't want him that way....That confused me.” It was noticed by several participants that Jack's struggles with his sexuality are often glossed over and addressed only when it suits the show's creative team.

Some participants seemingly accept Jack's sexuality, but still “other” gays. The “Us:Other” ratio is established where the “the ‘Us’ side is the legitimate standard. The ‘Other’ is deviant and illegitimate. Furthermore, the ‘Us’ is bestowed with the moral authority...‘we’ judge and criticize the ‘other’” (Acosta-Alzuru and Roushanzmir, 2000, p. 323). Elizabeth expresses the Us:Other ratio concerning Jack: “you know taking his time and then even the last episode when he is in college and he wanted a roommate and how big of a deal it was for him to be normal...I could understand where he was coming from [trying to be normal] and I think they tackled it well.” Thus, “normal” behavior is not equivalent with homosexuality as judged by “us,” or those who are the moral

authority; instead homosexuality is considered to be the deviant, or the “Other.”

Elizabeth “others” Jack by contrasting “normal” and “homosexuality.”

Some participants reject or resent Jack’s sexual orientation. Jessica was disgusted by the open intimacy that Jack and his boyfriend, Toby, displayed on the show when they shared a kiss during last season (2000-2001). She did not view them as being a couple and was very uncomfortable about this idea. Jessica said the idea of them being a couple was “gross” and “weird.” Stacy was more comfortable with the idea as long as the characters were not seen “kissing or having sex or something.... I mean too much of it turns people off.”

In any case, the participants felt there is too much focus on Jack’s sexuality. “I think that the show is using his gayness too much. I know people who are gay, I have friends that are gay, and that’s not all they are...and you know, it seems like every time something comes up about Jack, it’s the only issue,” Ann said. Sally held a similar viewpoint, “I feel like they focus too much on him being gay...I think they focus too much on that aspect of him...they should focus the same on each character on the same types of things.”

Elizabeth viewed Jack’s coming out as a struggle because of the stigma associated with homosexuality that exists in the high school setting: “I know people that are outwardly gay and then I know people that I wouldn’t be surprised [if they were gay]...so I am sure that they go through you know like their own little personal struggles and everything, but no one like shares, like come out, like Jack has with his friends, with me.” Michelle agrees, “I think if I were gay, I wouldn’t want anyone in my school to know

about it.” Homosexuality in the high school setting, perhaps more than anywhere else, is viewed as shameful.

Amanda used Jack’s story as a metaphor for the struggles of being an outcast: “...I feel that it [having a gay character] is a good idea. It gives everyone something to relate to. Even if they [the viewers] can’t relate to being gay, they can relate to being an outcast or they can relate to not fitting in.” Her view of Jack’s “coming out” serves as a comparison to the teenage struggle with fitting in and coming to grips with who they are. In this way, viewers can relate to Jack’s struggle to fit in, even if they are not gay, they can likely find some similarities between Jack’s plight and their own struggle (Amanda).

The participants recognized the strong friendship that exists between Jack and Jen. Most believe that each character provides the other with something they are not getting in their own lives. Elizabeth said, “I think Jack restores the faith for her [in males]. Let’s her know that good people are out there...he gives her a male perspective.” Jessica added, “I think they need each other and I think they know that. I think they go to each other for support and they need it.” Showing her stereotypical assumption that homosexual men are feminine, Stacy feels, “they might bond on a certain level. I think it is the whole feminine aspect.”

Michelle mentioned a similar theme about the friendship between the two characters, but also expressed her disgust at an episode where the two shared a kiss. “I thought it was kind of awkward...They are friends and I guess it is like the same thing when Joey and Dawson kiss, [because] they are supposed to do that and so when they did it, it was strange.” In this sense, participants are comfortable when certain characters remain only friends. At the same time participants recognize the need that characters

have for each other because of the turmoil that each has endured. In addition, Michelle's comment reveals participants' views that gay characters should not have any onscreen physical contact with either gender.

Race and Gender

The cast of *Dawson's Creek* is a group of attractive, Caucasian "teenagers" (though all of the actors are past their teenage years) whose socio-economic backgrounds range from the working to the middle class. Most of the interaction among the five main characters occurs in their own group, very rarely including other teens.⁷ I was interested in exploring how the participants felt about the show's representation of ethnic, gender and socio-economic dimensions, and whether these viewers found these to be representative of their own "realities," as they define them. I should first underscore that socio-economic balance was not discussed by any of the participants. Through my analysis, it appears as if class is not an issue for them. In addition, gender was viewed as being balanced on the show.

Jessica is from a small rural community, and she admits that she has not been exposed to that much of the "real world," outside of her own high school social circle. She draws similarities between the kinds of characters on *Dawson's Creek* and the people she goes to school with in her small town. "A lot of us are the same. We have like rednecks and preppy people and like all of that, but we don't have that many blacks in our school...They [*Dawson's Creek*] don't have any black people or other races really in the show." Her high school in northeast Georgia is predominately Caucasian, where

⁷ During the 2001-2002 season, there was another character added to the cast, Joey's college roommate Audrey. The credits list her as a guest star. Most participants did not have too much to say about her because she only started appearing on episodes over the past season. It should be pointed out that this character is also Caucasian and from the upper middle class.

most students appear to be close to the same socio-economic standing, so she is not bothered by the lack of ethnic diversity on the show. She feels that the show is on target for the most part, if not a little too dramatic at times.

On the other hand, Amanda notices the show's lack of racial balance: "there is not an equal racial balance. I think that they are getting better now that the cooking girl is there." The "cooking girl" is an African American female who was Pacey's short-lived love interest during the past season (2001-2002). Both Amanda and Stacy viewed the addition of this character as a good starting point for trying to increase the diversity on the show. However, both had very little else to say about the character and could not remember her name. In most interviews when this character was brought up, it seemed like it played a very minor role and did little to make the show more diverse. She was remembered only as being "that cooking girl" as Amanda liked to call her. Furthermore, no participant mentioned Grams relationship with an African American man.

In contrast, Elizabeth does not see the addition of the "cooking girl" as a step towards increasing the diversity on the show. Instead, she said, "I don't even think that is a diversity issue, that was just kind of Pacey and his relationships issues. I didn't really focus in on you know, who she was really, just what she was," and she was just a minor character. Very little was explored beyond the role she fulfilled in Pacey's life. Elizabeth feels the intent of the show's creative team was to focus on this character as a secondary figure and little else.

Elizabeth (as mentioned, the only African American participant) is highly aware of the lack of diversity in the show: "there are a lot of groups that could be represented

that they [*Dawson's Creek*] don't [represent]." The only episode she has on tape and could recall from memory was one that dealt with a minority issue. She taped it the second time it aired. For Elizabeth, *Dawson's Creek* Caucasian characters do not reflect the diversity of her own group of friends who come from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds.

The other participants viewed the characters' ethnic composition as satisfactory and representative of the lives they live. In a similar fashion, participants feel that the show's gender composition is balanced. There was no mention that one gender group was favored over the other.

Authority Figures

The authority figures on the show are the main characters' parents, guardians and teachers. Participants recognize that the show has few parental figures. However, this does not bother them because they feel that teenagers have distant relationships with their parents in real life. Carly said the characters "don't seem close to their parents. They kind of have a distant relationship. They're not really that close with them." Kristy and Jessica agreed, and stated that this type of distant relationship between teenagers and parents is typical.

Stacy echoed these opinions. When I asked her if the show's parents and teenage characters had any sort of relationship, she said, "They don't... Their parents just don't seem to care about them and stuff like that." In this way, parents on the show come across as being separated from their children's lives and, in turn, they also appear to be uncaring or unaffected about what is happening to their offspring. According to the teenagers interviewed, this is a realistic portrayal.

