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The effect of television viewing on ethnic prejudice against immigrants: A study in the Italian context

ABSTRACT

Television viewers construct many different meanings from the programs they watch. Here, we investigated whether ethnic prejudice is differentially influenced by the genre of television programs in their portrayal of ethnic minorities. We also wanted to determine whether a higher educational level reduces ethnic prejudice and television use. A self-reported questionnaire was administered to 401 Italian adults. Structural equation modeling was used to analyze the relationships between ethnic prejudice and television program contents and educational level. Viewing *Reality & Variety Shows* was positively related to ethnic prejudice, *News & Public Affairs* was negatively related, and *Films & TV series* had no apparent influence on prejudice. Educational level was negatively related to both ethnic prejudice and watching *Reality & Variety Shows*, and positively related to viewing *News & Public Affairs* and *Films & TV series* programs.

Keywords Ethnic prejudice, Television consumption, Television contents, Educational level, Structural equation modeling.

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Mass media and intergroup relations

The mass media plays a powerful and pervasive role in framing our beliefs, perceptions, and collective emotions. How it articulates social issues has shaped our attitudes toward them. Much of the research on mass media and intergroup relations falls into two camps. The one argues that the mass media reinforces the status quo and plays a very specific part in the distribution and acceptance of ethnic ideologies (Maneri & ter Wal, 2005; Mazzara, 2008; Pharr, 1996, van Dijk, 1991; 2000; Volpato, Durante, Gabbiadini, Andrighetto, & Mari, 2010). Accordingly, the media occupies a preeminent place in the public representation of unequal social relations. As Cottle (2000) states, “It is in and through representations, for example, that members of the media audience are variously invited to construct a sense of who ‘we’ are in relation to who ‘we’ are not” (p. 2). The other points out that the mass media actively criticizes and questions the status quo, thus representing a significant agent for driving sociopolitical and cultural change (Bodenhausen, Schwarz, Bless, & Wanke, 1995; Vrij, van Schie, & Cherryman, 1996; Tsuda, 2004).

But while the media has been, can be and should be put to good use to reduce intergroup tension and prejudice (Paluck, 2009), it oftentimes plays an ambivalent role, being neither clearly positive nor negative, though never a neutral one. As an illustration of this, Tsuda (2004) notes that the media frequently ‘cheats’ on its audience, presenting them with antithetical images which apparently strengthen dominant ideologies and stereotypes but erode them as well. This is also why the portrayal by the media of social and minority groups within a society (e.g., the elderly, women, gays and lesbians, the disabled) inevitably raises questions about whether and to what extent such depictions promote or undermine the values of equity, democracy, and justice in a pluralist society. Here, we focus on the representation of ethnic minority groups by the mass media and the relation between mass media consumption and ethnic prejudice against immigrants. The term “mass media”

covers a wide spectrum of printed (e.g., newspapers and magazines) and broadcast media (e.g., television and radio), as well as newer forms of electronic media (e.g., the Internet and videogames). Although each medium needs to be understood and critiqued for how it handles prejudice and discrimination, we chose television because, along with radio, it is the predominant outlet for entertainment and news and because, as Signorielli (2001) notes, television has become the “nation’s primary storyteller” (p. 36). Furthermore, television audience reception research has suggested that audiences may infer norms from the behavior of real or fictional media personalities (Shapiro & Chock, 2003) and that programs featuring members of ethnic groups cast in protagonist or other roles in the narrative of various genres (e.g., News or Entertainment) can differentially influence racial perceptions (Armstrong, Neuendorf & Brentar, 1992). Therefore, we wanted to examine the influence of viewing three different television genres (films, news, entertainment) on ethnic prejudice and television consumption.

Ethnic prejudice and television

Prejudice and discrimination against ethnic minorities is ubiquitous. Outright rejection of diversity is deemed generally unacceptable in Western societies, and blatant prejudice is seldom expressed directly because the normative climate makes “old-fashioned” prejudice socially unpalatable in its raw form. It does not necessarily follow, however, that prejudice has disappeared from an individual’s cognitive and affective world. In the discourse on the justification of inequality, the term *modern racism* has been coined to describe this phenomenon and to distinguish between “old” and “new” forms of prejudice.

