Does Absence Make the Heart Grow Fonder?

Habit, Hiatus and Program Performance in Primetime Broadcast Network Television

"Game of Thrones." "Mad Men." "Breaking Bad." Audience anticipation for the next

season of each of those shows often reached a fever pitch with viewers waiting patiently for their

return and producers and distributors rewarded with high ratings and/or renewed subscriptions.

But long, sometimes years'-long hiatuses, especially in an era of virtually unlimited viewer

choice, would seem to fly in the face of habit formation, a key programming goal. Further, while

high visibility programs like the three noted above might be able to sustain and even build on

their successes over those extended hiatuses, it is likely other programs, especially those on the

margin would suffer ratings losses.

The proposed paper will use season-average national Nielsen television ratings data for

adults 18-49 for all non-news series that aired on one of the five English-language broadcast

networks—ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox and CW in the 2014-2015, 2015-2016 or 2016-2017 television

seasons (September to May) to investigate the relationship between the length of a series' hiatus

and its performance. The study also will consider whether some types programs, those with

continuing storylines for example, do better than others and whether factors like the availability

of the program on a streaming service, the network on which it airs and schedule predictability

impact its performance. The goal of the paper is to help advance our understanding of the role of

habit and predictability in 21st century television audience behavior.

There are two primary theoretical perspectives that guide most of the scholarly research

on television audience behavior: uses and gratifications, which focuses on the individual factors

that impact a person's decision to watch and what to watch once that decision has been made,

and models of program choice that consider the structural characteristics of the medium itself

(Cooper 1993; Cooper, 1996; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974; Webster, 2014; Webster & Phalen, 1997; Webster & Wakshlag, 1983).

Structure as detailed by Giddens (1988, p.16-17) is usually understood as "some kind of patterning of social relations or social phenomena. . .that make it possible for discernably similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space." Further, "a fundamental concept of structuration theory" is routinization or habit. (Rosenstein and Grant, 1997; Weibull, 1985). While audience availability is the key structural driver of television viewing, routine and habit also are fundamental structuration concepts that have influenced how and when programs are aired (Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Weibull, 1985).

Recognizing the importance of predictability in building audience loyalty, television programmers traditionally have used a variety of strategies to help establish a viewing habit. Those include placing similar programs, especially situation comedies, back-to-back to maximize ratings and audience duplication and limiting the use of stunting which is the manipulation of a program's time slot (Adams, Eastman, Horney & Popovich, 1983). To date scholars have not considered whether the length of a series' hiatus has any relationship to its performance. The proposed paper intends to fill that gap.