

# Political Implications of Prime-Time Drama and Sitcom Use: Genres of Representation and Opinions Concerning Women's Rights

By R. Lance Holbert, Dhavan V. Shah, and Nojin Kwak

*Scholars studying the content of televised entertainment programming have long argued for a relationship between exposure to sexist media representations of women and opinions concerning women's status in society, yet research has rarely examined prime-time television audiences and their sociopolitical opinions concerning women's rights. To explore these relationships, we engaged in a secondary analysis of the 1997, 1998, and 1999 DDB Life Style Studies. Using hierarchical regression, we found three forms of entertainment television use (traditional drama, progressive drama, and situation comedy) that retain statistically significant, unique relationships with opinions concerning women's rights, even after accounting for variables thought to shape patterns of media use and influence support for women's rights. Further, regression path analysis revealed that these three forms also mediate relationships between various demographic, situational, and orientational variables and the criterion variable.*

Prime-time television fare has long been thought to construct and contest sex roles and provide a forum where issues of gender equity and reproductive rights are discussed (Dow, 1996; Tuchman, 1978). Prime-time programs touch on a range of topics concerning women: professional roles, domestic responsibilities, and sexual mores. Indeed, media cultivation studies have observed sexist portrayals of women across a range of television genres and used this to support their assertion that general television consumption adversely affects opinion about gender equality (e.g., Morgan, 1982, 1987; Morgan & Rothschild, 1983; Signorielli, 1989).

Yet this focus on total television use is problematic (Potter & Chang, 1990), especially when studying opinions toward women. Such an approach assumes

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R. Lance Holbert (PhD, University of Wisconsin-Madison) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication, University of Missouri-Columbia. Dhavan V. Shah (PhD, University of Minnesota) is an associate professor in the School of Journalism & Mass Communication and Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Nojin Kwak (PhD, University of Wisconsin-Madison) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. Each author contributed equally to this manuscript. The authors would like to thank DDB-Chicago for access to the Life Style Study, and Marty Horn and Chris Callahan, in particular, for making these data available and sharing methodological details. All correspondence should be directed to the first author at 115 Switzler Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, HolbertR@missouri.edu.

that "there is one television experience, rather than multiple channels and programs, and one audience, rather than different types of viewers" (Norris, 1996, p. 475). As qualitative research examining representations of women in media has rightly pointed out, there are sharp distinctions among television genres in their gender portrayals, suggesting that "each genre poses different possibilities" for the construction of the opinions concerning women's place in society (Lemon, 1978, p. 51).

This perspective is supported by the work of a wide range of scholars who have actively reflected on the possibility that representations of women within certain television genres may positively *or* negatively influence opinions about women's rights (Condit, 1990; Lemon, 1978; Press, 1991; Zoonen, 1996). Their suspicions are generally based on the close study of media content as guided by perspectives ranging from critical-feminist to sociohistorical (e.g., Cavender, Bond-Maupin, & Jurik, 1999; Gamson, 1999; Lauzen & Dozier, 1999). They conclude that the story lines contained in evening dramas and situation comedies vary widely in their representations of women and prescriptions for gender roles, with some offering more traditional ideological perspectives and others advancing more progressive views.

Indeed, many shows present contrasting ideological perspectives of important public policy issues (i.e., abortion, gender equity) dealing with women's rights. For example, Condit (1990) classified television programs dealing with abortion into one of three categories: proabortion, prochoice, or false choices/false pregnancy. She asserts that these categories present the issue of abortion from a particular ideological position and thereby shape how viewers come to understand the position of women in society. Such content-focused research hints at the potential effects of entertainment content on opinions about gender roles and such varied matters of public policy as abortion, birth control, and the women's rights movement.

Unfortunately, little research has attempted to connect these conclusions about the features of different programs with observable influences on audiences. As Durkin (1985) states, "far more attention has been given to the nature of sex-role portrayal in television than to its effects" (p. 191). The consumption of different television genres would certainly seem to have the potential to affect individuals' opinions concerning the status of women in society (Volgy & Schwartz, 1980), yet the supposed links between these patterns of television use and opinions concerning women's rights have not been subjected to systematic empirical testing.