This perceived distance between parents and teenagers is one of the reasons the show becomes a surrogate parent for some of its viewers. *Dawson's Creek* provides guidance and advice to young audience members who feel uncomfortable discussing certain issues with their parents. For instance, Jessica said the show helps her address topics she would not want to discuss with her parents like drugs, alcohol and sex. She mentioned the similarities between Andy's overdose in the show, and her friend's overdose: both had taken ecstasy, both almost died.

Kristy also believes that the show's characters "talk about stuff that I wouldn't want to talk about with my parents but," she adds, "[the characters] haven't really helped me through it or anything." Mirroring this opinion, Elizabeth acknowledges that she can relate to certain situations presented in the show, but she does not know "if it's like taught me, well, next time I should maybe do that...I don't know if it's taught me." Similarly, Amanda does not think the show helps her to address problems with her parents, yet she sees some of the similarities between the fantasy world of *Dawson's Creek* and the real world in which she lives. She said, "It's really weird to see how it works out in real life and how it works out on TV 'cause it's usually the same."

Most participants declared that the portrayal of parents and guardians in *Dawson's Creek* is realistic. Sally explained that the show displays types of parent-child relationship that are present in society: strong relationship (Dawson and his parents), lack of parental presence (Joey, Jen and Pacey) and critical parents (Jack and Andy). Elizabeth agrees and believes "they have a lot of variety in the parenting" on the show.

Notwithstanding these comments, some participants argued that parents and guardians in *Dawson's Creek* hardly impose any norms and restrictions on their children.

Ann said, “there’s like no restrictions, no curfew, no...nothing’s off limits for them.”

Michelle coincides, “it is not real, the stuff that they do just isn’t like reality. I mean most people would never do half of the stuff that they do...it [the show] makes you want to do it, but you can’t.” For instance, it is highly unlikely that teenagers would be allowed to stay out all night without calling their parents and reporting their whereabouts. However on *Dawson’s Creek* this happens on a regular basis. Even though participants feel this is not realistic, they acknowledge that part of the show’s appeal is that it teaches viewers “how to beat the system.” The show would not be as much fun to watch if its characters faced the typical punishments most teenagers face. In this sense, *Dawson’s Creek* is a show of possibilities, not realities.

Some of the most controversial storylines in the show involve relationships between teachers and the main characters. Pacey had a brief relationship with his high school English teacher. More recently, Joey has been romantically inclined towards her college Literature professor. Participants believe that these storylines and portrayals are unrealistic, “really like buddy buddy and friendly, and I don’t see that with my authority figures, but this is [true] more of my friends. I don’t know, maybe that’s how it is” (Elizabeth). Jessica echoes this sentiment, “Them with teachers. I think that’s funny. You’re not really like that with teachers.” Stacy addressed Joey’s relationship with her college professor and acknowledged: “I don’t know how much that actually happens, but it was a good storyline. It was fun to watch. I don’t want that to happen in real life, but it was fun to watch.” In sum, participants feel that the relationships between the show’s characters and their teachers serve entertainment purposes only. They help retain

viewers' attention, and they do not portray reality and the consequences of such relationships.

The Teenage Reality

According to participants, *Dawson's Creek* teenage world has common elements with the real world of teenagers. One of these elements is drama. "Teenagers are very dramatic!" exclaims Jessica as she explains that drama infiltrates the lives of most female teenagers. It seems that some participants relate to the show because of its dramatic aspects, which Stacy acknowledges are "for the TV ratings."

The young women interviewed believe that showing that life is not always perfect provides another realistic element to the show that helps them relate to this virtual teenage reality. "I think [the show] relates to them in that you know, there are going to be ups and downs to life and that you know, it hurts and you deal and you cope" (Elizabeth). Michelle holds a similar viewpoint. She believes that the show's message is, "you are a teenager and you are going to have all these obstacles and stuff, but you are going to overcome them."

Notwithstanding these two realistic elements, participants consider *Dawson's Creek* portrayal of teenage life as only partly realistic. They argue that, in order to entertain (Stacy), the show portrays a teenage life that is easier than reality: "Some things [sic] are too easy and too free and the decisions are already made for them and it's not hard enough" (Elizabeth). Michelle agrees: "they just make it unrealistic. Like the things that happen, but I mean like they make it dumb, you know. I mean they make you realize it's never going to happen." In addition, several participants stated that the characters "deal with a whole bunch of problems, but they don't seem like the ones that typical

teenagers deal with” (Amanda). For her part, Kim believes that the problems are typical, but the characters deal with them “not in typical ways.”

In contrast, Ann’s point of view is that the show “treats teenagers as like older and more mature than they actually are.” She sees this as a positive characteristic, since “teenagers like to think that they are that mature, but they’re not. They [the writers, producers, etc.] kind of say that to the audience.” In other words, Ann feels that the show’s unrealistic characterization of the teenage world gives teenagers the respect they struggle for.

An important element in this representation of teenagers as “older and more mature” is the vocabulary used by the show’s characters. As already explained, this has been an important point of discussion in the news and trade press. Furthering her argument that representing teenagers as more mature is positive, Ann explained that the writers’ and producers’ purpose behind the advanced vocabulary is “to make the point that, you know, teenagers aren’t stupid and they don’t say ‘dude’ or whatever, all the time.” Nevertheless, she acknowledges, “some of the stuff, like I can’t even follow it when they’re talking. You know it took the writers five minutes to look up whatever they wrote down. Nobody says that.” Michelle, Kim and Amanda agree. The latter mentioned that the vocabulary is not typical, “especially with Dawson and Joey.” Michelle also highlighted Joey’s advanced vocabulary: “Like, Joey, oh my gosh, I don’t understand like anything she says. I don’t.” It is interesting to note that even as the show’s viewing audience has aged, they still feel the vocabulary is far advanced for their age group and especially for any younger groups.

Participants argue that *Dawson's Creek's* representation of the high school social scene also contributes to the show's partially realistic portrayal of teenage life. For instance, Michelle believes that the core characters on the show would not be as close in real life as they are on the show because of peer pressure to fit into a certain social group. She said, "I think that they all would have found other people and would have made other friends and I don't think that they would be like they are now." Elizabeth also recognizes peer pressure as a conspicuous element in high school. "I think that high school is definitely a filtering process. Like you filter out who you are and who you want to be and who you want to be around." She agreed with Michelle's assessment that the *Dawson's Creek* characters "would broaden their friendships because they wouldn't all be in the same classes and they wouldn't all have the same demands...so, I think they would branch out. They would keep a friendship, but I don't know if they would be as close as they are now."

In sum, participants believe that *Dawson's Creek's* teenage life has some realistic elements such as the sense that life has dramatic elements and ups and downs. At the same time, the young women interviewed feel that the show's portrayal of high school life and the problems and issues facing teenagers is not realistic. While participants can still relate to the show's depiction of teenage life, they are aware of its dramatic elements whose purpose is to entertain them.

Attractiveness

An important theme that surfaced in the interviews is the participants' conceptualization of attractiveness and whether the *Dawson's Creek* characters fit these definitions. Some of the participants placed emphasis on a person's looks. For instance,

Kim focused on her hair, “I guess since I’ve always had dark hair, I don’t like dark hair. I don’t think that’s a really great feature.” Ironically, she finds Katie Holmes, a brunette who plays Joey, attractive. Also several participants think Pacey is “cute.”

Most participants however, declared that attractiveness involves more than good physical appearance, personality is an important element too. Elizabeth explained that although the “typical” concept is about, “the very skinny, long haired, nice clothes, nice car” she believes that being attractive “is more about personality, humor and how they deal with situations, how well they get along with other groups other than the one clique that they are a part of.” For her, Joey is attractive because of her personality. Jessica agreed: “I think that personality is a big thing. And, I think that people who are friendly are a lot prettier than people that are snobby or people that are rude to other people. That even if they are the most gorgeous thing in the world, I don’t think that makes them pretty because they are being ugly to others.” For Michelle being attractive is linked to authenticity: “I think girls like Julia Stiles [a young film actress], like she is like so natural...she is herself and I think that when girls are like themselves, I think they are so beautiful.”

