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Abstract

In 2007, the CW network debuted an hour long teen drama entitled *Gossip Girl*. The program was based on the already popular novels of the same title by Cecily von Ziegesar (The CW, 2008). While this teen drama resembles the many teen dramas before it, there is a distinctive production element which makes this program stand out, the costuming. The styling of the program is the creation of Eric Damam, who ironically also was the stylist for the fashion forward program "Sex in the City" (Wharmby, 2008). In any given episode designer names such as Christian Louboutin, Tory Burch, or Chanel can be heard and seen on the various characters. When not in top designer names, the character's costuming still present an unseen level of glamour and innovation. With so much focus placed on the wardrobe of the characters, it must be questioned what this translates to for the audience. This research will set out to identify whether the costuming of the *Gossip Girl* characters affects the audience's personal fashion choice. In order to discover the answer to this question, three steps are taken. Firstly, a brief literature review will explore the scholarly work published in regards to television show's affects on viewer behaviour, specifically on fashion choices. Secondly, a small content analysis will attempt to establish how important costuming is to the production of *Gossip Girl*. Thirdly, an audience study will give insight into how this importance of costuming affects viewers' personal fashion choices.

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Introduction

In 2007, the CW network debuted an hour long teen drama entitled *Gossip Girl*. The program was based on the already popular novels of the same title by Cecily von Ziegesar (The CW, 2008). While this teen drama resembles the many teen dramas before it, there is a distinctive production element which makes this program stand out, the costuming. The styling of the program is the creation of Eric Damam, who ironically also was the stylist for the fashion forward program "Sex in the City" (Wharmby, 2008). In any given episode designer names such as Christian Louboutin, Tory Burch, or Chanel can be heard and seen on the various characters. When not in top designer names, the character's costuming still present an unseen level of glamour and innovation. With so much focus placed on the wardrobe of the characters, it must be questioned what this translates to for the audience. This research will set out to identify whether the costuming of the *Gossip Girl* characters affects the audience's personal fashion choice. In order to discover the answer to this question, three steps are taken. Firstly, a brief literature review will explore the scholarly work published in regards to television show's affects on viewer behaviour, specifically on fashion choices. Secondly, a small content analysis will attempt to establish how important costuming is to the production of *Gossip Girl*. Thirdly, an audience study will give insight into how this importance of costuming affects viewers' personal fashion choices.

Literature Review

I will be exploring literature that discusses three issues. Firstly, a rather broad area of research will be covered on the topic of television characters' influence on viewers' lives in general. Secondly, a more narrow area of research will be discussed regarding television characters' influence on the viewers' personal appearance. Thirdly, literature regarding the nature and influence of the specific television series *Gossip Girl* will be discussed.

TV Characters Influence Viewers' Lives

Various sources have confirmed that television characters have an effect and direct influence on the lives of viewers. These effects occur because media figures may be perceived as viewers' fictive peers, and for a majority of young viewers these fictive peers are perceived even more positively than actual peers. These media figures act as ideal role models for these viewers (Willson, 1998: 425). This notion of media characters becoming role models leads to audience "connectedness". Audience "connectedness" occurs when a viewer feels that they have an intense relationship with a character

from a television program which extends the viewing experience into their personal and social lives. This connection leads viewers to express themselves by adoring, imitating and modeling their lives after the characters in the program (Russell and Puto, 1999: 397).

TV Characters Influence Viewers' Appearance - The "Friends" Case

Viewers who imitate and model their lives after a character commonly do so through their personal appearance. For example, a study done to investigate the influence of the media on television viewers' choice of clothing discovered that 24% of the participants perceived the media as the most influential factor in their choice of clothing (Willson,1998: 433). In order to be a part of their fictive peers, viewers imitate television characters' appearance through clothing choice, hairstyle and colour (Willson, 1998: 435). By imitating the styles of their favourite television character, viewers attempt to connect their social identity with their favourite character (Russell and Puto, 1999: 400). A study of internet chat rooms discovered that specialized boards exists where the sole focus of the participants is to discuss shopping tips on where to find the exact clothing their favourite television character sports on the program. The study also found that those who claimed to be devoted viewers of a program were the most interested in imitating the clothing of a character. The contributors of these chat rooms were so interested in the character's clothing that they were able to discuss the exact outfits of a character in a certain episode (Russell and Puto, 1999: 403).