This study focuses its attention on the relationships between the consumption of various genres of prime-time television content and individual-level opinions concerning women's rights. In doing so, we attempt to bridge the gap between content-based and media effects research by conducting a quantitative study of individual-level opinions that derives some of its theoretical underpinnings from the observations of feminist and sociological scholars. We contend that the relationship between the consumption of certain prime-time television genres and opinions concerning women particularly deserves the attention of communication scholars because the policy debates defined in terms of women's rights have a substantial influence on political processes and outcomes (Abramowitz, 1995; Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996, 1997).

### **Prime-Time Depictions of Women**

Much feminist and sociological media studies research has asserted that certain depictions of gender roles found in prime-time programming reinforce chauvinistic attitudes, solidifying stereotypes about women and their place in society (Press & Cole, 1999; Tuchman, Daniels, & Benet, 1978). First articulated by Tuchman (1978), this perspective assumes that televised entertainment programming has a strong influence on attitudes toward women by reflecting dominant societal norms (i.e., the reflection hypothesis) and underrepresenting women in positions of authority (i.e., symbolic annihilation). Numerous content analyses attending to depictions of women on television provide strong support for the basic claims that women are often treated as subservient to men or are underrepresented in positions of leadership (DeFleur, 1964; Henderson, Greenberg, & Atkin, 1980; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999).

Likewise, media effects research connected to these content studies have linked the totality of television with more traditional sex-role stereotypes and conservative gender ideology. For example, Signorielli (1989) analyzed general attitudes toward women among light and heavy television viewers and found relatively weak evidence for an effect of television viewing on opinions about the proper role for women in society. Somewhat similarly, Elsamer, Hasegawa, and Brain (1999) compared trends from the late 1960s to the early 1990s in the portrayal of women in prime-time television with General Social Survey data on attitudes concerning gender roles and U.S. Department of Labor statistics on the percentage of females in the workforce. They found a positive linear relationship between the proportion of female characters in prime-time television, the percentage of women in the workforce, and attitudes toward working women.

It is important to note that these cross-sectional and time-series exemplars both treated television as a monolithic whole. This is typical. Research has generally failed to link specific effects thought to stem from categories of television content with the use of that content. Even experimental work in this area has often simply manipulated total television viewing (e.g., Ross, Anderson, & Wisocki, 1982). This treatment of television use is a common argument against cultivation scholarship (e.g., Hawkins & Pingree, 1981); it is particularly troublesome when connecting prime-time television use and opinions toward women, given the latitude of representations contained in prime-time dramas and situation comedies.

In fact, recent work not only has suggested that the differences between "gendered" portrayals of male and female characters on prime-time television are increasingly heterogenous, it has hinted at emerging differences across entertainment content (Elsamer et al., 1999). Gamson (1999) contended that prime-time entertainment content might be particularly influential in constructing and shaping sociopolitical opinions. The presentation of issues like abortion and women's liberation in entertainment programming, what he defined as "life-world" content, allows for a strong representation of particular ideological sides, given that these programs engage the audience on an emotional level, base truth claims on experiential knowledge, and treat the audience as being physically present within the program.

Some past empirical research has substantiated these claims. Miller and Reeves (1976) studied the relationship between television viewing and sex-role stereotypes in adolescents, focusing on children's contact with individual characters. They found that "exposure to counterstereotypical females portrayed on TV *causes* modifications in real life sex-role perceptions" (p. 48). Unfortunately, others studying the connection between television use and adolescents' attitudes toward sex roles have not modeled Miller and Reeves's attention to specific elements within the vast array of material offered via prime-time television (see Freuh & McGhee, 1975; McGhee & Freuh, 1980; Morgan, 1982).

