Deconstructing Ally: Explaining Viewers’ Interpretations of Popular Television

Jonathan Cohen
Department of Communication
University of Haifa

Two hundred fifty one Israeli students, viewers of the series Ally McBeal, were asked to choose among preformulated interpretations of the program. Discriminant analysis was used to explore why some viewers endorsed an interpretation of the program as favorable to women, others as sexist, and others preferred a humorous interpretation. Results show that relationship status, feminist attitudes, identification with the lead character and perceptions of her, as well as liking of the program, were important determinants of the interpretation of the program adopted by viewers. The results are discussed in terms of contributions to reception theory and media psychology in general.

In countering the view of television audiences as passive receivers, reception theory has demonstrated that the myriad different ways in which viewers articulate their interpretations of programs are related to viewers’ lives and their background, but not in any simple or linear way. For example, resemblance between viewers’ lives and those portrayed on the screen sometimes breeds critical appraisals (Press, 1989). At other times, relevance of the text to viewers’ lives is associated with positive interpretations (Cooper, 1999a). Sometimes, viewers respond to a televised conflict by choosing sides, and at others, they dissociate themselves from the conflict (Lewis, 1991).

These seemingly conflicting results demonstrate how little we know about the anatomy of the interpretation process (Livingstone, 1998). How do viewers arrive at their interpretations? Is interpretation a cognitive process or one based primarily on emotional responses to television content? Is viewer interpretation dependent on general attitudes or specific responses to textual cues? This study attempts to go beyond identifying relevant sociological variables that explain differences in responses to television content by providing insights into how
individual viewers arrive at their interpretations. A theoretical model to explain
the process through which television texts are understood is developed, in which
audience responses to texts are explained by social and psychological variation
among viewers, and their responses to textual cues. To test this model, viewers
of the program Ally McBeal were asked to choose one of three general statements
about the program that they agreed with most. Statistical analysis was then used
to identify which factors were helpful in explaining different interpretative
approaches.

Popular and controversial, Ally McBeal is a useful text for exploring
differences in reception, because it is sufficiently complex and contradictory in
its message as to provoke meaningful differences in interpretations, but its focus
on gender issues is clear. Thus, viewers are likely to agree that the program is
about gender issues, but disagree about the attitude the program portrays toward
women and their social roles. This makes it possible to anticipate a small number
of interpretations that are clearly distinct from each other while still likely to
resonate with viewers of the program, and analyze the differences between
viewers who prefer different interpretations. Although audience readings of
popular television are seldom identical to textual analyses of these programs, the
first step in anticipating audience interpretations is a review of critical analyses
of the program.

ANALYZING ALLY MCBEAL

Ally McBeal is a television program that describes the professional and personal
life of a single, young, female attorney. Although the program revolves around
the interactions, relationships, and personal development of Ally, her friends, and
co-workers, each episode highlights legal cases involving sexual harassment or
other topics of sexual politics. The program’s narrative intermingles Ally’s
personal life, dominated by her eternal quest for love, romance, and sex, with
legal cases handled by her law firm and the complicated personal relationships
between the various characters.

Ally McBeal as Patriarchal

Many reviews of the program see it as innovative, but as ultimately strengthening
traditional values regarding gender politics (Shugart, Egley, Waggoner, &
O’Brien Hallstien, 2001). These reviews argue that the program’s portrayal of
women conforms to patriarchal ideology by suggesting that regardless of how
intelligent and successful the women on the program appear, they are incomplete,
unhappy, and emotionally unstable without a male partner. Furthermore, according to this interpretation, the premise of the program is that because women’s natural role is at home, women who defy this natural order are doomed to a life of personal chaos and dissatisfaction (Corcos, 1998; Leafe, 1998).

To make matters worse, although the program’s star is a female professional and the action is set in her office—rather than the usual domestic setting (Stark, 1997)—Ally, like the program’s other female stars, conforms to social conventions of female beauty. Female cast members are all thin, attractive, and fashionable, and are defined through their attitudes toward men and sexuality (e.g., “Sub-Zero” Nelle, Elaine “the Slut”). Thus, although sometimes apparently challenging patriarchy and the male gaze, the program ultimately serves to ratify Hollywood’s traditional and sexist conventions.

Characteristic of critical reviews is Tom Carson’s (The Village Voice, Oct. 14, 1997): “Ally McBeal’s contempt for women is about as loathsome as TV gets; the trick is that its tone is all enlightened, sympathetic geniality” (p. 65). Ruth Shalit in The New Republic (April 6, 1998) saw Ally McBeal as a “demographically brilliant iteration of Jessica Rabbit” (p. 32). She continued to claim, “The zeitgeist impresarios who produce these demoralizing shows have made male power and female powerlessness seem harmless, cuddly, sexy, safe, and sellable. They have merely raised conservatism’s hem” (p. 32). Vavrus (2000) took issue with the series for representing feminism and feminists in a way that discredit them, arguing that the program exhibits disdain for the feminist movement.

**Ally McBeal as Empowering**

But *Ally McBeal* can also be seen as offering a new and positive model for young women. For example, Marek (1999) argued that “despite the inevitable ups and downs, she [Ally] is basically a happy person who is content with her life. She has many strong friendships and is well liked by her associates” (p. 83). True, Ally is looking desperately for romance and a male partner, worries about her looks and her hair, sometimes feels insecure, and has an overactive imagination and emotional life; but this does not necessarily make her an icon of patriarchy. She is obsessive in her search for a partner but rejects anyone who will not accept her for what she is. Despite her quirky imagination and antics, she has a successful career, and the youthful good looks she works so hard to maintain—as well as her infamous miniskirts—are used not to objectify her but to enhance her personal power. According to this view, Ally McBeal represents a new type of woman for whom second wave feminism has provided choices, and who when faced with
these choices, is trying to figure out her own life. Rather than downplaying her femininity, Ally McBeal can be seen as flaunting it and using the power of her sexuality (“Girrrl power”) to achieve her personal goals. Like Madonna, the Spice Girls (Lemish, 2000), and Alanis Morissette (Shugart et. al., 2001), Ally McBeal wants to be strong and successful and she wants to do it her way.