The most predominant example of television characters influencing viewers' appearance occurs with the characters of NBC's prime time show *Friends*. This can be demonstrated by the comments fans of the show leave on these specialized internet chat rooms. One contributor wrote:

> Rachel and Monica have the coolest clothes. I desperately want to raid their wardrobes. I have the sweater Monica was wearing on the episode where she and Phoebe were waxing their legs; however, she was wearing a T-shirt in another episode (I think the one with her doll house?) that I want but have no idea where to get. (Russell and Puto, 1999: 403)

Another viewer of *Friends* posted a letter to actress Jennifer Aniston, whom plays Rachel on the show, and exclaimed that not only does she copy Rachel's hair and clothing styles, she emulates the character in her real life. (Russell and Puto, 1999: 399).

"Gossip Girl"

Gossip Girl novels were first published in 2002. They follow various aspects of the lives of elite teens in Manhattan, including their shopping habits. The plots focus on the female characters' love of designer name clothing, which has had many comparing the series to the popular television show "Sex in the City" (Patte, 2006: 155). The popular books have since been turned into a television series. The TV series features the same popular, well liked characters as the novels, which is leading many of the viewers to believe that if they imitate the characters of *Gossip Girl* they too will have a glamorous life (Irving, 2008: 10).

Since the influence of television is significant in affecting the desire for certain clothing (Lachance, Beaudoin and Robitaille, 2003: 48) and the television series *Gossip Girl* focuses on a couture quality of clothing (Irving, 2003:10), it should then be studied if the viewers of *Gossip Girl* are influenced by what the characters are wearing. It has been proven that people are influenced by television characters, and more particularly in their clothing choices, explored with the case study of

Friends, but to what extent would a show that is so focused on high-end fashion influence its viewers?

Content Analysis

The final goal of this research is to discover whether or not the characters' wardrobes on the WB's program *Gossip Girl* have an effect on the fashion choices of their viewers. However, in order to discover the answer to this question, it must first be established that wardrobe is an important production element to this program. A small content analysis would be the best way of discovering an answer to this question. While textual analysis is primarily used to look at deeper meaning, content analysis is used to examine obvious content (Bryman and Teevan, 2008: 58). Therefore, since this research is not about the meaning of the text presented, but rather the production element of wardrobe, content analysis is the best method to discover if wardrobe is a predominant aspect of *Gossip Girl*.

Methodology of Content Analysis

As of today the CW's *Gossip Girl* is in its second season, with a total of 23 episodes having aired. The show focuses on a group of privileged high school students living in the Upper East Side of New York City. The two main characters are Blair, a petite brunette who is a manipulative overachiever, and her best friend Serena, a tall blonde who is a reformed party girl. The rest of the supporting cast includes Nate, a young man lost in his wealth, Chuck, a sexually perverted heir, Dan, a middle class outsider, and Vanessa, Dan's old friend who is also seen as an outsider. Various storylines also feature many of the main characters' family members. The episode coded and examined is entitled "School Lie", episode 12 from season one. In this episode the main characters and supporting cast have an illegal party at their private school, which results in a student being critically injured. This episode features the cast in varying settings both inside and outside of school. This allows for an analysis of various outfits, as compared to some episodes which may just feature the cast in a school setting, in which only uniforms would be worn (Wharmby, 2008).

In order to discover if wardrobe is a predominant factor in *Gossip Girl* the content analysis focuses on four themes in correlation to the characters. Firstly, it will be examined how many times each main character has a wardrobe change per episode. This will be examined because if the number appeared high, then it could be established that wardrobe is a predominant production element of the show. Secondly, it will be examined how many times fashion or clothing is mentioned per episode. This will be examined to determine if verbal, along with visual cues of the importance of fashion occur. Thirdly, it will be examined how many times a character wears a signature pieces. After viewing many episodes it becomes apparent that certain characters have a distinctive piece of clothing that is repeatedly worn. These signature pieces are not a mere observation of the viewer, but a creation of the costume designer, and have become a part of the character's wardrobes purposefully (Wharmby, 2008). The characters and their subsequent signature pieces that will be included are Blair and her headbands, Chuck and his scarves, Vanessa and her large earrings and Serena and her boots. These signature pieces show that there is a large amount of production put into the characters' wardrobe. Fourthly, it will be examined how many times a character is wearing a school uniform that is altered or stylized. This again will show if production focuses heavily on wardrobe, because realistically school uniforms are to be worn as directed, however, if fashion is a focus of production this rule will be bent.