Thus, most empirical research connecting television entertainment consumption and attitudes toward women has focused on undifferentiated television use. The handful of empirical studies that have attempted to move beyond total television use have dealt with a single type of programming or maintained a focus on individual characters rather than specific genres. Further, many of the insights have come from research on adolescents rather than adults, who are the vast majority of the prime-time audience. The failure to directly link various categories of media content to specific effects stemming from their use speaks to a chasm between content- and effects-based media research (e.g., Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In order to bridge these areas, research must begin by distinguishing the relationships hypothesized by content-based studies and connecting the use of various genres of televised entertainment content with the sociopolitical opinions of American adults.

### **Genres of Representation**

Given that many critical feminist and sociological scholars have made content-based arguments that various forms of entertainment television each have a unique set of effects on sociopolitical opinions concerning the rights of women (e.g., Lemon, 1978), it is important that any inquiry about media effects distinguish among multiple forms of prime-time entertainment television use. Thus, we differentiate three genres of prime-time television content:

#### *Progressive Dramas*

Progressive dramas, exemplified by shows like *ER* and *Law and Order*, present women in positions of authority and directly discuss sexuality from decidedly liberal viewpoints. They reflect a progressive view regarding the status of women in society and what rights they should be afforded. These shows are primarily set in urban environments and contain story lines that portray many of the difficulties facing women who are trying to establish themselves in work environments. In addition, they often present workplace environments where women work alongside men—or in leadership positions over men—and fight to be treated as equals. More important, many of the story lines deal with some of the most common issues associated with women achieving equal status in society (i.e., divorce, spousal abuse, child care, abortion, pay equity). Past research has shown that shows of this type have an effect on viewers' attitudes toward women's rights. In her analy-

sis of focus group data, Press (1991) found that viewing a progressive drama that presented women who were forced to confront the issue of abortion affected how women come to reason about this issue and, ultimately, how they discuss their stances on this matter of public policy (see also Clark, 1990; D'Acci, 1987).

### *Traditional Dramas*

In contrast, more traditional values regarding the status of women can be found in many other hour-long dramas. Programs such as *Walker: Texas Ranger* and *Touched by an Angel* feature either male characters in leadership positions or female characters in domestic, care-giving roles. Programs of this kind, although they may at times have a strong female lead character, promote a more conservative perspective by elevating the nobility of motherhood as the defining characteristic of women (Dow, 1996). In contrast to progressive dramas, traditional dramas are often set in rural environments and therefore reflect certain "heartland" values and norms. In addition, religious themes and discussions of faith in a higher power are explicit in several of the programs that are representative of this type of programming. Critical scholars have long argued that television's presentation of various patriarchal institutions creates barriers for women in society (e.g., Zoonen, 1996), but no one has tested empirically whether this type of television use is negatively related to liberal opinions concerning women's rights.

In short, different types of television dramas present contrasting viewpoints concerning social controversies affecting women. Thus, hypotheses 1 and 2 may be stated:

H1: The consumption of television dramas that espouse progressive values will be positively related to liberal opinions concerning women's rights.

H2: The consumption of television dramas that espouse traditional values will be negatively related to liberal opinions concerning women's rights.

### *Situation Comedies*

Dramas are not the lone form of television content addressing reproductive issues, sexuality, and women's rights. Feminist scholars have also pointed to situation comedies as having an influence on how citizens come to understand social norms and lifestyle choices (Dow, 1996). Shows such as *Friends* and *Seinfeld* are often set in major metropolitan areas. For those shows not set in an urban environment, many of the story lines revolve around the conflict between a more sophisticated, or urbane, character and the town's traditional customs or provincial attitudes. Many situation comedies present strong-minded female characters who openly discuss sexuality and contraception. In addition, many of the women in these shows are trying to balance career and family. Accordingly, these characterizations may play some role in the relationship between entertainment television consumption and attitudes concerning reproductive rights and gender roles (Lee, 1995). Accordingly, the third hypothesis may be stated:

H3: The consumption of situation comedies will be positively related to liberal opinions concerning women's rights.