Another *Dawson’s Creek* character that is deemed attractive is Pacey. “I like Pacey. I love his personality. He’s so witty and so funny” (Jessica). For Michelle, Pacey’s ability to make others laugh while helping them feel better fits her definition of attractiveness, “obviously I love it when a guy can just make me laugh and make me feel like I am the best person in the world. I think that is what makes a guy like gorgeous and cute. ...I don’t like Dawson. He is sort of serious...you know, he is not funny. But like

Pacey will just make you laugh. I think that is good.” In this way, Michelle equates being attractive to being personable.

In sum, the teenagers in this study feel that two of the characters on the show, Joey and Pacey are attractive, but for reasons which transcend the traditional definitions of attractiveness which focus on physical characteristics. These two characters were deemed to be attractive because of personalities that are considered to be more attractive than their physical appearances. To these participants, a person is attractive if they are all around good-natured and strive to make others feel good.

Identifying with *Dawson's Creek*

The teenagers in the study identify with the show's characters, which is one of the many reasons why the show is enduring: “I think what people like about *Dawson's Creek* is that the characters do and say things that everybody wants to do or say...but, I think all of ‘em have little pieces of like things that you find in yourself, so it's like easy to relate to the show” (Ann).

These characters seem bigger than life, having a presence in the lives of these teenagers. Participants conflate the actors with the characters they play, both on and off the show. “They have definitely established themselves as their characters,” perhaps typecasting themselves in the process. In other words, the actor's name is superseded by the character's name at least as far as these characters are concerned. Elizabeth said, “automatically...[I] think Pacey , but in eighth grade when the show came out, we visited New York and we actually saw Joshua Jackson, so we were like ‘That's Pacey!’” Jessica admits that she has a difficult time seeing any of the actors as anything other than the characters they play: “I always see people like that though.” When I asked her, “how

about Jack when you see pictures of him? Do you see him as gay in real life?” She responded, “Yeah” and laughed nervously. Jack’s sexuality is carried over into the life of the actor who plays him.

In sum, the participants have a difficult time distinguishing between the actors’ personalities and the actual characters these actors play. The line between fantasy and reality is blurred and it is difficult for viewers to identify what is real and what is not. In other words, the show’s characters are viewed as actual “people.”

Participants relate to the characters for a variety of reasons. First, some participants feel (or people tell them) they look like a character. Amanda not only thinks that she looks like Jen, but a few of her friends tell her she does which caused her to start paying more attention to the character. Second, some participants relate to characters because of a particular feature in a character’s life. Jessica relates to Joey because “she just seems really cool and I like how she has all the guy friends because that’s basically me.” Third, some participants relate to a character out of admiration. Elizabeth admires Joey because she has “been through so much and has so much responsibility put on her.” Kristy mentioned she admires Grams, Jen’s grandmother because, “she’s just wise. She’s always helpful.”

Other participants relate to the characters because they know people like them. Jessica has a “Dawson” in her life – a relationship that straddles the line between friendship and romance that is “kind of like Dawson and Joey.” Michelle also mentions a “Dawson” in her friend’s life: “my friend Amy, like she is dating this guy, Josh...they were friends before...then she told him that she liked him and they got together and now they are like on and off...for a year and a half now.”

Notwithstanding these modes of identification with characters, participants declared that none of these characters are their role models. Participants define role models as, “someone who keeps allegiance to themselves, that has a strong personality and is not willed by the tide, by people’s opinions easily” (Elizabeth) and, “someone who is natural...just the right kind of ideals, but is patient about smart moves” (Sally). However, these teenagers do not have any role models. In addition, these participants do not want the pressure of being role models. Jessica talked about being a role model to a younger female who lives down the road from her: “people expect me to tell her not to do things, and she is not going to listen because I know that when I was young, people would tell me not to do things and I would do them anyway because they told me not to...So, I don’t believe in the whole role model thing.” Michelle felt similarly: “I couldn’t do what I wanted to do because I had to be perfect for them.” Also, she sees a negative effect for someone having a role model: “when you want to do everything that they do, then you are not living your own life...because you want to be like them.”

In sum, regardless of the participants’ perception that *Dawson’s Creek’s* teenage life is only partially realistic and their refusal to have role models, participants still identify with certain characters for reasons that range from physical resemblance to admiration.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis examined how *Dawson's Creek's* teenage female viewers engage with the show and perceive its representation of teenage life. The study attempts to understand *Dawson's Creek's* popularity by fleshing out the meanings that these young viewers associate with the show. Mindful that the audience “should be understood as producers of meaning instead of as mere consumers of meaning taking up prescribed textual audience positionings” (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 108), my study focuses on everyday life as the site where “concrete articulations” between representation and consumption, and the text and the audience, take place.

Dawson's Creek's role in the viewers' lives

The series plays several roles in the participants' lives. For some, *Dawson's Creek* serves as a “blueprint” for “how” to be a teenager. The show teaches these viewers lessons on how to behave in and fit into the teenage world. The show also serves as a vehicle for addressing the tough issues that teenagers face on a day-to-day basis. For some of the participants, *Dawson's Creek* gives advice: do not be afraid to deal with the difficulties that life hands you, but embrace these obstacles and make yourselves stronger in the process of dealing with them. For these viewers, *Dawson's Creek* serves the role of a surrogate parent, providing them with guidance and advice about controversial issues they would not want to discuss with their parents. The show establishes a kinship between its characters and viewers, communicating the message – “I am like you and I

respect you.” Furthermore, *Dawson’s Creek* reassures its viewers that they are “normal” teenagers with “normal” problems. At the same time that the show models adolescence for its viewers and guides them through this treacherous period in their lives, participants also use the show as a source of entertainment and escape.

Dawson’s Creek can be an individual viewing experience, but the show can also be a part of a bigger group experience consisting of the teenage community of which the participant is a member. The group dynamics surrounding the show are phenomenal as compared with other television shows these viewers watch. For example, teenagers call each other during commercials to discuss what has happened on an episode, if they are not watching it together. This type of behavior is atypical of most teenagers’ viewing experiences since other television shows are often viewed in an individual setting.

The Representation of the Teenage Experience

Dawson’s Creek’s role in its young viewers’ lives is inextricably linked to the viewers’ perception that the show’s teenage life is partly representative of their own. In other words, while the serial’s teenage virtual reality contains plausible elements that mirror the participants’ lives, the onscreen depiction also contravenes their daily experiences. For instance, according to the participants, many of the issues that the show’s characters face in their daily lives actually happen in the viewers’ lives also; but, in a less extreme form. In each episode of *Dawson’s Creek* a trauma or at least a conflict occurs that affects at least a portion, if not all, of the cast of characters. In the lives of these participants, the problems they experience do not happen on a regular basis and often do not involve a great deal of people, other than themselves. Some of the participants recognize that the exaggeration they perceive in the show is the product of

the latter's dramatic requirements. Drama enhances the serial's entertainment value, and, in consequence, raises the program's ratings.

Notwithstanding *Dawson's Creek's* dramatic elements, participants feel that when problems occur in the show, these are easily solved and overcome in a single episode. The young women interviewed characterize this as unrealistic since they struggle to overcome problems in their own lives, often not resolving them in a short time frame. In particular, Jessica emphasized how her friend who almost died of an overdose is reminded of this event on a daily basis, both in her mind and by her friends and classmates, who have not been the same with her ever since. In contrast, the characters on the show have not furthered discussed or mentioned Andy's overdose.

Another example of the show's partial realism (as defined by the participants) is that while participants argue that "their" issues are present in *Dawson's Creek*, they also acknowledge that one of the most conspicuous elements of their lives – peer pressure – is blatantly absent from the show's portrayal. *Dawson's Creek's* teenage world is one without peer pressure and one where decisions seem to be free of any repercussions.