The coding sheet used to find these results is both reliable and valid. If this study was to be repeated, the exact results would be produced. However, if this study were repeated on another episode, the results may vary but not with completely contradictory results seeing as this episode was

not strategically picked to produce certain results. Also, the coding sheet is valid. Validity occurs when the measurement of a concept really does measure that concept (Bryman and Teevan, 2008: 58). This analysis was attempting to measure if wardrobe is an important aspect of the production of *Gossip Girl*. By measuring the amount of costume changes, mentions of fashion, signature pieces and uniform alteration, it can be gathered that, yes, wardrobe is important to the production of *Gossip Girl*. One critique of this however, would be how can it be determined that wardrobe matters to *Gossip Girl* production more than any other hour-long teen drama. This critique could call for further content analyses in order to compare with the following results.

Findings & Analysis of Content Analysis

The results of this content analysis were very interesting. In regards to how many costume changes occurred per episode based on each character, Serena, Nate, Chuck and Vanessa all had four different outfits during the 47 minute program, which took place within 24 hours. Dan had the least costume changes with three, while Blair had the most with six. Therefore, the audience saw Blair in a different outfit approximately every eight minutes. These findings establish that costuming is an important aspect of production, but more importantly it shows that Blair's costuming is most important as she changed more often, while not appearing on the show more that the other main characters. In regards to how many times fashion is mentioned in the dialogue, it occurred twice with Chuck referring to high fashion designers. This demonstrates that fashion is not overwhelming in the actual dialogue; however it is important to note that most programs do not even mention factual designer names. In regards to the number of times a character wore their signature piece, Serena, Blair, Chuck, and Vanessa all wore their signature piece four times. If the question regarding the amount of costume changes is cross examined with the amount of times the character wore their signature piece, it can be shown how predominant this aspect of the wardrobe is. For example, every time Serena, Chuck and Vanessa had a costume change their signature piece was included. While at times Blair did not wear a headband, it was still present four times out of her six costume changes, making the headband still a predominant feature of her wardrobe. In regards to the number of times a character appeared with an altered or stylized uniform, Blair appeared three times, Serena appeared twice, and Chuck once. When Dan and Nate were featured in uniform it was not altered, and Vanessa could not be included in this analysis because she does not attend school (Appendix A).

In order to answer the final research question of whether or not *Gossip Girl* viewers are affected by the wardrobe of *Gossip Girl* the following research will focus on audience studies because it is only the viewers who will be able to answer this question. However, this content analysis has proven that fashion is a large component of the production of *Gossip Girl*. While this content analysis did not answer the research question, it established the grounds for a further audience study that will lead to an answer.

Audience Study

The purpose of this research is to determine how the costuming of the *Gossip Girl* characters affects the audience's personal fashion choice. Since the content analysis previously completed determined that fashion was a key production element of the program, it must now be determined what that means in correlation with the audience. Only audience members of this program posses the information that will lead to a sound conclusion to this question. The best method to obtain this information would be in-depth interviewing since, in comparison to other research methods, it allows for a deeper understanding of the subject's thoughts (Savage, 2008).

Methodology

Initially, two interviews were conducted in an attempt to answer this research question. These people were chosen specifically due to the fact the questions asked required a devout, not casual,

viewer of the series. It was determined if they were a devout viewer based on whether they had seen all *Gossip Girl* episodes, including Season 1. This was vital to the research because certain costuming choices have changed throughout the series, while other aspects of costuming have been continually repeated. The first interviewee, who will be referred to as Molly in this research, was discovered when she replied to an online advertisement seeking out devout *Gossip Girl* viewers to take part in research. The second interviewee, who will be referred to as Ann in this research, was discovered when others stated that she was a devout viewer, then she was directly contacted and asked to be interviewed. The interviews, which took approximately 45 minutes, went smoothly.

Following these interviews, two more interviews were conducted. The third interviewee, who will be referred to as Michelle, also replied to an online advertisement seeking out *Gossip Girl* viewers. The fourth interview was actually an idea that arose from the two initial interviews. Both interviewees mentioned the style of the male characters, specifically the character of Chuck. In order to make sure that the findings of this research are applicable to all viewers of *Gossip Girl*, and not just female viewers of *Gossip Girl*, I felt that a male viewer should be included. While there appeared to not be many male viewers of show, more specifically a male who had seen all episodes, one was located. He will be referred to as Matt.

All four interviews were conducted based on a predetermined interview schedule seen in Appendix A. While an interview schedule was followed the interviews were semi-structured. This means that while a list of questions was prepared, the interviews strayed from the guide with questions being added or deleted as I saw fit (Bryman and Teevan, 2008:186). This method was important to apply to these interviews, especially with the interview of Matt. In order to retrieve vital information from him, many questions were eliminated because they were irrelevant and others were added as needed.