### *Media Use as Mediator*

The hypotheses posited above speak to a set of direct relationships between various forms of prime-time entertainment television viewing and the opinions of interest to this study, but there may be a second route by which these various types of media use affect opinions toward women's rights. Media scholars have long understood that many demographic, situational, and orientational variables shape patterns of television use in a cycle of gratifications sought and attained (e.g., Palmgreen, 1984). Particularly important for this study, research indicates that the deeper motivations implicit in these social traits may lead individuals to consume media content that reflects their self-perceptions, views, and goals (McQuail, 1985). Accordingly, research has focused on personal identity and social interaction functions for media uses (Blumler & Katz, 1974). From this perspective, individuals use media to reinforce their understanding of how the world functions and their role within it. In turn, media provide detailed accounts of the roles people play in various social and professional settings, fulfilling the gratifications sought from the media. Thus, research should explore the possibility that these variables work through television entertainment viewing to influence sociopolitical variables (e.g., Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Accordingly, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: Does the consumption of traditional dramas, progressive dramas, and situation comedies mediate the effects of demographic, situational, and orientational variables on opinions concerning women's rights?

## **Methods**

### *Survey Data*

The data used in this study were collected as part of an annual mail survey, conducted by Market Facts and funded by DDB-Chicago, an international marketing communications company. In an effort to achieve a balanced final sample, a starting sample of approximately 5,000 mail panelists was adjusted within the subcategories of race, gender, and marital status to compensate for expected differences in return rates (1997,  $N = 3,462$ , response rate 69.2%; 1998,  $N = 3,350$ , 67.0%; 1999,  $N = 3,388$ , 67.8%). For methodological details concerning sampling procedures, see Scheufele and Shah (2000) and Shah, McLeod, and Yoon (2001).

### *Measures*

First, we constructed our criterion variable of opinions concerning women's rights. This variable consisted of two items, each measured on a six-point Likert scale with no neutral category: "I am in favor of legalized abortion," and "I think the women's liberation movement is a good thing." (Interitem  $r$ s range from .32 to .33, all at  $p < .001$ ). Gelb and Palley (1979) pointed out that the two long-standing associations individuals have with women's rights is the women's liberation movement in general, and the issue of reproductive rights in particular.

Multiple measures for television entertainment viewing were created from a total of 13 dichotomous items measuring the use of specific programs. Exploratory factor analyses conducted independently for each survey revealed three consistently articulated factors: situation comedies (*Friends*, *Frasier*, *Third Rock From the Sun*, *Mad About You*, *Caroline in the City*, *Seinfeld*, and, for 1999, *Dharma and Greg*; Kuder-Richardsons (KRs) from .68 to .77); progressive dramas (*Law & Order*, *NYPD Blue*, *Homicide*, and *ER*; KRs from .64 to .66); and traditional dramas (*Touched by an Angel*, *Walker*, *Texas Ranger*, *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, and, for 1999, *Promised Land*; KRs from .61 to .62).<sup>1</sup>

We included the standard set of four demographic variables: age, sex, education, and household income. In addition to these controls, this study included two situational variables that were expected to have an influence on the criterion variable: marital status and population density. Marital status was constructed as a dichotomous measure with "married" or "widowed" coded high, and "divorced," "separated," and "single" (never married) coded low. This variable differentiates individuals who have sustained or are currently involved in a traditional marital relationship from individuals who have not entered into or have withdrawn from such a relationship (Erskine, 1971). Population density was introduced because of the potential differences between the normative standards of small towns versus large cosmopolitan metros (Goldschmidt, Gergen, Quigley, & Gergen, 1974).

We also accounted for two orientational variables, ideology and sexism. Abramowitz (1995) describes abortion as a classic "easy issue" where individual-level stances are determined more by ideological concerns than partisanship (p. 176). Also, Duncan (1999) found sexism to be a strong negative predictor of individual's level of activity and association with the women's rights movement. Ideology was measured with a response to a single five-point scale, "Generally speaking, would you consider yourself to be . . .," with the scale ranging from *very conservative* to *very liberal*. Sexism was measured by responses to the following statements: "Men are better at investing money than women," "A woman's place is in the home," "The father should be the boss of the house," "Men are smarter than women," and "Men are naturally better leaders than women" (Cronbach's alphas from .77 to .79).