In contrast to the participants' sensibility to the contradictions present in the show regarding the use of drama and realism, as they define the concept, these young viewers were not concerned by the show's ethnic composition. With the exception of Elizabeth, the only minority, participants did not place any importance on the show's evident lack of racial balance, nor did they comment about any class-related issues.

Identification with characters

Dawson's Creek is filled with attractive characters that live out the viewers' perceived hopes, dreams and problems. Participants are able to identify with the

characters in a variety of ways. To these viewers, the characters are brought to life and become “friends” they interact with on a weekly basis. In addition, the characters serve as templates for how these viewers see themselves and their friends. Some participants seek out the similarities between the show’s characters and themselves or their friends, and model their behaviors after these characters (Jessica and *Joey*; Amanda and *Jen*). Viewers talk about the show’s characters as if they were real people. For these young women, the characters are more real than the actors who portray them. And, even though participants vehemently deny having role models, our conversations revealed that they admire the characters for their qualities, and wish they could be like them, (e.g.: *Joey*), or they could find someone like them (e.g.: *Pacey*).

The nature of relationships

Friendships are strong in *Dawson’s Creek*. Except for occasional disagreements, the characters remain friends with one another, regardless of their actions. However, according to participants, real-life friendships are more fragile. They are broken and destroyed regularly, whereas on *Dawson’s Creek* they are not. Jessica discussed the disastrous love triangle on the show involving *Joey*, *Pacey* and *Dawson* and how this was an unrealistic portrayal. On the show, the three characters are still friends despite all of the turmoil, whereas, in reality if a similar instance were to occur, those involved would not be able to easily repair their friendships. Other participants also mentioned that the show’s depiction of friendship is somewhat idealistic and diminishes the show’s accuracy in representing the teenage experience as they define the concept.

Romantic relationships on the show are accurately represented, according to these participants. The teetering relationship between friendship and romance as it concerns

Dawson and Joey was mentioned as a particularly common type of relationship that most of these participants saw existing in their own lives. The nature of teenage romantic relationships is full of “ups and downs,” which the viewers saw represented on the show.

According to the participants, *Dawson’s Creek* accurately represents the relationships that are present in most teenagers’ lives. For instance, they declared that the show’s depiction of parent-teenager relationships as distant is correct. In addition, participants expressed that they often feel misunderstood and look to their friends to provide them with advice (Elizabeth, Jessica). The parents on the show are cast in the background, just like they are in these participants’ lives. With its simultaneous portrayal of detached parent-teenage relationships and close friendships among teens, *Dawson’s Creek* reinforces and perpetuates the idea that teens should rely on their friends instead of approaching their parents.

Decoding *Dawson’s Creek*

Hall’s (1973b) three different types of readings were evident in through the analysis of the participants’ interviews. A few examples will now be discussed. While it should be noted that others do exist, these examples are the most common. Dominant-hegemonic readings of the text, or those operating inside the dominant code, were found in the participants’ understanding of the distant relationships between the characters and their parents. The participants’ interpretation reinforces the existing dominant perceptions of teenagers’ attitudes towards their parents. This message is reinforced by the participants’ reproduction of such codes in their interviews.

There are also negotiated readings of the text. Participants recognize and acknowledge *Dawson’s Creek* realistic and unrealistic elements. For instance, viewers

relate to the problems faced by the show's characters. At the same time, they believe these are exaggerated through dramatic elements. The contraposition of these two aspects of *Dawson's Creek* elicit both interest and pleasure in the participants as they partly accept and partly reject the dominant code, which tries to convey a definition of the "typical" teenager.

The study also revealed the presence of oppositional readings. A case in point is the participants' reading of Dawson. As explained, although he is the most focused and career-oriented character on the show, he is, nevertheless, not well liked. He is perceived as being too weak and emotional while his qualities are overlooked. In this way, viewers "detotalize the message in the preferred code" (Hall, 1973b, p. 103), (i.e., being focused and career oriented is a good thing) in order to "retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference" (p. 103), (i.e., being weak and emotional is a bad thing). At the same time, their reading of Dawson is also a dominant reading that operates inside the dominant binary opposition of man=rational: woman=emotional. This opposition is reflected in the participants' rejection of Dawson for being "too emotional."

There are various forces at work that influence these readings. Some participants placed greater value on certain aspects of the text while other participants focused on other elements. For example, Jessica places more emphasis on the "realistic" dimension of the text (as she defines it), especially as it concerned her friend's drug overdose and its similarities with Andy's drug overdose. Elizabeth also focuses on the realism of the show's representation, according to her perceptions. She gives more weight to issues of ethnic representation on the show because she feels the show does not represent her life

accurately as an African-American female with a diverse group of friends than what she sees on *Dawson's Creek*. Personal experience (the participant's "situation") and identification with a character were also key to the interpretation process. Watching *Dawson's Creek* is really a personalized experience.

Notwithstanding, the decoding process is more thorough than it may appear to be on the surface. *Dawson's Creek* is included in the everyday lives of its viewers, albeit in varying amounts depending on how they perceive the representation of the teenage experience on the show. Some viewers buy into the idea the show depicts the teenage experience perfectly. Others argue the show contains some elements of their experiences as teenagers, but argue the show contains some elements of fantasy in which they cannot relate. Still there are other viewers who do are not able to relate to the representation of the teenage experience at all as it is portrayed on *Dawson's Creek*. Nevertheless, it is useful at this point to review some of the commercial logic behind the show as it pertains to how the teenage life is portrayed on the show.

Consumption of the Commercialized Teenage Experience on *Dawson's Creek*

Teenagers "buy into" the show's commercialized teenage experience. *Dawson's Creek* sells to its viewers a particularized version of the teenage experience, which accounts for some of its popularity. The show and its parent network, the WB, have been quite successful in marketing its versions of the teenage experience to its audiences.

Commercialization of the teenage experience is not an ends to itself. McChesney argues the commercialization of teenage television is just part of networks and corporations' strategy to infiltrate commercial culture further into their lives. Television networks and shows alike view the teen market "as part of this massive empire that

they're colonizing" (*Frontline* Interview with Robert McChesney, paragraph 7), which has "nothing to do with kids. They couldn't care less about teenagers. Teenagers are just people to turn upside-down and shake the money out of their pants and then you let go" (paragraph 37). In this way, commercializing the teenage experience is impersonal and is only undertaken by the networks to make money.

It follows, *Dawson's Creek* can be viewed as commercializing entity where teenagers buy into the idea of what will make them "cool," which McChesney argues is, "a commercial relationship to coolness, of being acceptable. And if you don't do it, you're a loser" (*Frontline* Interview, paragraph 35). Teenagers do not want to be outcasts, they will do whatever is required of them to fit in. *Dawson's Creek* "teaches" its viewers how to be cool, because if you are cool, then you fit in.

In addition, the characters on *Dawson's Creek* exemplify the concept of the idealized (and ultimately commercialized) teenage experience. The nature of this experience is entirely commercial or part of "the sort of hyper-commercialized sewer" (*Frontline* Interview with Robert McChesney, paragraph 15). The entire teenage experience is a marketing tool that is "packaged and sold to young people" (paragraph 36) unknowingly. As audience members, especially when discussing teenagers, often do not even recognize this form of commercialization because we are so immersed in it from the shows we watch to the clothes we wear, that we can no longer see it from a critical viewpoint. The participants do not seem to even be aware *Dawson's Creek's* efforts to commercialize the teenage experience.

It is not surprising that the participants did not notice the commercialization of the teenage experience is produced in such a way that it literally tries to encompass all

aspects of the teenage experience and seeks to teach these experiences to its audience. Viewers want to be just like these characters because of the great successes they see the characters earning by fitting in successfully to the virtual teenage “reality” on the show. *Dawson’s Creek* is an informal socialization agent, probing and probing deep below the conscience of these viewers and infecting their subconscious with images of “how” to be a teenager.