Dovidio and Gaertner (1998), for example, argue that “discrimination occurs when an aversive racist can justify or rationalize a negative response on the basis of some factor other than race” (p. 7). Sears (1988) claims that modern ethnic prejudice is characterized by denial of continued discrimination, antagonism toward minority group demands, and resentment over perceived, undeserved special treatment of minority groups. Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) argue that the

discourse of prejudice has become “cool, distant and indirect” (p. 58) in its defense of traditional values, exaggeration of cultural differences, and denial of positive emotions. Unlike *modern racism*, old-fashioned racism can be expressed more openly and directly.

The mainstream media has increased the visibility of immigration. News coverage of the successive waves of immigrant arrivals to Italy, though it may stoke fears the public already has towards them, tends to focus on the drama of a newsworthy event. What has become problematic for the media is the growing long-term presence of ethnic minorities. It may even be argued that the media perpetuates the perceived threat to national identity by tapping into anti-immigrant sentiments in more subtle ways. If today’s public debate is polarized (often by the mainstream media itself), early television was notable for its virtual absence or underrepresentation of ethnic minority groups.

Previous work on the portrayal of ethnic minorities in television investigated how misrepresentations can potentially fuel racism and prejudice and confirm the negative stereotypes many television viewers hold about ethnic groups (Graves, 1999; Graves & Ottaviani, 1995; Greenberg & Brand, 1994; Greenberg & Collette, 1997; Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002).

Moreover, the underrepresentation of certain ethnic groups might have led television viewers to underestimate the power and importance of such groups within society. In recent decades, however, increasing attention has been directed to how television tends to give a more nuanced depiction of ethnic minorities (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Monk-Turner, Heiserman, Johnson, Cotton, & Jackson, 2010). Nonetheless, data suggest that the range of roles in which ethnic minority groups are cast as protagonists still tends to be narrow and stereotyped, and that certain ethnic minorities are overrepresented as perpetrators of crime or linked to deviant or criminal behavior, whereas voice is rarely given crime victims who belong to an ethnic minority. Summarizing, the interests and perspectives of ethnic minorities are not represented proportionally to the ethnic population and are presented in a simplistic and unidimensional way. Furthermore, negative media coverage of ethnic minorities as a risk to society has contributed to the build-up of prejudice against them.

The current study

If previous research has largely investigated the influence of television consumption on promoting or reducing ethnic prejudice, to our knowledge no study to date has examined the influence of different genres on ethnic prejudice. To fill this gap, we wanted to determine whether viewing different television genres can influence ethnic prejudice and, if so, in which direction.

We expected that:

- 1) Exposure to different genres differentially influences ethnic prejudice against immigrants.
Armstrong and colleagues (1992) reported that exposure to the genres entertainment and news was associated with conflicting perceptions of African-Americans. They studied the effects on viewers' beliefs about the socioeconomic status of Black Americans and found that the entertainment genre was associated with a positive perception and television news with a negative one. Twenty years later, Hoekstra and colleagues (2012) found in a sample of American students that the proportion of Black individuals in their dreams was increased by television consumption in general and by a preference for watching specific genres (i.e., sports and sitcoms). Our study differs from both studies in several ways. First, we investigated the effects of television consumption on ethnic prejudice, whereas the others examined different variables that can be related to prejudice but are not the same thing. Second, the two studies were conducted in the United States of America, whereas the present one was carried out in Italy (see next paragraph). Finally, the objects of investigation differ: our study focused on perceptions about immigrants (foreign ethnic minorities), whereas the other two studies involved Black Americans (a national racial minority). For these reasons, we are unable to hypothesize the direction of the influence of different television program contents on prejudice, but in any case, we expected that they would have an influence on prejudice.
- 2) In line with previous studies, we expected that having a higher level of education would influence ethnic prejudice (Pedersen & Hartley, 2012; Scheepers & Gijssberts, 2002; Zick,

Pettigrew, & Wagner, 2008) and television consumption (ISTAT, 2001; ISTAT, 2008; Censis, 2011), reducing both.

The context

Unlike other European countries (e.g., France, Britain or Germany), Italy has a relatively short history of immigration. This partly explains why so few ethnic minority characters appear on Italian television. A wider range of roles may be expected as the long-term presence of ethnic minorities continues to grow and celebrities of non-Italian origin¹ open up new space in the public sphere. In the decade between 2000 and 2010, the television consumption rate in Italy rose by 10.9% and peaked in 2012² when the average 24-hour rating reached over 10 million viewers and 26 million were tuned in during primetime (8.30 pm to 10 pm).