### Analyses

We performed our analyses in three stages. First, we ran a series of hierarchical regressions for each year, 1997–1999. The eight demographic, situational, and orientational variables were entered in a first block, followed by a second block consisting of the three forms of entertainment television use. These equations were run to make an initial assessment of whether a significant set of relationships between the three forms of prime-time entertainment television use and women's

<sup>1</sup> Given the changing nature of prime-time television schedules, a single item substitution was undertaken for both the 1999 traditional drama use and situation comedy use variables. *Seinfeld* was no longer airing in primetime on NBC in 1999, nor was *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* on CBS's schedule for that year. In order to retain equivalent media use indexes across each of the years, we substituted *Dharma and Greg* and *Promised Land*, respectively, for *Seinfeld* and *Dr. Quinn* in the 1999 regression equation.



rights existed and to see whether the relationships were consistent across the samples and in the hypothesized direction.

Second, the three hypotheses were then tested more formally in a series of three regression equations created for each of the 3 years, with each of the various forms of entertainment television use entered separately after the control block in each equation. The incremental  $R^2$  statistic was used to assess whether the various forms of media use retained a unique relationship with the criterion variable in each year beyond that which had already been established by the eight variables in the first block.

Finally, we used Ordinary-Least Squares (OLS) regression path analysis on a combined data set ( $N = 10,200$ ) to assess the unique paths of influence established by the various demographic, situational, and orientational variables on women's rights through the various forms of prime-time entertainment television use. The path analysis allowed us to better understand what leads individuals to use the three forms of prime-time entertainment television fare analyzed in this study and how these forms of media use act as potential mediators between the various premedia use items and support for women's rights.

## **Results**

The first set of regression equations revealed a strong pattern of associations between the three forms of media use and opinions concerning women's rights, above and beyond what relationships were established between the variables in the first block and the criterion variable (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup> The block of prime-time entertainment television use variables accounted for a significant portion of the variance in women's rights, and each of the individual relationships between the media use measures and women's rights was in the hypothesized direction.

Each form of prime-time entertainment television use was then entered as a single variable in a series of nine regression equations after a first block consisting of the eight demographic, situation, and orientation variables (not shown). Each of the three forms of media use retained statistically significant incremental  $R^2$ s for each of the 3 years. A very consistent pattern emerged regarding the relative influence of each of these forms of media use. Traditional drama use retained the strongest incremental  $R^2$ s for each of the three survey years (1997, incremental  $R^2 = 0.6\%$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 1998, incremental  $R^2 = 1.1\%$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 1999, incremental  $R^2 = 1.2\%$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The second strongest unique relationship among the forms of television use and the criterion variable was found in the use of situation comedies (1997, incremental  $R^2 = 0.5\%$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 1998, incremental  $R^2 = 0.8\%$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 1999, incremental  $R^2 = 0.5\%$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, progressive drama use retained the

<sup>2</sup> An initial set of regression equations included measures of both television public affairs and newspaper public affairs use prior to the three prime-time entertainment television use variables. The two public affairs media use variables did not have significant relationships with the criterion variable, and the three prime-time entertainment television use variables all retained their significant relationships with women's rights even after taking into account these two measures of public affairs media use.



**Table 1. Hierarchical Regression Equations—Women's Rights on Control and Media Use**

	1997		1998		1999	
	Eq. 1	Eq. 2	Eq. 1	Eq. 2	Eq. 1	Eq. 2
Control variables						
Age	.027	.058**	.026	.060**	.038*	.077***
Sex (F)	-.051**	-.038*	-.059**	-.044*	-.057**	-.046***
Education	.016	.013	.008	-.003	.035	.022
Income	.054**	.039*	.079***	.055**	.066**	.049**
Marital status	-.104***	-.106***	-.071***	-.064***	-.085***	-.080***
Pop. density	.076***	.063***	.087***	.069***	.070***	.057***
Ideology (lib.)	.331***	.315***	.277***	.259***	.319***	.304***
Sexism	-.237***	-.227***	-.270***	-.256***	-.207***	-.198***
Television use						
Traditional dramas		-.094***		-.124***		-.127***
Progressive dramas		.070***		.073***		.059***
Situation comedies		.059***		.076***		.058***

Notes. Coefficients are standardized Betas ( $\beta$ ).