Nochimson (2000) saw the series at its best (during its first season) as a challenge to conventional narrative structure and therefore claimed that expecting Ally’s character to be a feminist role model is to miss the point. She highlighted Ally’s relationship with her assistant Elaine as defining the program and therefore saw the feminism of the program as “located not in Ally, but between characters, in new relational paradigms” (p. 28). The popularity of Ally McBeal among young educated female viewers suggests that they have a more positive view of Ally McBeal than do some of its harsher critics. The identification of female viewers with Ally McBeal also indicates that the image of femininity that Ally represents appeals to many young women. Given what Radway (1983) has taught us about the gaps between cultural criticism and audience reactions to popular culture, it would be foolish not to suspect that Ally McBeal’s meaning and cultural impact is different for viewers than it is for reviewers. As Cooper (1999b) suggested, “Regardless of our views of Ally McBeal as a feminist text … the television series and its characters resonate with many women precisely because they find in Ally McBeal, narratives and female characters actively challenging patriarchal conventions rarely available in the media” (p. 25). Thus, Ally McBeal seems to offer the potential for a reading that is liberating for women, through identification with Ally as a strong and independent woman, living out the life she designed through her own choices.

**Ally McBeal as Benign Comedy**

All popular television is contradictory in its ideological positions (Dow, 1996), and Ally McBeal is no different. Like earlier programs featuring female stars (e.g., Murphy Brown, Cagney & Lacey), Ally McBeal is interesting precisely because it plays on the ideological and social tensions of its time. Nor does the program fit a feminist, postfeminist, or patriarchic mold. Dow (1996) argued that most postfeminist television (television of the 1980s and 1990s) diverts attention from the problems faced by women in the workplace. In this sense, Ally McBeal should not be considered a part of this genre, but like other postfeminist programs it does foreground the romantic or family arena and promotes the “implicit conflict between careerism and personal health and happiness, a powerful postfeminist theme” (Dow, 1996, p. 98). On the one hand, it is a
program centered on a potentially favorable female star and set in a work environment, but on the other hand, it is personal more than it is political. This ideological ambiguity provides the basis for a third interpretation of the program.

Oullette (2000) concluded her detailed analysis of the program by explaining how Ally McBeal maintains its ambiguity:

Instead of returning women to the home or erasing second wave feminism from the screen, Ally McBeal engages with feminist and antifeminist discourse, and layers them with a postfeminist compromise that is both troubling and unpredictable. Ally McBeal’s exaggerated and fantastic scenarios may render the program more ambiguous than most, but its shifting construction of female sexuality, sexual politics and sexual correctness makes it difficult to see how power intersects in the private and professional lives of young postfeminist women. (p. 25)

In an article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Sept. 4, 1998), Leslie Heywood wrote that her students are aware of the feminist criticisms of *Ally McBeal* but still love the program and strongly identify with Ally. They believe the program’s position echoes the ambivalence society holds toward ideals of gender equality. According to Heywood, *Ally McBeal’s* success is a result of its mixture of feminist and antifeminist ideas. Thus, it is possible to see the program as a humorous reflection of the problems faced by women in the 1990s, and less as an attempt to offer ways to solve such problems. In sum, an analysis of the reviews offers three main interpretative strategies of *Ally McBeal*: As a program sending a negative message for women, as a program that has the potential for empowering women, and as a program that focuses on the presentation of social situations and the humor of the program.

**AUDIENCE INTERPRETATION**

The most commonly used theoretical model for conceptualizing audience interpretations of television texts is the ideological model developed by the Birmingham School (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980). Conceptualizing the communication process as made up of two crucial moments—that of the encoding of messages by their producers, and that of decoding by audiences—this model defines three types of audience interpretations (readings) of texts: Dominant readings that accept the interpretations of the text as intended by its creators and in accordance to mainstream social values; resistant readings that reject the ideological assumptions that underlie the text and oppose its intended message; and negotiated readings that accept the ideological premises of the text
but negotiate somewhat different meanings from the dominant reading, based on the viewers’ personal identity and experiences. This model reflects the assumption that popular culture is bound to and transmits mainstream, hegemonic values, and that therefore accepting a dominant reading of a text involves both acceptance of the creators’ meaning and of dominant values.

Using this model, studies of television news have found marked differences in how viewers interpret news items, depending on their class affiliation (Morley, 1980). Liebes and Katz (1990) have built on this model to explain how different ethnic groups approached *Dallas* seriously or playfully, either as reflecting reality or as a constructed text. Whether for researching news or soaps (see also Ang, 1985; Lewis, 1991; Press, 1989), reception models are easier to apply when the ideological position of the text is uncontested and unambiguous. However, given the ideological ambiguity of *Ally McBeal*, it is difficult to articulate what should be considered a dominant or resistant position, because these positions are defined with respect to the program’s ideological position and its relationship with social values that remain unclear. Although the program clearly mocks and subverts patriarchal societal values, many argue that it ultimately serves them (e.g., Carson, 1997; Shalit, 1998; Shugart et al., 2001; Varvus, 2000). Given this, should the reading of the program as representing women as weak and needy, and careers and family life as contradictory, be considered the dominant reading, or is the dominant reading one that presents women as strong and deserving of the opportunity to balance careers and family in spite of the difficulties? Because this study focuses on viewers and how they construct particular meanings, resolving the “true” meaning of the program and assigning dominant/resistant labels to a particular reading is less important than finding out what distinguishes viewers who articulate or endorse different readings. What this study attempted, then, is to articulate specific readings that resonate with viewers rather than with considered theoretical positions.