As of 1 January 2011, the proportion of Italy's population accounted for by foreign immigrants was approximately 7.5% (4,570,317 from over 190 different communities) , signaling a marked rise from 5% of the country's population just 5 years earlier (2,670,514 as of 1 January 2006). The largest national groups by proportion of resident foreigners are the Romanians (21%), Moroccans (14%), and Albanians (10.6%) (ISTAT 2011). Because of the vast diversity of ethnic minorities in Italy, there is no single traditional identification characteristic (e.g., religion) of an immigrant belonging to a particular ethnic group.

METHOD

Data were collected using a self-reported questionnaire, which took about 20 minutes to complete. Participants were contacted directly at home and asked to participate in a study about the use of mass media. They were recruited in cities of different sizes via a convenience sampling method. Although this sampling technique has the limitation that it is not purely random, every effort was made to access a wide range of respondent demographics, including age range, gender, educational

level, and occupational status. Participation in the study was voluntary and the respondent's anonymity was ensured in all phases of data collection and analysis.

Measures

Participants rated items and answered questions about different topics. The indicators in our analysis were:

1. *Ethnic prejudice.* The Italian version (Gattino, Miglietta, & Testa, 2011) of the Classical and Modern Racial Prejudice scale (Akrami, Ekehammar, & Araya, 2000) contains 15 items that investigate prejudice against immigrants (e.g., “Generally speaking, immigrants have high moral principles”; “Immigrants are getting too pushy in their demand for equal rights”). Response options range along a scale from “strongly disagree” (0) to “strongly agree” (4). Items can be reversed as needed. After calculating the mean score, we found that the measure demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$; $M = 1.59$; $SD = .69$).
2. *Television consumption.* A single item asks about the daily number of hours spent watching television and is followed by a set of items that investigate how frequently participants watch different genres of television programs (Film, News, Entertainment, etc.). These items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from “never” (0) to “often” (4).
3. A brief list of sociodemographic items.

Participants

The sample population was 401 adults (M 44.9%; F 55.1%; age range 20 to 69 years, mean $39.83 \pm$ standard deviation [SD] 11.7) resident in two regions; 36.4% were college graduates, 40.4% were high school graduates, and 23.2 % had a lower educational level; 49.6% had never been married, 45.9 % were married, 2.8% were divorced, and 1.8% widowed; 68.6% were working, 11.3 % were students, 9.8% were retired, and 10.3% were unemployed; 45.1% lived in a large city (> 100,000

inhabitants), 31.2% in a mid-sized city (10,000-100,000 inhabitants), and 23.7% in a small town (< 10,000 inhabitants).

Data analysis

After preliminary analyses, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis to identify different patterns of television consumption. We then verified the hypothesized relationships between the variables by structural equation modeling.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses

On average, the survey participants watched television for 2.30 hours a day ($SD = 1.60$). The most frequently watched genre was *News*, followed by *Films* and *Documentary*, and the least watched genres were *Reality Shows* and *Soap Operas* (Table 1).

Table 1. Television programs frequency of watching: descriptive statistics.

	Mean	Standard Deviation
News	3.15	1.04
Films	2.76	1.26
Documentary	2.12	1.37
TV Series	1.83	1.47
Politics	1.79	1.39
Variety shows	1.50	1.30
Sport	1.48	1.46
Reality shows	.61	1.12
Soap operas	.52	1.06

In order to understand how the items investigating the different television genres fit together, we performed a maximum likelihood factor analysis (Oblimin rotation). The factor scree plot suggested extracting three factors labeled *Reality and Variety Shows*, *News and Public Affairs*, and *Films and TV series* (Table 2). Overall, the three factors explained a good proportion of variance (56.9%), and the structure was easily interpretable after rotation. Two genres (*Sport* and *Soap Operas*) did not load on any factor. The first and the third factor were correlated ($r = .20$).