As mentioned, the underlying logic of this commercialization is to make money and making money is what it does. I found evidence to support this argument. For example, Kristy bought both of the *Dawson’s Creek* soundtracks and made several copies of them for her friends in the *Dawson’s Creek* Club. It is through the synergy between the show, its viewers and the music featured on episodes that the selling of such products is successful. As mentioned, the theme song from the show, *I Don’t Want to Wait* by Paula Cole was merely a minor hit until it became the show’s official theme song, which sent sales of the single skyrocketing. Additionally, Jessica purchased a *Dawson’s Creek* journal that she joked did not show her to be an obsessive fan. Nonetheless, out of all of the journals she could purchase, she decided to purchase the one that had ties to her favorite television show. She bought into this commercialized teenage culture and incorporates it into her life.

However, it is not just tangible items that *Dawson’s Creek* succeeds in selling to its audiences. The characters on the show are incorporated into the participants’ social structures. Jessica brings the character of Dawson to life every time she mentions her male neighbor who lives down the street from her. She compares their relationship to Dawson and Joey’s. Michelle also mentions the presence of a Dawson and a Joey in her

life, also bringing this “fantasy” world to life so to speak. She compares her friends to these two characters, incorporating some of the show’s messages into her everyday life. Amanda incorporates Jen’s persona into her everyday life when she draws comparisons between the character and herself, drawing comparisons ranging from similarities in their looks to similarities in the hardships both have faced.

Notwithstanding, the commercial logic behind the show is genius; the show serves as a way for the advertising and television industries to manipulate their teenage audiences, instead of catering to their teenage audience needs (McChesney *Frontline* Interview). I often think this fact is overlooked. The participants in this experience mentioned repeatedly the show relates to them, when really it can be argued they relate to it, or really they buy into this virtual “reality,” which is entirely commercialized as it presents itself as an idealized version of the teenage experience.

Inherent in today’s commercialization of the teenage experience is the overarching concept of creating dissidence and rebellion. McChesney argues teenagers want the presence of more dissidence and rebellion in their lives as young people. Dissidence sells because teenagers “want that sense of struggle and conflict...which gives the illusion of conflict and tension and excitement without the real thing...but it’s not the real thing” (paragraph 30). He concludes, “people want tension. People understand there’s something going on in the world – it’s not just a *Brady Bunch* world we live in” (*Frontline* Interview with Robert McChesney, paragraph 32) and perhaps no one believes this more than teenagers who have an extensive history of struggle. *Dawson’s Creek* is not the *Brady Bunch*, it presents a virtual “reality” to viewers that incites dissident and/or rebellious responses to the teenage struggle for identity.

The participants in this study mentioned the concept of struggle repeatedly in their discussions ranging from the struggle one goes through to fit into a particular group to one's struggle to discover their own identity. The concepts of struggle and the impending drama surrounding one's struggle underpin the reasons these participants are drawn to the show. They need struggle in their lives, for their lives depend on it. They consume the need for struggle by watching "teenagers" on this television show and incorporate similar struggles into their everyday lives.

Therefore, it is no surprise that dissidence and struggle infiltrate the media's version of the teenage experience. Teenagers are portrayed in the media as being misunderstood and not respected by authority figures, especially parents. Teenagers consume this concept, especially those of the participants in this study. For example, I saw evidence of such behaviors in the participants' responses to the reasons why they have distant relationships with their parents and how this is a reflection of what they see of the relationship between the parents and characters on *Dawson's Creek*. In either or both cases, the phrase "parents just don't understand" comes into play. These participants consume the message that it is better to rely on friends than parents and it becomes a part of their everyday lives.

Dawson's Creek and Mass Communication Research

This study contributes to the field of mass communication research by examining some of the reasons why teen dramas like *Dawson's Creek* become a part of teenagers' real lives in such an effective manner. *Dawson's Creek* marks the beginning of a phenomenon in the television world as it targets a unique group of viewers: teenagers. No longer can this age group be ignored. The television industry and the field of mass

communication need to study this group more as it is a coveted age group for television's commercial requirements.

From a paradigmatic and methodological perspective, this thesis is part of the shift from exclusive focus on the text to the acknowledgement that "if we are concerned with the meaning and significance of popular culture in contemporary society, with how cultural forms work ideologically or politically, then we need to understand cultural products (or "texts") *as they are understood by audiences*" (Lewis, 1991, p. 47, emphasis in original). In this way, the epistemological emphasis is placed on the viewers rather than on the critic/researcher.

Finally, the findings supports the cultural studies position that "hegemony is won in the to-and-fro of negotiation between competing social, political and ideological forces ...representation is a key site in such struggles, since the power of definition is a major source of hegemony" (Gledhill, 1997, p. 348). In other words, the struggle over meaning is dialogic in nature. As these participants demonstrate, audience members are active in the meaning-making mode that is at the center of the communication process. However, their capacity to produce meaning is partly restricted by the text's encoding process.

Limitations of the Study and Suggested Research

There are limitations to this study. I had to limit my sample to one geographical area, northeast Georgia, which did not provide for much variety in ethnic and economic backgrounds. The area, for the most part, consists of what appears to be a predominately Caucasian population with few representative minority groups. While there are noticeable differences among the various economic groups in the area, these differences were not represented in this study.

The participants all came from similar economic levels, ranging from lower to upper middle class families, none of which I would consider to be extremely wealthy or extremely poor. This has both advantages and disadvantages. It is advantageous because I was able to achieve redundancy in responses and themes. At the same time, it is a disadvantage because I did not gather much variety in responses on important issues such as representation on the show. If more time and resources were available, I would have liked to expand my geographical scope. I believe that if I were to conduct the study in various regions of the country with teenagers of different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, there would have been more possibility to achieve more variety in responses and gain some additional insights into this topic.

Further research in this area could focus on the moment of production, examining the show's creative team and how the show's messages are constructed. In-depth interviews with the show's writers, producers and directors could be utilized to understand the degree to which the commercial requirements of the genre (high ratings) determine the show's encoding process.

Another possible area of research is a study of how *Dawson's Creek* has changed teenage television. When undertaking such a study, it would be useful to talk to industry executives in the field of television, as well as doing further research into trade journals to see how teenage television has evolved since *Dawson's Creek's* inception.

In addition, it would be useful to apply other qualitative methods such as autoethnography and textual analysis to provide different perspectives on the subject. Autoethnography could be utilized to compare similar viewing experiences with shows that preceded *Dawson's Creek* such as *Beverly Hills, 90210* to draw on similarities

between the participants in this study and the researchers' own feelings of each shows' representation of the teenage experience. This method would allow for more reflexivity in the study, mixing the participants' viewpoints with that of the researchers.

When examining dominant and secondary readings of the text, textual analysis could be used in order to establish a better understanding of the dominant readings of the text and then in turn, these readings could be compared with those of the participants. This method would allow for a better feel for different readings of the text.

Summarizing, *Dawson's Creek* is a product of the commercialized teenage experience. Participants incorporate the show in their everyday lives and literally "Eat. Sleep. Watch *Dawson's Creek*." While these five words may sound simple, this slogan encapsulates this study. *Dawson's Creek* is more than just a television show; it is a way of life for many teenagers. The participants in this study have incorporated the show's representations of the virtual teenage world into their lives. In a relatively short amount of time, *Dawson's Creek* has redefined the teenage world and the television industry that seeks this audience.

While the premise of the show may sound simple, the quest of a group of teenagers defining themselves and making sense of the world around them, it is anything but simple; rather *Dawson's Creek* is an important show with concrete implications for teenagers. Its popularity encourages us to delve deeper into the intricate relationships between text and audience, the construction of reality, serial genres and the pleasure audience's derive from them.