Interpretations of narrative TV programs that resonate with viewers are likely related to the logic of how narratives work. Fiske (1989) argued that viewers come to adopt a dominant reading through identification with the main characters, whereas a resistant reading requires that the viewer distance him or herself psychologically from the heroes of the program in order to ideologically question the realism of the program and resist suspension of disbelief. Thus, whereas in studying news programs ideological agreement is the key to assigning the dominant/resistant labels in narrative programs, using differences in perceptions of characters would seem a more useful approach. In this study, therefore, instead of assuming that *Ally McBeal* reflects society’s values, and therefore that an interpretation of the program as sexist should be considered
“dominant,” it is assumed that viewers’ reactions to the program are based on their reactions to its lead character. Although it may be argued that both sets of assumptions (that the program reflects society’s values or that liking the program means liking Ally McBeal) are similarly problematic, the latter seems more suited to narrative programs, and especially one that is purposely ideologically ambivalent. Thus, this study borrows the notion of resistance, but uses it within a rather different framework than Hall originally discussed it.

Audience interpretations of texts are individual and unique, often reflecting each individual’s social and cultural position and personal identity. To capture the richness of the connections between personal identity and media reception, most studies of reception include in-depth or focus-group interviews, uncovering the richness and diversity of audience interpretations. But these studies tell us little about why certain people arrive at one interpretation, whereas others come to a different understanding, or how the reception process actually works (Livingstone, 1998). In order to facilitate studies that will provide the basis for a more comprehensive statement of the connection between interpretations of popular texts and personal and social constructs, quantitative methodologies are beneficial.

Applying Hall’s (1980) model to the logic of narrative TV (Fiske, 1989), three prototypical audience readings of Ally McBeal can be formulated: The dominant reading would be one that views Ally as strong, independent, and intelligent—a positive character—and views the program as sympathizing with her problems and as providing a positive image of women. An oppositional reading would conform more closely to critics’ readings of the program, viewing Ally as weak and the program as sexist and detrimental to second-wave feminist causes. Finally, a negotiated reading of the program is one in which viewers focus on the dilemmas humorously portrayed in the program, rather than on the characters and the ideological “bottom line” they deliver.

EXPLAINING VARIATION IN VIEWERS’ INTERPRETATIONS

What can explain variations in interpretations of popular media? A comprehensive model of media interpretation should include three spheres of influence: (1) The social and cultural background of audiences; (2) their general social attitudes and psychological dispositions; and (3) their reactions to a specific text. The three spheres of influence each represent a different level of social analysis but interact so that the micro level influences are understood within the context of the more macro spheres. Thus, general attitudes are seen as being formed within the context of one’s social identity (although not fully determined by it), and reactions to a specific text are formed based on one’s
attitudes and how they bear on that text within the context of reception. For each particular text, different concrete variables become relevant to explaining reception. For example, it is likely that when looking at the reception of police dramas, race and class, political attitudes on law and order issues, as well textual cues such as liking the lead characters may be relevant.

This model also explicates the time sequence of the various spheres. Social factors causally precede both general attitudes, which precede textual interpretations. General attitudes and orientations (e.g., political and social beliefs and personality variables) are considered relatively stable and are unlikely to be significantly affected by exposure to any single program, movie, or book. It is unclear, however, whether the formation of attitudes and reactions to a text precede, are part of, or come after the overall interpretations of this same text (i.e., figuring out what the text is “about”). Although the interrelationships between these levels and their contribution to the process of interpretation is yet to be fully understood, it is possible to identify the variables at each level that are relevant to the study of the reception of *Ally McBeal*.

Sociological Factors

In contrast to the uses and gratifications tradition, media reception studies have privileged sociological over psychological explanations for the production of meanings. Numerous studies have shown that viewers’ interpretations are tied to gender (e.g., Cooper, 1999b; Livingstone, 1987; Morley, 1986), class (Press, 1989), race (Lewis, 1991), and ethnicity (Liebes & Katz, 1990). These studies suggest that people interpret texts by bringing their social knowledge, frames of reference, attitudes, social comparisons, ideology, and desires to their interpretations of texts.

When making sense of a TV program or film, viewers attend to those textual elements that are relevant to them (Cohen, 1991; Cooper, 1999a) and understand the text by emphasizing these elements. For example, in Cooper’s (1999a) study of the reception of the film *Thelma and Louise*, she found that with few exceptions, women mentioned the scene depicting an aborted rape attempt as a crucial point in the narrative, but most men did not. Whereas women predominantly adopted a reading that saw the film as being about women’s struggle for freedom and female friendships and identified with the heroines, men thought the film was an exercise in male bashing. Although it is tempting to expect female viewers to be more sensitive to Ally’s faults and to adopt a perspective of *Ally McBeal* as an agent of patriarchy, it is more likely that identification processes will lead female viewers of *Ally McBeal*, more than male
viewers, to align themselves with the main—female—character and adopt a dominant reading of the program as presenting an ostensibly female viewpoint.