Table 2. Factor Analysis of television programs consumption: Factor Loadings

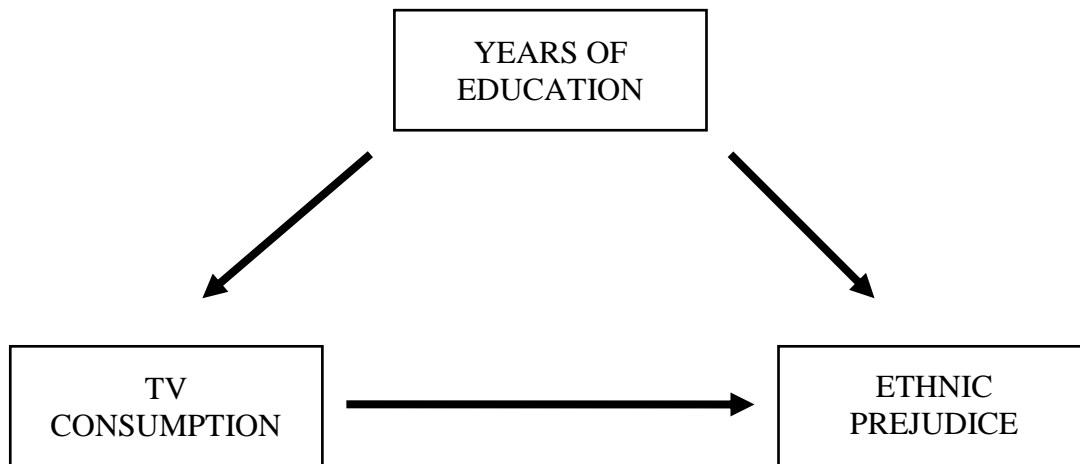
	Reality and Variety Shows	News and Public Affairs	Films and TV series
Reality Shows	.72		
Variety shows	.70		
Politics		.65	
News		.61	
Documentary		.48	
Films			.71
TV series			.60
Sport			
Soap operas			

Note. Loadings below .40 are omitted.

Predictors of prejudice

To verify our hypotheses, we tested a structural equations model assuming that years of education would influence television consumption and ethnic prejudice, and that television consumption would influence ethnic prejudice (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. The hypothesized theoretical model.



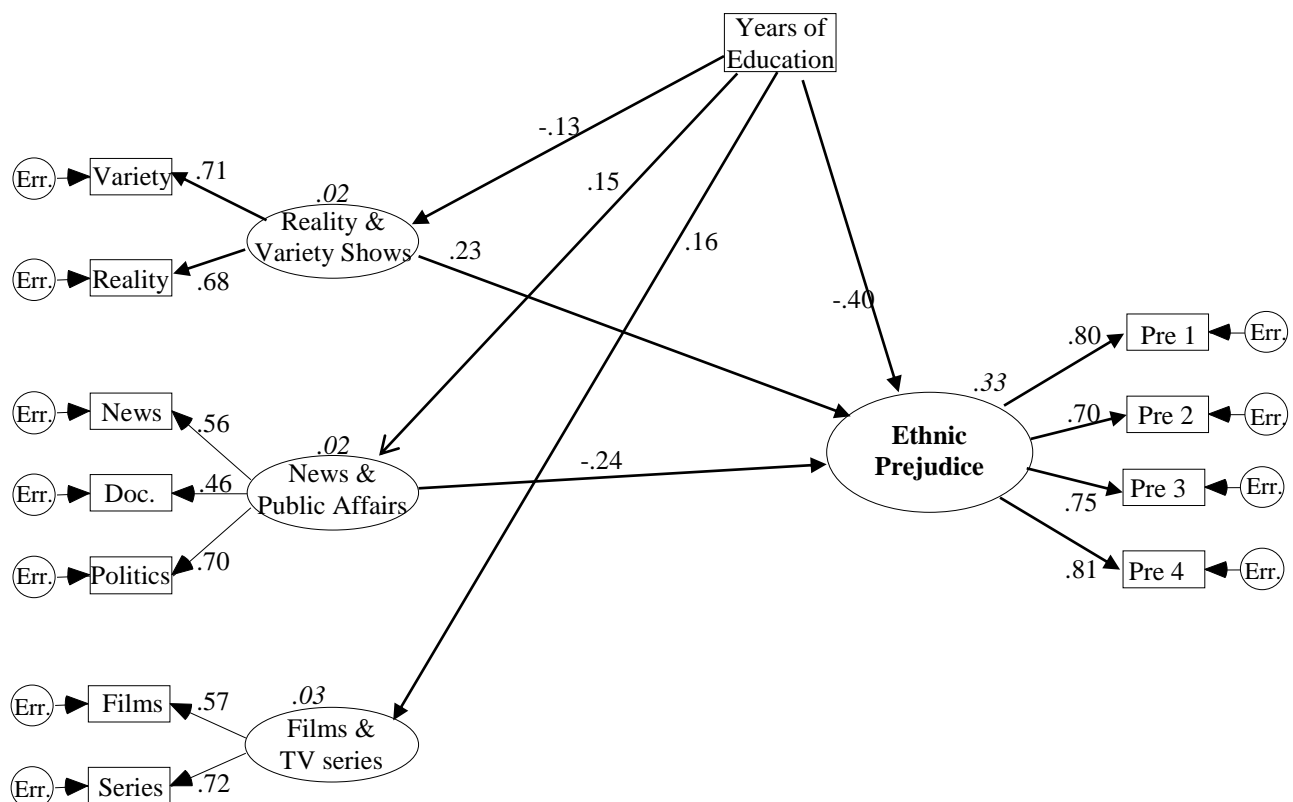
Television consumption was operationalized by means of the three latent factors suggested by the explorative factor analysis (*Reality & Variety Shows*, *News & Public Affairs*, and *Films & TV series*) with their respective indicators. Because of the high number of items on the scale, we used a partial disaggregating approach (Bagozzi, 1993; Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998) to examine groups of aggregated rather than single items as indicators in the analysis of ethnic prejudice. The advantage of this approach is that it reduces the number of variables in the model that may lead to a significant worsening of the fit, while still allowing for an estimation of the measure error of the latent variables.