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

1997 Eq. 1 Total  $R^2$  (%) = 24.6\*\*\*, Eq. 2 Incr.  $R^2$  (%) = 1.5\*\*\*, Total  $R^2$  (%) = 26.1\*\*\*,  $N = 3144$

1998 Eq. 1 Total  $R^2$  (%) = 21.6\*\*\*, Eq. 2 Incr.  $R^2$  (%) = 2.4\*\*\*, Total  $R^2$  (%) = 24.0\*\*\*,  $N = 2905$

1999 Eq. 1 Total  $R^2$  (%) = 20.6\*\*\*, Eq. 2 Incr.  $R^2$  (%) = 2.0\*\*\*, Total  $R^2$  (%) = 22.6\*\*\*,  $N = 3078$ .

weakest incremental  $R^2$  in each of the three data sets, but the variance accounted for by this type of media use was still unique relative to that which could be accounted for by the first block of variables (1997, incremental  $R^2 = 0.4\%$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 1998, incremental  $R^2 = 0.5\%$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 1999, incremental  $R^2 = 0.3\%$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In short, hypotheses 1 through 3 received strong support across the data sets.

The final stage of our analyses looked at the role of the three forms of media use as mediators between the eight demographic, situation, and orientation variables and women's rights. The overall results from these equations revealed a wide disparity in how well the control variables were able to account for who is using what forms of prime-time entertainment television (see Table 2). These variables were able to account for 11.9% of the variance in traditional drama use, with age ( $\beta = .189$ ), income ( $\beta = -.131$ ), and sex ( $\beta = .129$ ) being the strongest

**Table 2. OLS Regression Path Analysis—Control, Television Use, and Women's Rights**

	Trad drama	Prog drama	Sit com	Women's rts
Control variables				
Age	.189***	.000	-.209***	.063***
Sex (female)	.129***	.043***	.016	-.045***
Education	-.095***	-.024*	.009	.011
Income	-.131***	.005	.038**	.049***
Marital status	.016	-.004	-.003	-.085***
Population density	-.079***	.055***	.040***	.063***
Ideology (liberal)	-.074***	.044***	.075***	.295***
Sexism	.002	-.076***	-.073***	-.228***
Television use				
Traditional dramas				-.109***
Progressive dramas				.063***
Situation comedies				.064***

Notes. Coefficients are standardized Betas ( $\beta$ ).

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Traditional drama use: Total  $R^2$  (%) = 11.9\*\*\*,  $N = 9191$

Progressive drama use: Total  $R^2$  (%) = 1.7\*\*\*,  $N = 9191$

Situation comedy use: Total  $R^2$  (%) = 7.1\*\*\*,  $N = 9191$

Women's rights: Total  $R^2$  (%) = 23.9\*\*\*,  $N = 9129$

predictors. By contrast, the demographic, situation, and orientation variables were able to account for only 7.1% of the variance in situation comedy use, with age ( $\beta = -.209$ ) being the strongest indicator of the use of the genre. Finally, we were able to explain far less about who tunes in to progressive dramas. The users of this form of prime-time entertainment television appear to be quite diverse. Sexism ( $\beta = -.076$ ) was the strongest predictor of this form of media use, but the regression equation did not account for much variance, 1.7%.

We then entered all independent variables into an equation with opinions concerning women's rights as the dependent variable. All variables, with the exception of education, retained a significant relationship with the criterion variable. Traditional drama, progressive drama, and situation comedy viewing all retained

strong relationships with women's rights. As shown in Table 2, several interesting paths of influence that travel through the various forms of media use are revealed in our analysis. In many cases, these indirect relationships between the control variables and the criterion variable were distinct from the direct relationships.