Ally McBeal is defined not only by her femaleness but also through her search for romance. Therefore, relationship status should also be a predictor of how viewers interpret *Ally McBeal*. Single viewers should find the focus on relational dilemmas more appealing and relevant to their lives, and therefore are more likely to adopt a dominant reading of the program. Married viewers or those in steady long-term relationships are more likely to find the program’s focus on Ally’s romantic life obsessive, unrealistic, and tedious and thus develop resistant readings. Although the most theoretically meaningful comparisons are between dominant and resistant readings, in all the following hypotheses, negotiators are expected to fall in between these two groups.

Hypothesis 1: Female viewers of Ally McBeal as compared to male viewers are more likely to adopt a dominant reading of the program.

Hypothesis 2: Single viewers of Ally McBeal, as compared to viewers who have romantic partners, are more likely to adopt a dominant reading of the program.

General Attitudes

Beyond broad social categories, the ideological interpretation of a text is also a function of individual differences in people’s attitudes and beliefs. Selective perception research indicates that people tend to avoid information that challenges their existing schemata and hence are more likely to interpret messages in accordance with their prior beliefs (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). Specifically, beliefs about intimacy and relationships are likely to be a crucial influence in viewers’ interpretation of *Ally McBeal.*

Research on adult relationships has found that attitudes toward romantic relationships are strongly related to one’s attachment styles (Shaver & Hazan, 1987). Attachment styles represent relatively stable behavioral and mental models governing attitudes toward close relationships. People with secure attachment styles tend to feel secure in their relationships, have positive beliefs toward relationships and find it easy to get close to and depend on others. Others who have avoidant attachments hold pessimistic beliefs about relationships, tend to distrust others, and avoid intimacy and relationships. Finally, anxiously attached individuals strongly desire and seek romance, intimacy, and relationships, yet distrust their partners and become overly dependent and
“clingy.” To the degree that attitudes and real-life experiences in relationship coincide, it would be reasonable to expect that both attachment styles and relationship status should impact viewers’ understanding of Ally McBeal. More specifically, anxiously and avoidantly attached viewers are more likely to find that Ally’s difficulties in her search for romance and a committed relationship is relevant to them, that her experiences are consistent with their own beliefs about real relationships, and therefore are more likely to adopt a dominant reading. Secure viewers, on the other hand, should find that the themes of romance and relationships are less relevant and realistic.

Hypothesis 3: Ally McBeal viewers who are either anxiously or avoidantly attached, as compared to those who are securely attached, are more likely to adopt a dominant reading of the program.

Ally McBeal is perhaps most widely known for its treatment of gender politics. It is therefore likely that feminist attitudes should impact the interpretation of Ally McBeal. Vidmar and Rokeach’s (1974) study of All in the Family indicates that viewers tend to understand TV programs as supporting their own views. Similarly, it is expected that viewers will interpret Ally McBeal in accord with their personal beliefs regarding gender roles. Because the program is purposely ambiguous in its stance toward feminism, viewers with feminist opinions are likely to interpret Ally’s character as ultimately strong and independent because they will pay more attention to cues supporting such a view. In contrast, viewers who hold more traditional gender role attitudes are likely to focus on Ally’s erratic behavior and her difficulties and therefore perceive Ally as being weak and eccentric, thus paying the price for resisting the “natural order.” Because Ally is the main character in the program, a dominant reading of the program would be more consistent with viewing Ally as strong and independent, whereas a resistant reading is more consistent with seeing Ally as weak and eccentric.

Hypothesis 4: Among Ally McBeal viewers, holding feminist views will be positively associated with adopting a dominant reading of the program.

Reactions to Specific Text

Vidmar and Rokeach (1974), found that identification with Archie Bunker was associated with both enjoyment of All in the Family and agreement with his views. In their study of audience reactions to the same program, Brigham and
Giesbrecht (1976) found that compared with less prejudiced viewers, racially prejudiced viewers reported a stronger identification with the main—prejudiced—character (Archie Bunker), although they did not necessarily enjoy the program more. In studies of *Dallas*, many fans hated J. R. Ewing but loved the program (e.g., Ang, 1985; Liebes & Katz 1990). Brigham and Giesbrecht (1976) also reported a negative association between enjoyment of *All in the Family* and liking Archie among Black viewers, but no association among White viewers.

The relative importance of a program’s star to audiences’ attachment to the program varies from program to program, yet the importance of audiences’ reactions to central characters is well documented (Cohen, 1999). Further evidence of the importance of well-liked stars to the popularity of programs is provided by the use of celebrities in both advertisements and as rating-boosting guests on programs. Previous research has also found identification with characters to be a key factor in mediating the effects of TV (Cohen, 2001).

Another central judgment viewers make regarding TV programs is about its realism. Given *Ally McBeal’s* use of special effects to symbolize fantasy, it would be surprising to find viewers who perceive *Ally McBeal* as realistic in form. However, as Corner (1992) and Ang (1985) pointed out, there is more than one type of realism. Audiences often perceive a program as realistic if it deals with “real” issues even if it does so through fantasy. Audience perceptions of realism repeatedly come up in ethnographic accounts of TV audiences and are considered to be central to viewers’ reactions to, and interpretations of TV programs (Liebes & Katz, 1991; Press, 1989; Radway, 1983). Thus, realism and identification are two important factors when examining the interpretations and reactions of audiences to television narratives, and both are hypothesized to relate positively to adopting dominant readings of *Ally McBeal*.