The model fit was tested using four different fit indexes to attenuate the limits of each index (Hu & Bentler, 1998): the χ^2 , the comparative fit index ([CFI] Bentler, 1990), the Tucker-Lewis index ([TLI] Tucker & Lewis, 1973), and the root mean square error of approximation ([RMSEA] Steiger, 1990). For the CFI and TLI, values higher than 0.90 are considered satisfactory, as indicated by Bentler (1990). For RMSEA, values lower than 0.08 are satisfactory (Browne, 1990).

The first model proved acceptable according to all the fit indexes but χ^2 : $\chi^2(48) = 113.77$, $p < .01$, CFI = .94, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .059 (90% CL = .045, .072). Given that the significance of χ^2 depends on the sample size and that our sample was quite large ($N = 401$), we considered this model to be satisfactory. However, because one path was not significant, we retested the same

model after deleting this path. The second model was satisfactory, and all the parameters were statistically significant: $\chi^2(49) = 114.85$, $p < .01$, CFI = .94, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .058 (90% CL = .044, .072). Figure 2 shows the model in graphic form.

Figure 2. Ethnic prejudice prediction model: Standardized regression weights and variances.



Reality & Variety Shows is correlated to Films & TV series ($r = .42$).

Errors of Reality & Variety Shows, News & Public Affairs, Films & TV series, and Ethnic Prejudice are omitted from the figure in order to make it easier to view.

With regard to our first hypothesis, we found that: (a) watching *Reality and Variety Shows* had a positive influence on ethnic prejudice ($\beta = .23$); (b) watching *News and Public Affairs* had a negative influence on ethnic prejudice ($\beta = -.24$); and (c) watching *Films and TV series* did not influence ethnic prejudice. Concerning our second hypothesis, we found that years of education had: (a) a

negative influence on watching *Reality and Variety Shows* ($\beta = -.13$); (b) a positive influence on watching *News and Public Affairs* ($\beta = .15$) and *Films and TV series* ($\beta = .16$); and (c) a negative influence on ethnic prejudice ($\beta = -.41$). The whole set of predictors explained 33% of the variance of ethnic prejudice.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the influence of television consumption on ethnic prejudice. Previous researches have looked into the effects of the mass media on ethnic prejudice, but to our knowledge, no study has focused on the effect of specific television genres on prejudice. Two studies (Armstrong et al., 1992; Hoekstra et al., 2012) reported that perceptions about minority groups can be influenced by television genres, suggesting that genres of television programs may also influence ethnic prejudice. From these observations, we expected to find differences between the effects on prejudice of viewing different genres of television programs.