Most notably, the direct effect of age on opinions concerning women's rights ( $\beta = .063$ ) was positive, but traditional drama and situation comedy viewing acted as mediators that intervened negative indirect relationships between age and the criterion variable. Older viewers tended to gravitate toward traditional dramas, but this type of viewing has a negative relationship with women's rights. Conversely, they were turned off by situation comedies. In short, both of these forms of media use, acting as mediators, resulted in a slight reduction in the positive overall influence of age on women's rights.

One of the more interesting findings was the relationship between sex and opinions concerning women's rights. After considering the effects of a host of control and media variables, we found a direct negative relationship between sex and the criterion variable ( $\beta = -.045$ ), indicating that male respondents tend to have more liberal views concerning women's rights when all other variables, mainly sexism, were controlled.<sup>3</sup> However, the total effect of this demographic variable on women's rights was altered as a result of two forms of media use, traditional and progressive dramas, acting as significant mediators. Sex was positively related with the use of these two disparate types of content, leading to a pair of indirect effects that counter one another. Females tended to watch more traditional dramas, but also tended toward progressive dramas. All in all, the indirect path flowing through traditional dramas was stronger than that through its progressive counterpart, leading to an enhanced total negative effect of sex on opinions concerning the rights of women.

As highlighted above, education was the one variable that failed to retain a significant direct relationship with women's rights. Although a direct relationship did not exist, this does not mean that education failed to exert any impact on the criterion variable. In particular, those with more education tended to watch fewer traditional dramas, a form of programming that was negatively related with women's rights. The result is a positive indirect relationship between education and women's rights through traditional drama use.

Population density retained a strong set of relationships with each of the forms of media use, and each relationship depicted a connection between where audience members live and the dominant setting for each type of prime-time entertainment television fare. Traditional dramas are most often set outside of cities, and those in more rural environments gravitated toward this type television use. Likewise, progressive dramas and situation comedies are set in urban locales, and

<sup>3</sup> The zero-order relationship between sex and women's rights was .023. If sexism is removed from the first block, the relationship between sex and the criterion held ( $\beta = .025$ ). When sexism was introduced, a shift in the sex variable occurred. This shift was not due to multicollinearity, given that the relationship between sex and sexism was moderate ( $r = -.317$ ). It appears that women are less sexist, and this is what leads them to be supportive of women's rights. If sexism was accounted for, men retained more liberal views toward women's rights.

those who lived in areas that were more population dense tended to watch these types of programs with greater frequency. The result was a strong additive effect of the indirect influences of population density through the three forms of prime-time entertainment television use onto women's rights, with each indirect effect to women's rights contributing positively. Although the direct relationship between population density and opinions concerning women's rights was relatively small ( $\beta = .063$ ), the overall effect was significantly enhanced through the indirect paths established via the three types of television viewing.

Finally, the ultimate indirect effects leading from sexism and ideology through the various forms of media use work to enhance the total effects of these variables on women's rights. Ideology was a strong positive predictor of women's rights ( $\beta = .295$ ), and this positive relationship is strengthened via the indirect routes established through traditional drama, progressive drama, and situation comedy viewing. In short, those who were more liberal have greater regard for women being offered equal rights, and these opinions are further strengthened via their use of prime-time programs. The same pattern of an indirect effect enhancing an observed direct effect can be found with sexism. Those who were more sexist retained negative opinions of women's rights ( $\beta = -.228$ ), and they also shied away from those programs that provide story lines that run counter to their established value systems. Thus, the negative impact of sexism on women's rights expanded further as a result of the choices concerning television use made by those who held sexist worldviews.

## **Discussion**

In summary, use of certain types of prime-time entertainment television programming (i.e., progressive dramas and situation comedies) was found to hold a positive relationship with support for women's rights, whereas the use of content espousing more conservative values (i.e., traditional dramas) had a negative relationship with the criterion variable. These relationships reflect the insights of several feminist and sociological media studies scholars who assert that certain genres of entertainment content have a pronounced effect on opinions toward women and their role in society (e.g., Condit, 1990; Dow, 1996; Press, 1991). Notably, this pattern of associations can be observed across three different national data sets after extensive controls, providing strong support for the hypotheses tested in this study.

