

Audience Generations: Millennials, “Becomers,” and Beyond

Jennifer Hessler, *University of California, Santa Barbara*

The proliferation of platforms for viewing television and expansion of media options has resulted in lower ratings for conventional linear television programs. The youth audience has been the quickest to shift away from conventional linear television. According to Nielsen, traditional television viewing by 18-24 year olds dropped 34% between 2011 and 2015.¹ Nielsen’s slow adaptation to changing viewing practices has resulted in lower ratings across the board, but especially for traditionally youth-centered television networks such as Freeform (formerly ABC Family), MTV, and the CW.

This response draws attention to just one of the many ways Nielsen is trying to turn connected viewing into usable currency: through the adoption of social media metrics. In 2013, Nielsen started measuring television discussions on Twitter, creating the Nielsen Twitter TV Ratings (NTTR).² In 2016, Nielsen added Facebook discussions to that metric, merging the data into a single Social Content Rating (SCR).³ Along with live events, sports, and reality TV programming, teen programming does particularly well in SCRs. Freeform’s *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-) was the most tweeted about show in 2013 with 2.6 million unique social media users sending out over 11.7 million Tweets about the show. The show’s August 2013 finale set a standing record for the top-tweeted episode of any series on television up to that date.⁴ The show’s social media buzz was deemed partially responsible for its ratings growth, up to an average of 4 millions viewers per episode from 3.6 million viewers per episode in its first season.⁵ During the past three years, *Pretty Little Liars* has consistently remained in Nielsen’s “Weekly Top Ten” SCRs list.

Part of the show's successful online presence derives from its innovative social media campaign. The show's marketing team labels surprising moments in the plot of the show as "OMG" and "WTF" moments; they then create hashtag descriptions for such scenes. John Jurgensen of *Wall Street Journal* writes, "The hashtags not only prompt fans to weigh in, they also make it easier for the network to track and tally data on their responses."⁶ The show's social media success works in tandem with and because of the show's young viewer demographics. The show's core demographic—females between 12 and 34 years old—is among the most active on social media. The show's Executive Producer, Marlene King states, "On other shows that have an older demographic, it might not [work]. I mean, my mother doesn't want to follow Betty White on Twitter. With this demographic, it's just so organic to who these people are."⁷

However, success in the SCRs has not done as much for MTV's *Teen Wolf* (2011-), another teen-targeted show that consistently lands on Nielsen's "Weekly Top Ten" SCRs list. The producers of *Teen Wolf* also strategically cultivate the show's social media buzz, using #TeenWolf to demarcate and aggregate show-related discussion.⁸ For its season 4 premiere, *Teen Wolf* was the number 1 rated show on social media with 130,000 unique Tweets and 1.2 million total tweets.⁹ But while the season 4 premiere scored a 3.6 rating among the 19-49 crowd, by the end of season 5, ratings dropped to a .37. The show's declining ratings factored into MTV's decision to not renew the show for a 7th season.¹⁰

The question remains whether SCRs have the potential to reinvigorate the commercial value of the teen audience. Currently, Nielsen's traditional television ratings still reign supreme. There is no evidence that social media engagement can make up for or overcome low ratings. Still, could social ratings alter how youth audiences are valued? For example, I posit that SCRs engender new ways of understanding the role of "loyals." In the case of SCR's, loyals are

considered to be viewers who Tweet about three or more episodes of a TV series per season. The viewers that Nielsen puts in this category also send nearly 3 times as many Tweets per episode than other authors and have more followers.¹¹ In this case, teen audiences become powerful not just as consumers, but as grassroots brand advocates. Further, some analysts claim that SCRs could benefit black programming. Three of the shows that consistently fall in Nielsen's "Weekly Top Ten" SCRs list (*Empire* [Fox, 2015-], *Scandal* [ABC 2012-], and, *How to Get Away With Murder* [ABC, 2014-]) are particularly popular with black viewers. (For *Empire*, two-thirds of its viewers under 50 are black).¹² According to Pew Research, black youth are unusually heavy users of Twitter, and about "40% of 18- to 29-year-old black Internet users are on Twitter compared with only 28% of their Caucasian counterparts."¹³ Does the growth of SCRs have the potential to impact how social identity groups are valued within the youth audience category?

¹ "Traditional TV Viewing: What a Difference Five Years Makes," Marketing Charts, 5 July 2016, www.marketingcharts.com/television/are-young-people-watching-less-tv-24817/.

² Michael Humphrey, "Nielsen Acquires Social TV Metrics Company SocialGuide," Forbes, 12 November 2012, www.forbes.com/sites/michaelhumphrey/2012/11/12/nielsen-acquires-social-tv-metrics-company-socialguide/#124091a3315e; "Nielsen Launches 'Nielsen Twitter TV Ratings,'" Nielsen Press Release, 7 October 2013, www.nielsen.com/us/en/press-room/2013/nielsen-launches-nielsen-twitter-tv-ratings.html.

³ "Nielsen to Launch 'Social Content Ratings' with Measurement Across Twitter and Facebook," Nielsen Press Release, 20 January 2016, www.nielsen.com/us/en/press-room/2016/nielsen-to-launch-social-content-ratings-with-measurement-across-twitter-and-facebook.html.

⁴ John Jurgensen, "Twitter Hatches a TV Show," *Wall Street Journal*, 18 Oct 2013: D.7.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Yvonne Villarreal, "'Pretty Little Liars' Finds and Keeps Fans on Social Media," *Los Angeles Times*, 09 February 2011: D.14

⁸ Elizabeth Wagmeister, “‘Teen Wolf Ranks as Tuesday’s Most Social Show, Ahead of ‘Pretty Little Liars’ and ‘The People v. O.J. Simpson,’” *Variety*, 11 February 2016, variety.com/2016/digital/news/teen-wolf-twitter-social-media-ratings-mtv-1201704111/.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Laura Prudom, “‘Teen Wolf’ Ending After Season 6; MTV Unveils New Trailer at Comic-Con,” *Variety*, 21 July 2016, variety.com/2016/tv/news/teen-wolf-final-season-6-trailer-ending-1201819854/.

¹¹ “The Making of Social TV: Loyal Fans and Big Moments Build Program-Related Buzz,” *nielsen-social.com*, 24 August 2015, www.nielsen-social.com/the-making-of-social-tv-loyal-fans-and-big-moments-build-program-related-buzz/.

¹² Meredith Blake, “With ‘Empire,’ Diversity Becomes the Watchword on Television,” *Los Angeles Times*, 02 Feb 2015: E.1, www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-black-audiences-television20150202-story.html.

¹³ Ibid.