EPILOGUE

At this point I would like to reflect upon my experiences in conducting this study. As a Master's student working on my thesis, I have learned a great deal not only about the teenagers and the teenage experience, but also about myself. This project has allowed me to grow into being a better researcher and ultimately a better person, for I realize the importance of the teenage experience and those factors that influence it. I care about the relationship between the text, in this case *Dawson's Creek*, and the audience, for I believe strongly in the audience's agency. I will first reflect upon my experiences in conducting interviews and then I will reflect on and make comparisons with my experiences watching *Beverly Hills, 90210* and the participants' experiences watching *Dawson's Creek*. The later especially I believe provides a useful comparison to the participants' relationships with *Dawson's Creek*.

Experiences Conducting Interviews

As mentioned in Chapter 3, interviews are difficult to conduct. They require a great deal of time and effort to perfect. This was my first experience with in-depth interviews. Using them provided me with a valuable tool, but nonetheless, it was also a challenging responsibility to undertake. There were times throughout the conducting of these interviews where I was overwhelmed at the enormity of the task. This feeling became amplified when I wrote up the findings. I kept thinking to myself: How can I incorporate so much information into a concise and readable product? This study is perhaps one of the most challenging experiences of my life thus far. However, I believe

in the study I have conducted and I feel that it is of paramount importance and should not be ignored.

The participants provided me with a great deal of insight about being a teenager today. I would have been unable to obtain this information by using any other method. I am not a teenager anymore, but I was one not long ago. However, the world around us has changed since I was one and I needed to seek out those female viewers of the show and gauge their perceptions of the teenage world and compare them to their feelings of how *Dawson's Creek* represents it. I gained valuable insight on topics ranging from peer pressure to drug use, to identity issues in a teenager's life and whether and how these issues were addressed or not addressed on the show. The participants' voices provide these perceptions. I wanted to ensure their voices were the ones that would be heard; I feel they were.

Even though I was able to gain a great deal of information through the interviews, I had a difficult time trying to get some participants to discuss more sensitive and controversial issues, such as Jack and sexuality. These topics presented me quite a challenge. I felt that they were essential to my research, but at the same time, I did not want to make any of my participants feel uncomfortable by forcing them to discuss topics they did not want to talk about with me. In particular, Kim had a difficult time opening up about most of the topics I asked her about. She was especially uncomfortable discussing sexuality. However, I was able to gain some information from her as well as others on those issues that are deemed sensitive. Probing, while essential to my study, did not come naturally to me. In sum, interviewing proved to be a fascinating, yet difficult, process.

Beverly Hills, 90210 and Dawson's Creek: Two of a Kind?

My exploration of the participants' perception of the representation of the teenage experience on *Dawson's Creek* was important to me, because I am a product of the teenage television machine, but my experiences were with a different show.

Television shows matter. They matter a great deal to their viewers, but they are also important to parents and to those of us who study television. They affect viewers in a way that has consequences for television shows, especially the two that will be discussed in this section, *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Dawson's Creek*, in that they shape viewers behaviors and attitudes in ways that a parent cannot. These shows become surrogate parents and friends and more importantly, teach and/or influence viewers' attitudes and behaviors, often exposing them to controversial topics at young ages. As scholars, we can no longer ignore shows like these.

My experiences conducting this study made me remember and reflect on my days of being a teenager watching shows like *Beverly Hills, 90210*. I remember watching the show with my friends, hanging on the edge of my seat and waiting to see what would happen next. I remember specifically the episode where Brenda (one of the female characters on the show) thought she was pregnant with Dylan's (a male character on the show) baby. This episode had a huge impact on the show's viewing audience, at least as far as my friends were concerned. I thought the episode seemed unbelievable at the time because it was not typical of my teenage world, though I knew that these things affected other people. However, now I see the importance in addressing such issues, since teenagers feel a great deal of pressures early on.

Interesting, there was a similar situation concerning pregnancy occurring on *Dawson's Creek* with two characters. In this situation, Joey feared she might be pregnant after having sex with Pacey. I can imagine that similar undercurrents like the ones that I described my experiences with *90210* were felt from the airing of such an episode; however, there are some differences. I feel that society has changed where there is more awareness that teenage pregnancy is a reality. When I was a teenager the perception was different. In this sense, today's teenagers seem better equipped to handle such issues than my friends and I were in our teenage years. Teenagers do not live in a world that is without controversy and mistakes, and they know it.

Another similarity with my experiences with *90210* and those of the participants with *Dawson's Creek*, was our desire to behave like the show's characters. My friends and I found similarities with the show's characters due to our desire to be just like them and live the lives that they lived. For example, I wanted to be Kelly Taylor, a beautiful and popular female character on the show. I tried to dress, behave (to a certain extent) and talk like her because I thought she had the perfect life, filled with friends, boyfriends and of course, money. Kelly wore the nicest clothes, threw money around at her own will and drove the best of cars. She got whatever she wanted out of life, whether that meant the grades she needed to get into good colleges or, of course, the boy of everyone's dreams, Dylan, who my friends and I were obsessed about.

My female friends and I had posters in our rooms of Dylan (played by Luke Perry). We thought he was the dream guy that we all wanted in our lives. We had a difficult time considering that we could have to "settle" for less in our own romantic relationships. My friends and I were not cognizant of the fact that Dylan was not a

person, but rather was just a character on a popular television show. For us, he was larger than life as most of the characters on the show were to all of us.

Some of the participants in this study mirrored this behavior, desiring to be like Joey. I view this as an unhealthy condition where the ramifications of teenagers desiring to make themselves similar to a character or associate themselves with people like characters on a show are detrimental, especially when their attempts are unsuccessful. Ultimately, it affects self-esteem in ways that cause great damage. I fear for the teenagers that try to become something they cannot be because in the end, all they will end up doing is hurting themselves.

Additionally, both shows paint a false sense of “reality,” a virtual teenage “reality.” Life on *90210* was blatantly easy and artificial, almost on the level of a fairy tale. No matter how hard we may have tried, my friends and I finally realized there were some things in life that we saw happening on the show that could never happen in our own lives. One example of such a realization occurred when we realized that most of us did not have money that we could throw around to buy the nicest of clothes. Instead, many of us had jobs or responsibilities that had to be attended to around our houses. I never saw such realities on *90210*. Interestingly, the characters on *Dawson’s Creek* are a little more grounded, but still with the exception of Joey and Pacey, things come too easily to the other characters. Both shows serve as vehicles of fantasy and possibility and do not reflect our own “realities.”

Notwithstanding these disparities with reality, the characters on both shows are influential. As mentioned, these characters influence viewers’ behaviors in ways that can be negative. I know that just being exposed to sexual activity in the high school setting

on *90210* negatively encouraged several of my friends to view the act as acceptable and consequence free because the characters on the show engaged in such behavior with little or no second thought to what they were doing. Because we believed that the show depicted “what happens,” we thought that sexual activity was, indeed, typical of the teenage experience. *Dawson’s Creek* is also to blame for influencing behaviors in negative ways. The show’s controversial treatment of issues, such as drug use and sexuality, influence teenagers’ worldviews. While I do feel that addressing these issues is an important responsibility of parents, exposing young viewers to such issues without proper guidance often ends up teaching impressionable viewers wrong ideas.

One of the more interesting parallels that I drew between the two shows deals with their diverse viewing audiences. Something not present in my study was the presence of males who watch the show.⁸ *90210* had a relatively strong male viewing audience. They watched for a variety of reasons. There were males that watched the show who wanted to be Brandon, but more frequently they wanted to become Dylan, who was so “cool” and “smooth,” never having problems “getting the girl.” Dylan was the epitome of what a teenage male should be like. He had the right car (a black Porsche), wore the right clothes and was a surfer, all of which appealed to most males. Other males wanted to be Brandon. Brandon was not as “cool” as Dylan, but nonetheless, he had great qualities that most males strive for which I would call “boy next door looks” and a down-to-earth personality to match. Brandon always got the girl in the end, though he had to work harder than Dylan to do so. It is difficult to find any males who “admit” to

⁸ It should be noted that I was unable to find for my sample any males that admitted to watching the show. The participants in the study could not provide me with any names either.

watching the show. Therefore, I am still left wondering why this is the case because there are similarities between the two shows.