Findings & Analysis

Based on these four interviews, it can be gathered that without a doubt the costuming of *Gossip Girl* affects the viewers fashion choices. However, the interviews produced information that, especially in correlation to each other, presents some interesting reasons as to why this is so. Three major findings were clearly identified on the viewer's relation to the costuming of the programs. Firstly, it appears that the viewers were affected based on individual characters, not the overall stylization of the show. Secondly, when viewers attempt to emulate a character's costuming, they search for the exact product or buy similar items at lower priced retailers. Thirdly, although certain retailers benefit from the viewers' attempting to copy the costuming of the program, the success of retailers ends there and cannot be carried on into endorsement deals.

Based on the interviews, it appears that viewers' fashion choices are affected based on individual characters on the program, not the overall show. For example, Molly and Ann stated that they identified with one of the main female leads in the program; Molly identifying with the character of Serena, while Ann identifying with the character of Blair. When asked which particular aspects of the costumes they find themselves imitating the most, they both replied with the signature fashion piece of the character they identified with. For example, the content analysis discovered that Serena's signature fashion accessory are boots, which is what Molly identified as the piece she attempts to emulate most often. The content analysis also determined that Blair's signature fashion accessory were headbands, which is what Ann identified as the piece she most commonly imitates. Michelle's interview produced similar results, stating that she attempts to emulate the style of the character Jenny, especially concerning the different coats she wears. Jenny is also the character she feels that she identifies with the most, especially based on her "hipster" persona. While the variety of coats that the character Jenny wears was not included in the content analysis, the costume designer does

identify colourful coats as an important part of Jenny's wardrobe (Wharmby, 2008). However, Michelle does not find the overall style of all the characters appealing, even going as far to state how she doesn't like Serena's costuming because it is "messy, but not in a good way". The only interview in which the respondent stated that they did not attempt to copy the style of one of the characters was Matt. However, while he did not say he emulates a character purposely, he does admit that people have compared his style to the character of Dan. Also, Matt admits that he does take note of the character's Chuck and Nate's style, stating that if he had a great deal of money he would dress more like Chuck, and he owns a "nautical" sweater which he associates with the style of Nate.

Based on these interviews, it could be gathered that the costume designer for the program gave each character an individual sense of style, which is successful in giving each audience member a character to identify with. However, when comparing the female's interviews with the male interview, it can be gathered that the females identify one *Gossip Girl* character to emulate, while the male does not admit to emulate any style, although recognizes the costuming and can apply it to his personal wardrobe. Therefore, it can be said that most *Gossip Girl* viewers' fashion choices are most affected by their personal affiliation with individual characters, not the overall stylization of the series. This finding is consistent with the literature written concerning TV viewers' emulation of television characters. Just as *Friends* fans wanted the Rachel haircut, sweater and personality (Russell and Puto, 1999: 399), *Gossip Girl* fans want the Blair headband, heels and attitude.

Since *Gossip Girl* viewers do attempt to emulate the characters' costuming, it must be determined how they go about this. Based on this audience research, *Gossip Girl* viewers take close notes of the designer's mention or clothing articles shown in the program, and then seek out the pieces online and in stores. Anna explains how she saw a pair of heels that Blair had worn on the show and sought out the designer name and places they could be purchased on the internet. Now those heels are on the top of her Christmas list. Molly also explains how she is searching for the same shrunken leather jacket Serena wore during a recent episode. Michelle is currently searching for a headband with netting that Blair wore in an Audrey Hepburn inspired scene. While Matt did not identify a specific piece of clothing of the characters that he desires, he did mentioned that if he had a disposable income he would dress more like the character of Chuck. While some aspects of the costuming are obtainable to the viewers, it must also be noted that a lot of what is featured on *Gossip Girl* is extremely high-end fashion or even at times specially made by designers for the program. This brings up the question then, how are these looks copied when they are unobtainable by the average viewers? *Gossip Girl* viewers actually attempt to imitate these high-end looks by shopping for similar styles at prices they can afford. When asked if she sought out the designers featured on *Gossip Girl,* Molly responded, "Like Louboutins, I know the brand, I know the signature red soles. But I don't buy it…too friggin expensive. I just look for the similar look, but I can't look for the brand name". Ann describes a similar situation in which she searched for a headband Blair had worn only to discover it was nearly $900, so she "bought a black head band with a bow just like it". Michelle explains how she wants to visit the high-end store Bendels because it is always mentioned on the show. Although she recognizes how expensive the store is, she explains how she will attempt to buy "something small" so she can say she has something the *Gossip Girl* characters do. What is most interesting about these *Gossip Girl* viewers seeking out similar looks at affordable prices is that all interviewees mentioned that they do so in the same store, chain retailer H&M. According to all the interviews, H&M has clothing and accessories, that if put together in the right manner, can easily emulate the style of *Gossip Girl* characters. Matt and Michelle also identify Urban Outfitters as a retailer where clothing that resembles the school uniforms of the characters can be found. Overall, *Gossip Girl* viewers emulate the characters' clothing by seeking out the exact pieces online or in store, however, when the pieces are beyond their means they turn to retailers such as H&M and Urban Outfitters for the imitation.