Fiske (1989) argued that a dominant reading is more pleasurable because it involves a psychological identification with the characters and leads the viewer to care about the characters. It is also less effortful than a resistant reading and should thus lead to greater liking of the program. Therefore, liking of the program is predicted to be associated with a choice of a dominant reading, whereas a choice of resistant reading should be associated with lower levels of identification, perceptions of realism, and liking of the program. Having a positive opinion of *Ally McBeal* as strong and independent rather than as weak and eccentric is, as explained earlier, also expected to be related to dominant readings.

Hypothesis 5: Among *Ally McBeal* viewers, identification with the lead character will be positively associated with adopting dominant readings of the program.
Hypothesis 6: Among Ally McBeal viewers, perceived realism of the program will be positively associated with adopting dominant readings of the program.

Hypothesis 7: Among Ally McBeal viewers, liking the lead character will be positively associated with adopting dominant readings of the program.

Hypothesis 8: Among Ally McBeal viewers, thinking that the lead character is strong and independent will be positively associated with adopting a dominant reading of the program.

**METHOD**

This study was designed to explore audience interpretations of Ally McBeal using quantitative methods and to profile what it is that distinguishes the viewers who adopt each of the three readings from each other. The key to studying reception quantitatively using large samples is to articulate a limited number of possible readings of the text in advance. There is a legitimate doubt about the validity of choices viewers must make among overall interpretations of the program rather than making up their own narratives or responding to more specific statements about the program. This question is magnified when applied to a program like Ally McBeal where each episode varies, and there is great variation between seasons (Nochimson, 2000). But, this method sacrifices such specificity for the ability to make general statements about reception processes. A priori validity of this method is enhanced by basing the readings on careful textual analyses, and a posteriori through viewers’ willingness to adopt these readings and the variation in their choices. Each of the three readings formulated for the present study was chosen by a substantial portion of viewers (see later), and a convergent source of validity is that, as expected, the dominant reading was more popular (35%) than the resistant reading (19%), and the most popular reading was the negotiated reading (46%). A final source of validation for this method of assessing audience interpretations is that the choices were not random. The analysis of the results found many theoretically consistent findings explaining the choices of interpretation and providing post-hoc validation to this methodological approach.

Simply put, if viewers’ choices of readings were not meaningful or simply the result of demand characteristics, we would expect them to exhibit no variance or to be quite random. If viewers responded only to specific episodes rather than the series as a whole, it would be expected that each viewer would respond with the last episode he or she watched in mind, and that the data set as a whole would lack any significant patterns. As will be seen, this is not the case.
Sampling and Procedures

The sample for this study included 251 undergraduates at an Israeli university. At the time of the study, the Israeli commercial channel was broadcasting the initial episodes of the second season of Ally McBeal to a strong rating of over 15%. Although *Ally McBeal* is aimed at U. S. audiences, the program was also popular in Israel among young adults. It is likely that some differences exist between the way Israeli and U. S. audiences understand the program, but given the exposure of Israeli audiences to many U. S. series, these differences should be rather small. As Liebes and Katz (1990) found, various sectors of Israeli society differ in their reception of American drama, and the socioeconomic strata to which university students belong is the most westernized. Thus, although it is interesting to explore the way Israelis differ in their reception of *Ally McBeal* from American audiences, this study controls for such differences by focusing only on Israeli college students.

Students were approached at the beginning or end of classes in cooperation with instructors from a variety of classes and departments at the university and asked to participate. The author and/or an assistant came to a class session on a predetermined date and asked for students’ cooperation on a volunteer basis. No course credit or compensation was offered. Most students completed the survey within 15–20 minutes. After completing the survey, students were debriefed as to the study’s objectives and allowed to ask questions regarding the research. Because only viewers of *Ally McBeal* were eligible to complete the questionnaire, it is impossible to compute an exact completion rate. However, students who claimed to be regular viewers seemed eager to complete the survey and share their thoughts.

Viewers of the program were defined as those individuals who had viewed the program enough so that they could provide an assessment of the program and its characters. Operationally, this definition included viewers who had viewed at least three (hour long) episodes. Students who had not viewed the program at least three times were asked not to complete the questionnaire. It is therefore possible that some respondents viewed the program only three times, but from their responses during completion, it seems that those who chose to complete the survey did so because they were regular viewers of the program.

The sample included 170 females and 81 males. The average age of respondents was 24.5 (SD = 3.56), and just over half of them were in their first year of school. Thirteen and a half percent reported being married or in long-term relationships (several years), another 44.6% were in dating relationships, 33.9% were single, and 9% did not report their relationship status.
Measures

Dependent Measure. The dependent measure in this study was the choice of reading of *Ally McBeal* adopted by each viewer. Three readings were constructed a priori by the author, and respondents were asked to choose the one that came closest to their “personal attitude toward the show and its main character.” The readings were presented in the survey as three short journalistic accounts of the program, but were, in fact, constructed by the author from two sources. The first source was a small pilot study in which 20 students were asked to write a one-page description of their feelings toward the program and its main character by addressing the following questions: What is the main social message of *Ally McBeal*? Does the character represent anything in reality or is the program totally disconnected from reality? Do you feel the character represents anything at all in you or something you can connect to in some way? The second source included reviews of the program. From these sources, three paragraphs were constructed by the author, to resemble a press review of the program, but included phrases and ideas used by the students in the pilot study. The paragraphs were shown to several judges (including students) prior to the study and revised based on their comments. The main goals of developing the paragraphs were to create believable paragraphs that participants would be willing to adopt, to create clear paragraphs that reflect differences in perceptions of the program in relation to its major issue, and to assure that the paragraphs were sufficiently different from each other as to facilitate the desired analysis. The three paragraphs were randomly ordered to test for any order effects, but none were found.

