

Audience Generations: Millennials, “Becomers,” and Beyond: Part 1

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ABC Family’s rebranding as Freeform and particularly the way they identify their audience as “Becomers” is illustrative of a larger problem the television industry faces as Millennials – a generation exhaustively researched, marketed to, and think-pieced – ages out of their teen years and into their 20s and 30s. Other youth-oriented networks, like the CW, are at a similar crossroads and appear unwilling to entirely abandon their pursuit of established Millennial audiences for a lucrative new teen market. Below, I identify some of the overlapping, yet distinctive, strategies networks are using to balance their image as youthful brands, while maintaining appeal for maturing Millennials.

Freeform’s brand overhaul is the strongest example of this phenomenon, as they have explicitly renamed their audience to widen their demographic to ages 14-34, which includes both new teens and Millennials. While their original programming could certainly be examined as representative of this strategy, their weekend movie blocks present an interesting case as well. ABC Family originally grew and solidified their audience a decade ago by purchasing the rights to and then aggressively airing and re-airing the *Harry Potter* films, a franchise practically synonymous with Millennials. Although NBCUniversal purchased the rights to the franchise away from Freeform this August, with a deal beginning in 2018, the network has usefully broadened their movie marathon strategy outside of *Harry Potter*.

Instead of original programming, Freeform’s weekend programming is filled with reruns of youth-oriented films. The films are programmed each weekend as thematically linked movie marathons, which appeal to audiences familiar with binge-watching. This marathon strategy is especially effective as Freeform is able to offer films that appeal to their demographic but are not

conveniently available to stream (especially consecutively) on any platforms like Netflix or Hulu. For example, over the summer of 2016, Freeform aired marathons like “Boss Girls Weekend” (including *Matilda*, *The Hunger Games*, *Pitch Perfect*, *Legally Blonde*), or the animated-centric “Sunday Funday” (every time including a different mix of Disney/Pixar classics). This strategy hinges on nostalgia, airing films meant for a younger audience but also vitally pulling in older viewers that remember these films fondly.

It should be noted that nostalgia-based programming is a much bigger industry-wide trend that is being utilized effectively by many other networks to maintain Millennial appeal by repurposing programming that was popular when Millennials were teens or even younger. Last year, MTV renamed *Teen Mom* “*Teen Mom OG*,” to remind audiences of the cast’s status as the “original gangsters,” of the genre (despite premiering a mere six years earlier), and this August the network aired “That Was Then, This Is Now,” a 10-year reunion special for *The Hills*. Disney and Netflix have respectively rebooted popular 1990s series *Boy Meets World* and *Full House*, igniting viewer nostalgia for the original characters while also introducing a new generation of teen characters.

This strategy of balancing generational audiences via nostalgia presents itself in an intriguingly different form on the CW. The network, having only recently celebrated its 10th anniversary, began as the most teen of networks, filled by the orphaned programming of the WB and UPN. However, the network has shifted rapidly in the last several years to be the home of distinctive twentysomethings and a plethora of superheroes. Still, a teen nostalgia element is apparent in the casting for CW shows. The network appears loyal to a stable of actors that have appeared on their previous programming or other teen shows, actors which often inspire dedicated loyalty in their fanbases that will follow them from project to project. For example, the

leads of the CW's longest-running show, *Supernatural*, Jared Paladecki and Jensen Ackles, got their start on WB/CW programs *Gilmore Girls* and *Smallville* respectively. The female leads on *The Originals*, Phoebe Tonkin and Leah Pipes, had both previously starred in other short-lived CW projects before landing a show that stuck, indicating their confidence in the actresses connecting with audiences over time. The examples of the phenomenon are incredibly numerous, especially if you expand to considering non-starring guest arcs roles and actors with strong teen-flavored resumes outside of the WB/UPN and CW family.

As I have briefly outlined, youth-oriented networks utilize nostalgia to maintain their carefully cultivated Millennial audiences while still projecting a youthful brand. I would like to close by suggesting that social media use is key to this strategy. Both Freeform and the CW have been innovators in digital marketing for their networks using social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. In fact, I first noticed Freeform's movie block strategy after perusing their Instagram feed. Social media also allows the networks to link their brands more closely to the brands of their stars, via practices like tagging and account takeovers. These practices will only become more imperative over time as Millennial audiences continue to age.