Gossip Girl fans attempting to emulate the style of the program's characters can obviously lead to revenue for retailers that carry clothing similar to the costuming but at affordable pricing. While retailers can benefit from fans devotion to *Gossip Girl* characters, can this success translate into endorsement deals for the stars of the programs? According to this research, probably not. While it would make sense that these actors would be able to sell products, because, according to Matt, "If Blair can sell 6 million headbands, why can't she sell shoes?", for reasons unbeknownst to them, the interviewers all stated they would not be inclined to purchase a product if it was endorsed by an actor on *Gossip Girl*. Although, as mentioned in the interviews, two of the young stars have signed deals with major athletic wear companies, based on this research, these ads will not be successful. It can be gathered then, that the while *Gossip Girl* viewers' fashion choices are affected by the show, they are only affected by the character's clothing and not the actor's personal style. Therefore, since the imitation by fans does not go past the show, the actors on the program becoming endorsers would fail.

Conclusion

This research was essentially a two step process with a small initial content analysis leading to specific questions for in-depth interviews. What was discovered was that yes, costuming is an essential part of the programming and has a profound effect on *Gossip Girl* viewers' fashion choices. The ways in which costuming had an effect on the viewers was based on individual characters on the program, which they felt specifically drawn to. Furthermore, while these viewers are seeking out particular *Gossip Girl* inspired items in retailers, they would not be drawn in by the actors who play these characters' endorsing a retailer. This research offers very interesting insight into how audience members relate to television characters and how that relationship affects their personal fashion choices. Within the interviews conducted, similar questions and answers can be identified in all four interviews. These similarities could now be used to create a survey on this subject, because guidance that did not previously exist in formulating one is now available. This next step would allow for a greater number of audience members to be reached, resulting in more concrete evidence. Furthermore, it should be noted that many online communities regarding the fashion on *Gossip Girl* are slowly emerging. If this trend continues, this area would also be a good research area that would shed more light on this topic.

Appendices

Appendix A
Coding Sheet
Gossip Girl & Fashion

Character	Number of Costume Changes Per Episode
Serena	I I I
Blair	I I I I I I I
Chuck	I I I I
Nate	I I I I I
Dan	I I I
Vanessa	I I I I

Character	Number of Times Fashion or Clothing is Mentioned Per Episode
Serena	
Blair	
Chuck	II
Nate	
Dan	

Character	Number of Times a Character Wears Their Distinctive Accessory
Serena (Boots)	I I I I
Blair (Headbands)	I I I I
Chuck (Scraf)	I I I I

Character	Number of Times a Character Wears Accessorizes/Alters Their School Uniform
Serena	I I
Blair	I I I
Chuck	I
Nate	
Dan	

Appendix B

Interview Schedule

1) What initially drew you to begin watching Gossip Girl?

2) Is there a certain character that you are particularly drawn to?

3) Why do you feel yourself drawn to this character?

4) How do you feel about that character's style on the program?

5) How important do you feel the costuming in Gossip Girl is?

6) Do you find yourself copying any of the costumes of the Gossip Girl characters?

7) Can you describe examples of clothing or accessories you have bought because it resembles something this character has worn?

8) Do you find that other viewers attempt to copy the style of Gossip Girl characters?

9) Which viewers would you say are most influenced by the costuming of Gossip Girl?

10) Which characters do you find are most emulate?

11) Can you identify specific stores where you can find clothing that is similar to the Gossip Girl characters?

12) When Gossip Girl mentions specific designer have you sought out these designers?

13) Do you feel that the Gossip Girl characters have started trends since the show had begun?

14) How much do you pay attention to what the Gossip Girl actors wear outside of the show?

15) How inclined to purchase would you be if the actors from Gossip Girl endorsed certain fashion labels outside of their character?

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