The first paragraph described a dominant reading of the program in which Ally is presented as a strong and independent woman making her own choices and in charge of her life. According to this reading, Ally represents a new generation of women who struggle to lead interesting and challenging lives as individuals not only as women. From this view, Ally is seen as sexual and confident enough to display her emotions and vulnerabilities, and never stops pursuing her dreams of both family and professional success.

The second paragraph described the resistant reading of the program. According to this interpretation, Ally is seen as neurotic and bewildered, a stereotypical female in both looks and character. The message of the program—according to this reading—is that even if a woman is a successful attorney she is still an overly emotional, immature person and cannot be fulfilled unless she has a male partner. The program is described as a male fantasy that objectifies women.

The third reading is a negotiated reading that views the program through a less ideological frame. The program is seen as a comic reflection of the dilemmas
faced by young professional women, and as a portrayal of their impossible state in a male-dominated society.

**Independent Measures.** The degree of liking of the program was measured using four 7-point Likert-type items measuring the degree to which viewers consider the program a favorite, preplan their viewing, are sorry to miss the program, and consider the program amusing. The items were found to form a reliable one-dimensional scale ($\alpha = .898$).

Perceived realism of the program was measured using four 7-point Likert-type items asking respondents to what degree they believed the issues the program deals with were realistic, to what degree the program made them think about themselves and the people around them, to what degree it reminded them of real things, and whether the program and what happens in it come up in conversation. These items were also found to form a reliable scale ($\alpha = .815$).

Identification with Ally McBeal was measured using two 7-point Likert-type items that asked respondents directly to what degree they identified with Ally McBeal and thought there were points of similarity between the character and themselves. The two items were positively correlated ($r = .70$). Because the liking, realism, and identification scales were all measuring positive attitudes toward the program, their construct validity is supported by the size of the correlations among them, which, as expected, were all significant, positive, and substantial (i.e., Pearson correlations sizes were all between .5 and .72).

Although the most common way to measure attitudes toward an object or a person is with Likert scales, semantic differentials are more useful for measuring detailed perceptions because they use descriptive adjectives rather than statements. Based on adjectives mentioned in the pretest questionnaires and in the press reviews, 10 semantic differential scales were constructed to test perceptions of Ally’s character, each with a 7-point scale to measure the following traits: Strong–weak, independent–clingy, smart–stupid, boring–interesting, ordinary–special, winner–looser, good–bad, initiator–noninitiator, attractive–nonattractive, and emotional–rational. These 10 adjective pairs were expected to relate to the two overall traits of strength and quirkiness that were relevant to how the program was interpreted. However, only six items proved useful in constructing two reliable scales. The first was an eccentricity scale that included two traits: ordinary–special and boring–interesting ($r = .638$). The second was a strength scale that included four traits: strong–weak, independent–clingy, smart–stupid, winner–loser ($\alpha = .779$). The four remaining semantic differential items were not used in this study. The strength and eccentricity variables were negatively correlated ($r = -.4654, N = 251, p < .001$).
Attachment style was measured using Shaver and Hazan’s (1987) scale for adult attachment, which consists of three short paragraphs describing attitudes toward relationships associated with the different attachment models: secure, anxious, and avoidant. Respondents were asked to choose the paragraph best describing their own feeling regarding relationships. The distribution of attachment models was similar to that reported in previous studies on Israeli students (e.g., Mikulincer, 1997): 68.6% secure, 21% avoidant, and 10.5% anxious.

A scale of feminist attitudes was constructed, consisting of four Likert-type items to which respondents were asked to report their agreement on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The four items related to the degree the respondent felt the following:

1. Women should be guaranteed equal opportunity in every area of social life;
2. The feminist movement is one of the most important movements of the 20th century;
3. Israeli society must create social circumstances that will enable women to fulfill themselves in every way; and
4. Violence against women is a symptom of the general attitude toward women in Israel.

An additional item was removed because it reduced the reliability, leaving a scale of four items with acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .702$). Because there is sensitivity and awareness of gender politics on Israeli campuses, these items were worded in a rather extreme manner in order to increase variability and reduce social desirability. By using extreme items, it was assumed that the pressure to be socially desirable would be less than if items were worded in a standard way. Thus, it would be easier to disagree with a statement arguing that violence against women is the result of inequality than that women should have equal pay.

**RESULTS**

**Preliminary Analyses**

Demographic Variables. A $\chi^2$ test showed no association between the sex of viewers and the reading of *Ally McBeal* they chose, $\chi^2(2, N = 251) = .309$, ns. However, relationship status was associated with viewers’ choice of readings,
such that single viewers were over-represented among those choosing dominant readings, and viewers with partners were over-represented among those choosing both resistant and negotiated readings, $\chi^2(2, N = 251) = 7.127, p < .05$. Attachment styles were not significantly associated with choice of readings, $\chi^2(2, N = 251) = 3.843, \text{ns}$. Marginally significant differences in feminist attitudes were found between viewers who chose different readings ($p = .084$), with the strongest feminist attitudes among viewers choosing dominant readings, and the weakest among negotiators.

**Discriminant Analysis**

Discriminant analysis is used to examine whether, based on their scores on a set of independent variables, it is possible to discriminate among participants who belong to different groups according to their score on a discrete dependent variable. In this study, the analysis was aimed at verifying whether it is possible to predict more precisely than would be predicted by chance what reading a viewer will adopt based on his or her sociological background or his or her attitudes and reaction to the program. Another advantage of the discriminant model is that it accounts for the correlations among the different independent variables. The analysis provides discriminant functions that indicate the importance of each of the independent variables (much like a beta weight in a regression model) and the direction of its association with the dependent variable. The discriminant model as a whole is subjected to a significance test, while the individual coefficients, which vary from –1 to 1, are interpreted based only on their relative size.