On a related topic, both shows have parents in the background. The only parents shown on either show were Brandon and Brenda's on *90210* and Dawson's in *Dawson's Creek*. Often they are not around until something tragic happens and then they dismiss the issue as a grain of salt or do not follow up on the issue. For example, I remember the same episode concerning Brenda's worries of being pregnant, where her parents grew upset with her for becoming sexually active and forbid her to see Dylan. She, of course, did not listen and continued to see him behind their backs and they did not discover this until much later. This is just one example of the "clueless" parents on the show.

In addition, Dylan's parents on *90210* were non-existent. His father was in and out of jail for most of his formative years and his mother lived on an island in Hawaii as some sort of recluse. Due to the absence of his parents for support and guidance, he turned to using drugs and almost died of an overdose of heroin. His parents seemed oblivious to the problems of their son once tragedy almost struck. Therefore, I draw similar comparisons with Dylan on *90210* and Andy and Jack on *Dawson's Creek*, noting the common theme of the uninvolved, uncaring parent. The fact that parents are portrayed in such a distant role is a little disconcerting for me. I feel that the diminished role of parents in children's lives encourages rebellion and more problems. Television shows are taking the place of parents in child rearing. With the absence of parents, television teaches young viewers how to beat the system and how to gain rewards for doing so. I see this attitude has not changed since my experiences with *90210*. When will this trend be reversed?

Since parents are absent in the lives of both show's characters, friends are very important. As a young viewer of television shows like *90210*, I learned to value my friends above all else, including my parents. The same is happening with the participants in this study. *Dawson's Creek* sends a similar message that stresses the importance of having an established system of support from friends. This furthers the perceived distance between parents and children. Shows like these teach viewers this is the way that life is "supposed to be" as a teenager; in this case, the lesson is reinforced. The lessons these shows teach us are a symptom of a society ill – to dismiss authority and take life into your own hands.

However, both shows also appear to have enduring power. The show maintains a loyal viewing audience, which is not unlike my experiences with *90210*. Rarely does a show capture its viewing audience from the airing of the first episode and keep them through the duration of the show's life. However, *90210* became an integral part of my life and the lives of other teenage viewers. We included the characters, messages, etc. into our everyday lives and they affected all aspects of our social relationships in society. I discovered the same occurrence with *Dawson's Creek*, which has quickly moved from the arena of entertainment into an everyday fixture in the lives of these viewers.

90210 followed the same cast of characters, with a few deletions and additions from their days in high school to a few years out of college. Most of the characters that were on the first episode of *90210* were also on the last aired episode. A similar occurrence is happening on *Dawson's Creek*, where viewers are following the same cast

of characters from their days at Cape Side High School to their collegiate days in Boston, Massachusetts.

The characters on *90210* resemble the cast of *Dawson's Creek* to an extent, they were all beautiful and homogeneous in composition (i.e. the main characters are all Caucasian); however, *90210* characters were all from wealthy families living in Beverly Hills, California where their every need and desire was met. Despite the fact that the cast of *Dawson's Creek* comes from a wider socio-economic composition, they are all beautiful and also of the same ethnic background, Caucasian. However, every want and need the characters have is not always met, though I do feel most needs are met, which is not an entirely accurate portrayal of the teenage experience. I believe the composition of both shows teaches viewers an idealistic representation of the teenage experience.

Keeping all of this in mind, this study is near and dear to my heart. As mentioned several times throughout this thesis, I am deeply concerned about the way these participants view the representation of the teenage experience on *Dawson's Creek*.

The media and especially those television shows teenagers watch on a regular basis construct standards of what constitutes an ideal teenager/teenage experience. Males and females are affected by these standards, but I fear for females who try to conform to such standards. Participants mentioned that theme several times. There is a great deal of pressure for teenagers to incorporate the messages of shows such as *Dawson's Creek* into their everyday lives because they paint the picture of the teenage lifestyle that every teenager wants to achieve, but rarely ever can because of social limitations and barriers. These participants want to be as smart or as pretty as Joey, or as down to earth as Jen, etc. In a very important sense, these characters embody standards that are impossible to reach.

I fear for young impressionable viewers who see television shows as “reality,” and do not recognize that these shows’ purposes are primarily to entertain.

All in all, one fact remains true – television is important. The shows we watch influence how we view ourselves and the world around us. In particular, young impressionable audience members are those who appear to be the most affected by the programs they watch. This study I feel is an important one and should not be dismissed. It serves a useful purpose to not only those in academia, but to parents whose children watch the show, as well as its writers/producers and of course, its core viewing audience. The representations of the teenage experience on *Dawson’s Creek* help to shape the teenage world. The viewers of the show include the messages, themes and experiences of the show into their everyday lives. These viewers “Eat. Sleep. Watch *Dawson’s Creek*” as a part of their everyday lives.

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANTS

“Michelle” is a 15-year-old Caucasian female who lives in a rural community in Northeast Georgia. She attends an area public high school. Her best friend is Jessica. She has blond hair and blue eyes. She dresses casually and wears no make up. She was interviewed in her father’s study. On the day of the interview she had “I am not a princess” written on her hand in a pink marker. Michelle is very sociable.

“Elizabeth” is an 18-year-old African American female who lives in a rural community in Northeast Georgia. She dresses casually and wears no make up. She attends an area public high school. She was interviewed in her den. She is well-spoken and very intelligent. She seems older than her age. She has a diverse group of friends and is independent.

“Jessica” is a 16-year-old Caucasian female who lives in a rural community in Northeast Georgia. She has brown hair and brown eyes. She dresses very trendy (she wore a black belt with glitter on it) and does wear noticeable makeup. She attends an area public high school. She was interviewed in her bedroom, which she shares with her sister. One half of the room has posters covering the walls that describe the things she likes such as N’Sync and *Dawson’s Creek* and pictures of her friends. The other half of the room has posters of the things her younger sister enjoys. Jessica is very sociable and males play an important role in her life, not only for romantic purposes, but also for friendship purposes. Her best friend is Michelle.

“Amanda” is a 17-year-old Caucasian female who lives in a small town in Northeast Georgia. She has brown hair and brown eyes. She dresses casually and wears no make up. She attends an area public high school. She was interviewed in her bedroom, which is covered in posters – some of them are reproductions of art and there are also posters of the movies she likes in addition to a poster of *Dawson’s Creek*. One poster in her room said, “Thin People Suck.” She has a diverse group of friends and has pictures of them all around her room.

“Kim” is a 17-year-old Caucasian female who lives in a small town in Northeast Georgia. She has brown hair and brown eyes. She dresses conservatively and wears glasses. She is very quiet and did not appear to be that comfortable in the interview setting. She was interviewed in her kitchen.

“Stacy” is a 17-year-old Caucasian female who lives in a small town in Northeast Georgia. She dresses casually wore a slight amount of make up. Stacy is very into the

social scene at her local high school and is a member of a high school sorority. She was interviewed in her den.

“Sally” is a 19-year-old Caucasian female who lives in a suburb of a large city in Northeast Georgia. She attends a private university in New York City where she is a rising sophomore. She has red hair and blue eyes. She was interviewed over the telephone. Friends are very important to her. She is also interested in dancing.

“Carly” is a 20-year-old Caucasian female who lives in a small town in Northeast Georgia, where she attends a public university. She is a rising Junior. She is originally from a mid-sized city in North Carolina. Carly has blond hair and blue eyes. She is into the social scene at her college and is a member of a Greek sorority. Carly was interviewed over the telephone.

“Kristy” is a 19-year-old Caucasian female who lives in a suburb of a large city in Northeast Georgia. She attends a public university in Tennessee, where she just completed her freshmen year. She was the founder of the *Dawson’s Creek Club* at her previous high school. Kristy has brown hair and blue eyes. She was interviewed over the telephone.