We found that the three television genres interacted differently with ethnic prejudice: *Reality & Variety Shows* increased it, *News & Public Affairs* reduced it, whereas *Films & TV series* had no effect on it. The first two results are quite surprising. The overrepresentation in television coverage of crimes committed by minority group members has been reported to promote racism and prejudice (Green, Staerklé, & Sears, 2006). In our study, however, watching news programs had a negative influence on prejudice. We can interpret this discrepancy in several ways. First, because of the particular U.S. national context, the majority of studies describing a crime bias are North American (Oliver & Fonash, 2002; Oliver, Jackson, Moses, & Dangerfield, 2004), whereas our study was conducted in Italy where the proportion of ethnic minorities within the general population is smaller as compared with the United States. Second, despite the continuous bias in the representation of ethnic minorities, overall media coverage has become less negative as minority members gain visibility and broader appeal in sports and entertainment (Shapiro & Chock, 2003). Third, although prejudice is generally higher among viewers with a lower educational level,

responsible and fair reporting in the news about minority groups can help to reduce prejudice and discrimination against them (Pettigrew, Christ, Wagner, Meertens, van Dick, & Zick, 2008).

Indeed, the model tested here showed that years of education reduced prejudice and increased the frequency of watching news and public affairs programs. As reported elsewhere (ISTAT, 2001; ISTAT, 2008; Censis, 2011), people with a higher educational level tend to be news-oriented, better informed about the world, and less likely to harbor negative attitudes and beliefs about minorities (Scheepers & Gijsberts, 2002; Pedersen & Hartley, 2012). We can exclude the presence of a spurious relation between watching news and public affairs programs and prejudice because of the contemporary significance in the model of this path and that of educational level and prejudice.

Though the literature does not indicate that watching the news can increase ethnic prejudice, studies from various different countries have shown that stereotyped or demeaning contents and styles of reporting can be particularly damaging to ethnic minorities (De Piccoli, Colombo, Mosso, & Tartaglia, 2003; Geschke, Sassenberg, Ruhrmann, & Sommer, 2010; Oliver et. al., 2004; in Italy, Germany, and the United States, respectively).

Viewing *reality and variety shows* was found to increase ethnic prejudice. A low educational level increased both prejudice and viewing reality and variety shows (which, in turn, increases prejudice). The narrative of this genre relies heavily on conventional generalizations in which stereotyped depictions of ethnic minorities emphasize misrepresentation and normalize prejudice against them (Herrett-Skjellum & Allen, 1996; Martin, 2008). Conceived for a general audience, such programs offer a simplified construction of reality through the use of stereotypes which, when applied to minorities, can foster prejudice and discrimination. For example, Armstrong and colleagues (1992) found that television entertainment consumption was associated with the belief that Black Americans enjoyed a high socioeconomic status. This may be explained by the favorable portrayal of successful characters belonging to a racial minority, but it does not preclude the persistence of ethnic prejudice which, in its modern forms, is characterized by the denial of a disadvantaged position of minority groups and resentment over special treatment for them (Sears, 1988).

It is now widely recognized that television asserts an influence on audience attitudes. Previous research dedicated less attention to the role of television on ethnic prejudice in non-student adults. Our study fills this gap. Because the survey sample included a wider range of viewer demographics, our results make a valuable addition to the literature on media consumption and prejudice. Our data cannot be generalized to other countries and cultures and require caution in their interpretation. Nonetheless, they may offer the starting point for further research. One line of development could be pursued along ideological dimensions, investigating whether watching different television channels, public or commercial, with different editorial policies, can influence ethnic prejudice. Moreover, since the effect of the media on public opinion and attitudes is mediated by audience reception and reaction (Tsuda, 2004), another line of investigation could be how to enable viewers to increase their own media literacy skills. A further area of focus is the habit of multitasking during television viewing. Since little is known about these viewing trends in Italy, studies are needed that can more accurately account for how different genres are consumed. Finally, because the media tends to have a greater impact in areas of the country where the proportion of the immigrant population is small (Hartman & Husband, 1974; Tsuda, 2004), it would be useful to investigate whether difference can be seen in relation to the social and ethnic composition of a community and the concentration of ethnic groups in the community. Limitations aside, our findings are consistent with previous observations that television plays a key role in defining modern society, providing not only information, education, and entertainment but also in the construction of reality and maintenance of social hierarchy (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). This final point stresses the important function of the media in a multicultural society, its role in influencing public opinion about ethnic minorities, and its responsibility, especially that of public broadcast networks, to reduce prejudice and improve interethnic relations.

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Footnotes

¹ Some examples are Dominican-born Danny Mendez, elected Miss Italy in 1996, two black players on the Italian national football team that participated in the 2012 European Football Championship , and singer Malika Ayane, born in Italy of a Moroccan father.

² <http://www.nielsen.com/it/it.html>