Due to missing values in several of the discriminating variables, the effective sample size for the discriminant analysis dropped from 251 to 213: 11 dominant, 8 resistant, and 12 negotiators were removed. Of the 213 respondents analyzed, 71 chose a dominant reading, 38 a resistant reading, and 104 chose a negotiated reading.

As can be seen in Table 1, the analysis identified two discriminant functions: The first is highly significant, $R_c = .385, \chi^2(20, N = 213) = 49.130, p < .001$, and the second is only marginally significant, $R_c = .275, \chi^2(9, N = 213) = 16.202, p = .063$. Group centroids and structure coefficients suggest that the first function discriminates between viewers choosing a dominant reading and the other two groups. The theoretical meaning of the second discriminant function is less clear because along this function all the group centroids are at approximately equal distances from each other. Using both functions, 58.2% of the cases were correctly classified into the three groups. Because only the first function was
significant and its distinction between the groups was more straightforward, the second function is not discussed further.

**TABLE 1**

*Discriminant Analysis: Demographic, Psychological and Attitudinal Predictors of Textual Interpretations to Ally McBeal*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary Statistics</th>
<th>First Function</th>
<th>Second Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canonical Correlation</td>
<td>.385</td>
<td>.275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue</td>
<td>.174</td>
<td>.082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilk’s Lambda</td>
<td>.787</td>
<td>.916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi-square</td>
<td>49.130</td>
<td>16.202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degrees of Freedom</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.063</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function Coefficient</th>
<th>Function Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sociological</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>.338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Dispositions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious attachment</td>
<td>.057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant attachment</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist attitudes</td>
<td>-.231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactions to Program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>-.576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liking Program</td>
<td>.540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realism</td>
<td>.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ally eccentric</td>
<td>-.350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ally strong</td>
<td>.558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Centroids:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominants</td>
<td>-.573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistants</td>
<td>.461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiators</td>
<td>.223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cases Correctly Classified</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The profile distinguishing the dominant viewers from others indicates that viewers choosing a dominant reading were found more likely to be female (Rc = -.210). This finding supports Hypothesis 1. In accordance with Hypothesis 2, viewers choosing dominant readings were more likely to be single (Rc = .338). Hypothesis 3, which predicted that the choice of a dominant reading would be
associated with a secure attachment, was not supported. Three dummy variables were created to analyze the importance of attachment style to the discriminant function, and the variables for anxious and avoidant were entered into the analysis. The canonical correlations for both anxious and avoidant attachment were small (Rc = .057 and .005, respectively). The correlation for feminism indicated that viewers choosing a dominant reading were distinguished from other viewers by their relatively strong feminist views (Rc = –.228), providing support for Hypothesis 4.

Hypothesis 5 was also supported. Strong identification with Ally McBeal’s character proved to be the most distinguishing factor of viewers choosing a dominant reading (Rc = –.576). Hypothesis 6 was not supported, as perceptions of realism did not contribute to the discriminant function (Rc = .031). Hypothesis 7 predicted that liking of the program would distinguish between viewers choosing different types of readings. Although liking the program did prove an important factor in the discriminant function (Rc = .540), the direction of the canonical correlation was opposite of that predicted by the hypothesis, as those who liked the program less were more likely to adopt a dominant reading. A similar finding for Hypothesis 8 emerged from the analysis. Both perceptions of Ally’s strength and her eccentricity contributed to the discriminant function (Rc = .558 and -.350, respectively), but viewers choosing dominant readings saw Ally as more eccentric and less strong.

Four of the eight hypotheses were supported (sex, relationship status, feminism, and identification), and four were rejected. Two hypotheses were rejected because no relationship existed (attachment and realism), and for two hypotheses, relationships were found in an opposite direction to that which was hypothesized (liking the program and judgments of character). The most important contributors to the discriminant function were identification, liking the program, and perceiving Ally as strong. Next in importance were perceived eccentricity and relationships status, and finally the sex of viewers. In sum, six of the eight variables identified by previous research as important to reception processes proved to be central to viewers’ interpretations of Ally McBeal.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to profile three groups of Ally McBeal viewers according to how they understand the program, and to identify the underlying reasons and processes involved in their interpretations of the program. In hypothesizing about these underlying factors, a heuristic model was suggested based on the following three assertions:
1. Viewers from different social groups and different life situations find different elements of the program relevant, and this should impact how they understand the program.

2. The meaning assigned to the program is a function of the interaction between viewers’ preexisting attitudes and the ideological discursive elements embedded in the program.

3. The overall reading of the program, constructed by viewers, is related to specific emotional responses to the program and to judgments made about the program and its characters.

The results of this study identified at least one variable on each of the three levels of analysis as helpful in classifying viewers based on their readings of Ally McBeal. In short, the profile for dominant readers as opposed to the other two groups is that they include more single women who find Ally eccentric and weak, identify with her, and like the program relatively less. Attachment styles and perceptions of realism did not distinguish between dominant and other readers. The data did not permit any conclusions about how viewers who adopt resistant readings are distinct from those who adopt a negotiated stance toward the text.