“Ann” is a 19-year-old Caucasian female who lives in a suburb of a large city in Northeast Georgia. She attends a public university in a small town in Northeast Georgia, where she just completed her freshmen year. She has brown hair and brown eyes. She dresses casually and wears little make up. She was interviewed on her screened-in porch off the back of her house. She is good friends with Kristy and was a member of the *Dawson’s Creek Club*.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORMS (PARTICIPANTS UNDER 18 YEARS OLD)

I _____ agree to allow my daughter _____ to participate in the research project, *Gender Performance and Identity Formation: An Analysis of Teenage Female Viewers of Dawson's Creek*, which is being conducted by Amanda Hall (Principal Researcher: Amanda Hall, Department of Advertising/Public Relations, University of Georgia, (706) 369-8776; Faculty Advisor: Dr. Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, Department of Advertising/Public Relations, University of Georgia, (706) 542-5680). I understand that her participation is entirely voluntary and she can stop and choose not to continue the interview at any time without any punishment or penalty and have the results of her participation returned to her, removed from the research project or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

- 1) The purpose of this interview is to explore female teenage viewers feelings/attitudes towards the television show, Dawson's Creek.
- 2) The interview will be taped on an audiocassette recorder.
- 3) There are no direct benefits she will gain by participating.
- 4) The procedures are as follows:
 - a. The interview will be set up by phone at a location and time convenient to participants.
 - b. I will read and be asked to sign the informed consent form regarding my daughter's participation in the study.
 - c. The interview should last one hour.
- 5) No discomforts or stresses are foreseen.
- 6) No risks are foreseen.
- 7) The results of my daughter's participation are confidential and will not be released in any way identify my daughter directly without receiving her permission first, unless otherwise required by law. For the purposes of confidentiality, tapes and written transcripts will be labeled with pseudonyms. The audiotapes will be destroyed once the study is completed.
- 8) I have the option to sit in on the interview if I desire.
- 9) My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to allowing my daughter to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

Signature of Principal Researcher

Date

For questions or problems about your rights, please call or write: Chris A. Joseph, Ph.D., Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-6514; email IRB@uga.edu.

APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORMS (ALL PARTICIPANTS)

I _____ agree to participate in the research project, *Gender Performance and Identity Formation: An Analysis of Teenage Female Viewers of Dawson's Creek*, which is being conducted by Amanda Hall (Principal Researcher: Amanda Hall, Department of Advertising/Public Relations, University of Georgia, (706) 369-8776; Faculty Advisor: Dr. Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, Department of Advertising/Public Relations, University of Georgia, (706) 542-5680). I understand that my participation is my choice and I can stop and choose not to continue the interview at any time without any punishment or penalty and have the results of my participation returned to me, removed from the research project or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

- 1) The purpose of this interview is to explore female teenage viewers feelings/attitudes towards the television show, Dawson's Creek.
- 2) The interview will be taped on an audiocassette recorder.
- 3) There are no direct benefits I will gain by participating.
- 4) The procedures are as follows:
 - a. The interview will be set up by phone at a location and time convenient to participants.
 - b. I will read and be asked to sign the informed consent form regarding my participation in the study.
 - c. The interview should last one hour.
- 5) No discomforts or stresses are foreseen.
- 6) No risks are foreseen.
- 7) The results of my participation are confidential and will not be released in any way that will say who I am without receiving my permission first, unless otherwise required by law. For the purposes of confidentiality, tapes and written transcripts will be labeled with pseudonyms (names that will stand for my name, but in no way will say my name). The audiotapes will be destroyed once the study is completed.

- 8) My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Principal Researcher

Date

For questions or problems about your rights, please call or write: Chris A. Joseph, Ph.D., Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-6514; email IRB@uga.edu.

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

(The Dawson's Creek Teenage, Female Viewer)

(Note interviewee's age and "personality") Female – Age: ____
(May have to note personality later in the interview)

When did you first start watching DC (began in 1998)?

Tell me about your experiences watching DC:

- Why do you watch it every week?
- Describe your "typical" Wednesday night viewing of DC (are you with friends/family? Do you talk on the phone during/after to friends? Do you "chat" on the Internet?)
 - o Do you and/or your friends/family watch episodes that you have already seen?
 - o Do you tape all of the episodes from each season? If so, how long have you been doing this? Tell me what you do with these taped episodes. (Watch them? Do they sit on a shelf?, etc.)
- Do you own any DC "stuff?"
- Do you visit or have you created any DC Web sites?
- Do you download songs off the Internet or purchase CD's of some of the artists that you hear on DC?

(Lessons DC "Teaches – The "Typical" Teenager)

Who is your favorite character on DC? Tell me why they are your favorite.

Describe your idea of the "typical" female teenager. Do you feel that DC's characters are "typical" teenagers with "typical" teenage problems? How so?
How do you feel about the vocabulary that the characters use; is it the same that you use with your friends?

Does DC help you to deal with topics that you deal with in your everyday life? Does the show address problems that you would not want to discuss with your parents?

Describe to me your idea of a role model for female teenage girls.

Tell me if you consider any of the characters on DC as your role models. Why or why not?

Tell me what kind of a message does DC send to its viewers about being a teenager. Is it accurate in your opinion?

(Representation on DC and beyond)

How would you classify the main characters' relationships with their parents? Are there any that stand out to you?

How would you classify the main characters' relationships with authority figures (such as teachers and principals)?

Do you see the characters on DC as actors playing characters or as actual characters in real life? (Do you see Pacey as "Pacey" or Joshua Jackson?).

Tell me in your everyday life, do you see boys being favored over girls. How? Do you see this happening on DC? What situations can you remember if any? Do these situations reflect reality?

Describe to me the people you consider to be your friends. Are they all the "same" in your opinion or are you all "different?" (All girls? All from the south? All from the US?). Are you all close to the same age?

Do you see the characters on DC as being the "same" or "different?" Describe to me how you feel about this.

Are there similarities between the characters and your friends?

Describe to me what makes a girl "pretty." Are any characters on DC "pretty?"

Tell me about your feelings towards wearing makeup. Do you or your friends wear makeup?

Describe to me what makes a guy "cute." Are there any characters on DC "cute?"
(Homosexuality)

Jack

Describe to me your idea of a "good" guy versus a "bad" guy.

Describe to me your feelings about Jack (is he "good" or "bad?"). Do you like him on the show?

Describe how you think other characters on the show treat Jack.

How do you feel when you see him in magazines/TV shows?

Do you know people like him?

Describe to me your definition of a “couple.” (Are they the same? Different (races, backgrounds, etc.)?)

Describe to me your feelings about Jack taking another guy to the prom.

(How other characters perceive homosexuality on the show)

How do you feel about Pacey kidding around with his brother (about being gay)?

Do you feel like Jack’s friends accept him for himself?

How do you feel about Jen trying to set Jack up with dates?

(Alcohol Abuse, Drug Abuse, Abortion and Promiscuity)

Jen

Describe to me your idea of a “good girl” versus a “bad” girl. How would you classify Jen?

Describe to me your feelings about Jen (on the ski trip; relationship with Drew; “many” boyfriends – relationship with men, going to see a psychiatrist, etc.).

How do you feel about Jen’s relationship with Jack? How do you think that they feel about each other (as “brother” and “sister?”, etc.)?

Gretchen

How do you feel about Gretchen? Is she a “good” girl or a “bad girl?”

How do you feel about her leaving college? Did she have a good reason?

(Relationships and Intimacy – esp. concerning Joey)

Tell me who think Joey should be with. Why?

Tell me how you would describe Joey and Dawson’s relationship.

Tell me how you would describe Joey and Pacey’s relationship. Was it a “typical” male-female relationship?

How did you feel about Gretchen and Dawson’s relationship?

Describe to me your feelings about the senior class ski trip everyone except Dawson took this past year.