However, what is important is that the unique relationships that exist between traditional drama, progressive drama, and situation comedy use and opinions concerning women's rights remain intact beyond a host of control variables, including many indicators that influence individuals' consumption of various genres of prime-time television. In addition, each form of television use analyzed in this study was related to the criterion variable in a distinct manner relative to one another. These effects were observed across three separate national data sets using a very strict test of significance—with and without simultaneous media controls—lending greater confidence to our conclusions.

These associations, when combined with the influence of the premedia use variables on each form of prime-time television use, have potentially important implications for media use as a mediator between various demographic, situational, and orientational variables and the criterion variable. In particular, the positive effect of age appears to be reduced as a result of the mediating influence of traditional drama and situation comedy use. In contrast, various forms of prime-time entertainment television use appear to enhance the contrasting influences of both liberal ideology and sexism, two variables that were already strong indicators of socio-political criterion variable analyzed in this study. In short, the use of traditional dramas, progressive dramas, and situation comedies retain unique relationships with opinions concerning women's rights, while also acting as mediators in the relationships between various demographic, situational, and orientational variables and opinions about what basic rights should be afforded to women in society.

More generally, this study acknowledges that entertainment television may play an important role in shaping opinion about various topics of public interest. McLeod (2001), Mutz (2001), and Shah (1998) have called for an expansion of the study of nonpublic affairs media within the field of political communication. These scholars contend that political discourse is not only found in nightly news programs, morning newspapers, and political advertising, but in a wide range of entertainment media outlets. This point has been widely recognized among critical and cultural communication researchers and scholars in other fields for some time (see Condit, 1990; Dow, 1996). Prime-time entertainment television fare provides a nightly forum where issues of human rights, race, the environment, and other important topics are discussed. In addition, the trials and tribulations that various characters have to go through when confronting these issues personalizes matters of public policy for the audience. Gamson (1999) argued that such portrayals have the potential to substantially shape individual-level opinion; our findings support this view.

This effort to link various forms of entertainment media use with opinions concerning women's rights is seen as a first step in merging previously distinct content- and effects-based lines of research (e.g., Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The relationships hypothesized in this research stem from content-focused studies, all of which allude to possible influences that grow from the depictions of women presented in one type of media content or another (Condit, 1990; Gamson, 1999). However, these studies did not formally connect content with effects. The empirical analyses conducted here serve as an example of how communication researchers can link qualitative media content studies with quantitative audience analysis. Many other such opportunities exist, especially given the substantial body of qualitative scholarship on televised constructions of gays and lesbians, African Americans, Hispanics, and certain religious groups.

To better assess the types of effects outlined above, future research needs to overcome some limitations that are inherent to this study. Most obviously, research must improve upon our measures of media use. All media measures employed in this analysis were assessed dichotomously and, as such, likely underestimate the true impact of the variables they represent. It is important that studies of

entertainment media effects work to improve consumption measures as has been done for news media (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; McLeod & McDonald, 1985). Special attention must also be paid to the limitations of inferring causation from cross-sectional data. We have remained resolute in treating all connections between prime-time television use and opinions concerning women's rights as correlational associations, and only the use of longitudinal data would allow for future research to overcome this weakness.

Lastly, concerning the validity of the arguments made in various critical feminist and sociological inquiries, many of the relationships suggested by these scholars appear to have measurable consequences. It is clear from our findings that even when controlling for a broad set of control variables, the use of prime-time entertainment television content retains a consistent and robust set of relationships with the criterion variable. The work of such scholars as Condit, Dow, and Press not only allowed us to recognize that the use of entertainment television fare can have an impact on opinions toward women, but provided us with a framework for positing a specific set of relationships across different genres. It is our objective to broaden interest in the linkage between entertainment television content and socio-political opinions by providing evidence of existing relationships. The merging of insights from various qualitative or critical/cultural studies with a quantitative analysis has proved fruitful in this study, and we encourage this meshing of approaches for future studies that deal with the relationship between media and public opinion.

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