Several findings of this study should be highlighted. Although viewers who opted for a dominant reading were not the largest group, they were the most distinctive. Thus, it seems that the most important element in reception is whether viewers of television texts accept the position offered to them by producers. Those who accept this position are clearly distinct from those who decline, whether through resistance or negotiation. Based on past studies, accepting or rejecting the dominant reading was expected to be related to three main reactions to the text: how realistic the text seemed to viewers, the degree of enjoyment they got from the program, and identification with the main character. It is surprising that perceived realism did not prove an important factor in distinguishing dominant readers, but given the fantastical nature of Ally McBeal, perhaps this is understandable. The finding that viewers who opted for dominant readings did enjoy the program more than those who chose negotiated readings challenges some existing theory (Fiske, 1989) yet is consistent with earlier studies (e.g., Brigham & Giesbrecht, 1976). Finally, the important role of reactions to characters in reception processes is reaffirmed and provides additional motivation for more comprehensive future research on the connection viewers have with fictional characters (Cohen, 2001). Whereas previous studies have focused mostly on demographic indicators of culture as explaining
variations in decoding TV programs, this study suggests that attitudes and judgments about the program have more explanatory power. Clearly, attitudes and judgments are dependent on demographic variables, and thus such results should not be seen as negating a focus on demographic categories, but rather suggesting new and perhaps fruitful avenues of exploration.

Although the present analysis tells us little about the difference between viewers who resist the text’s message and those who negotiate it, two findings suggest that negotiation is a key to the pleasure viewers take from viewing popular television. Both the popularity of the negotiated reading (46%) and the high average liking score reported by viewers who chose this reading ($m = 4.74$, $sd = 1.69$, which was the highest of all groups) suggest that negotiated reading can be pleasurable, at least for relatively educated viewers. In contrast to Fiske’s theorizing, it seems that there is pleasure to be found in negotiation. For many viewers, the enjoyment of TV may reside in entertainment that challenges some of their ideological beliefs—even if not their entire belief system—and makes them think.

Although the role of feminist attitudes in distinguishing groups of readers was only moderate, viewers choosing the dominant reading were those with stronger feminist attitudes. This suggests that critiques of *Ally McBeal* as a chauvinistic program (e.g., Carson, 1997; Shalit, 1998; Vavrus, 2000) not only interpret the program differently from many viewers who see it as liberating for women, but also that—echoing Radway’s (1983) critique—the program seems to serve feminist viewers well. But why are feminist attitudes predicting dominant, rather than resistant readings, as we might expect? Possibly because as reception theorists have repeatedly claimed, audiences interpret popular texts not through a careful textual analysis comparing the text to a set of idealized values, but by a process of narrative understanding dominated by immediate emotional and subjective reactions to the program (e.g., identification) and especially to its characters. The formation of an overall ideological reading most likely follows these reactions and is heavily affected by them. A reasonable interpretation of this study’s results is that viewers with feminist attitudes identify with Ally’s feminist sensibilities and struggles (even if not with their ultimate outcomes) and therefore adopt her point of view and hence a dominant reading. That such viewers judge Ally to be weaker and more eccentric suggests that they fully recognize the challenges to feminism posed by Ally’s behavior but prefer to excuse these as part of her eccentricism. Feminist viewers of *Ally McBeal* seem to find comfort in the program’s portrayal of the problems facing young women in a chauvinist society, whereas the critics focus on the social message of the program.
A similar conclusion about the importance of audience involvement in the text can be reached from the finding that single viewers were more likely than others to adopt dominant readings of *Ally McBeal*. The program’s message is that despite the challenges it poses, romance is of primary importance. If this were the message received by viewers, we would expect that viewers in steady relationships—as opposed to single viewers—should adopt a dominant reading. The findings, to the contrary, suggest that it is not this ideological message that matters, but rather the dynamics of the plot and what the characters do that is important. Finally, although most analyses have focused on the program’s treatment of sex roles (e.g., Bellefante, 1998, 1999; Carson, 1997; Shalit, 1998), it seems that for viewers the program’s treatment of relationships and romance is more central. This is perhaps why the impact of relationship status is greater than that of viewers’ sex.

It is premature to draw strong conclusions regarding reception processes in general based on a study of a specific, nonrandom, sample of viewers of any specific program. However, several implications of this study are worth discussing. First, this study suggests a useful methodological paradigm for further explorations into reception processes. In a survey context, viewers were able and willing to choose between three readings in a theoretically meaningful way. Although more work needs to be done to validate this method, this study offers initial evidence of this method’s validity, and the method offers an efficient way to examine more programs and broader samples. Quantitative data of this sort will have the significant benefit of allowing researchers to accumulate data across studies and develop stronger theory.

Many limitations of this study have already been discussed, but a cautionary note regarding the generalizability of any conclusions drawn from this study bears repeating. There is plenty of room to speculate that reception processes and dynamics differ greatly between audience groups and across programs. It is significant, for example, that the present study did not address in any way issues of class and race as represented in *Ally McBeal*, issues that would likely be important in interpreting the program if the sample were more diverse. Although the evidence emerging from this and many other studies is that media reception is extremely complex, new methods for exploring the ways viewers make sense of television offer significant progress in the search for newer and more exciting theories.

NOTES

1Although students were generally cooperative in filling out the surveys, in the first several classes, many respondents (about 20%) omitted the first section of survey, which
was the dependent measure, and thus their surveys were excluded from the sample. Once this trend was identified, the instructions given to respondents were changed to better explain what students needed to do. Furthermore, as students completed the surveys and returned them, they were asked specifically whether they had completed the first part. If they had not, they were asked to go back and complete them. Thus, in later classes the incompletion rate dropped. It is unclear whether incompletion was a function of unclear instructions, laziness to read through the three paragraphs, or difficulty in choosing an answer. However, when pressed to complete the dependent measure, there did not seem to be any special difficulty in choosing a paragraph.

REFERENCES


