

Portrayals of Unethical and Unvirtuous Workplace Behaviors on TV: Implications for Vocational Anticipatory Socialization

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This article presents a 2-phase multimethod study exploring (a) how unethical and unvirtuous workplace behaviors are portrayed on television programs that are popular among adolescents and (b) how adolescents make sense of the portrayals and use their interpretations for their vocational anticipatory socialization (VAS)—the process of learning and developing expectations about future careers. In Phase 1, we conducted a content analysis of the top 15 most watched television series among adolescents between 2013 and 2014 (data obtained from the Nielsen Company). In Phase 2, we conducted a series of focus group interviews with 74 adolescents who were regular viewers of the 15 television programs. The findings contribute to our understanding of television as an important source of VAS and how television portrayals of workplace ethics-related content affect individuals' career pursuits.

Keywords: vocational anticipatory socialization, workplace ethics, television, adolescents, social cognitive theory, moral reasoning

Choosing a career path is often a highly uncertain and confusing experience for many individuals—especially middle to late adolescents (between the ages of 15 and 21 years) who are learning about different career options as they transition from childhood to adulthood (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018). Because people rarely have innate interests in specific careers, they rely on messages that help them choose their career paths from various sources, including relational (e.g., peers, teachers, parents) and nonrelational sources (e.g., media, educational materials, work experience). Some of the messages focus on providing details about certain careers, and others focus on motivating individuals to choose careers

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based on their passion, skill sets, or personal goals and needs (Jahn & Myers, 2014). The growing body of literature on vocational anticipatory socialization (VAS) offers such insights about how communication affects young individuals' learning and expectations about their future careers (Kramer, 2010).

An important question that remains underexplored in the VAS literature is how communication about moral values associated with occupations might affect individuals' career pursuits. Business educators are increasingly concerned that adolescents do not receive adequate socialization about ethical work values (see Wang, Malhotra, & Murnighan, 2011), and the seemingly unending reports of morally reprehensible conduct in the workplace make people question how professionals develop values that would allow them to engage in such questionable behaviors. Although past studies on VAS have identified messages that encourage people to consider personal motives and values when choosing a career (e.g., "Whatever you do, do it for yourself" and "Provide for your family"; Jahn & Myers, 2014), it has not been clear whether and how such VAS messages may (un)intentionally convey information about what are right, wrong, good, or bad workplace behaviors, and importantly, how those messages can shape individuals' career interests.

Recent studies have indicated that VAS messages, especially from nonrelational sources, can indeed inform individuals about (un)ethical values associated with their potential career paths. For example, Wang et al. (2011) found that economics courses perpetuate unvirtuous behaviors and mindsets, such as hoarding resources and the belief that such greedy behaviors are morally acceptable. Woo, Putnam, and Riforgiate (2017) showed how observing morally questionable behaviors (e.g., swearing at coworkers, drinking alcohol during work hours) during media industry internships could disappoint adolescents and ultimately sway them to change their future career goals. Examples such as these demonstrate the importance of adolescents' exposure to moral standards associated with career options and the potential for the exposure to have unintended effects on their VAS.

Often blamed for socializing adolescents with distorted images of the work world, television remains a popular and powerful nonrelational source of VAS messages (see Kramer, 2010). Indeed, prior studies have suggested that television depictions of the workplace are often deceiving and unrealistic (e.g., Jones, 2003), and that unethical behaviors such as sexual conduct and harassment are depicted as common workplace behaviors that are often downplayed or disregarded as humorous or innocent (Lampman et al., 2002). The present study aims to extend this research by exploring how unethical and unvirtuous workplace behaviors are portrayed on television programs that are frequently watched by adolescents, and how and what VAS messages adolescents extract from such portrayals. The findings will offer insights for organizational communication and media scholars interested in the role of television as a source of vocational information and moral development among young adults.

Unethical and Unvirtuous Workplace Behaviors on Television

Determining what is morally (in)appropriate workplace behavior is largely context dependent, ambiguous, and can be further complicated by competing values of individuals and organizations. Behaviors that are acceptable in the workplace may be against the general ethical standards of society (e.g., lying to customers), and vice versa (e.g., cyberloafing). The equivocality of workplace ethics led scholars to develop alternative standards for achieving moral excellence in the workplace. For example, Cameron and Winn

(2012) argued that dominant theories of workplace ethics merely follow harm-avoiding assumptions rather than pursuing the good. They suggested that general ethical standards be supplemented by a virtuousness standard. Following a virtuousness standard would involve exhibiting workplace behaviors reflecting what individuals aspire to be when they are at their best, such as resilience, fairness, and compassion. Others made similar arguments that morally desirable behaviors should not only maintain but also enhance social and psychological environments of the workplace (see Bright & Fry, 2013).

Following the advice from the scholars cited above, this article considers both unethical and unvirtuous (UEUV) workplace behaviors portrayed on television. Because adolescents often rely on television as a window into a world that they have not encountered previously (Hoffner, Levine, & Toohey, 2008), seeing characters' engagement in behaviors that do not meet general ethical standards and/or the virtuousness standards can shape their VAS. Especially concerning is that if and when adolescents develop an affective disposition toward a character in a television program that they enjoy watching, their desire and expectation for the character to do good things can lead to their justifications of the character's morally questionable behaviors rather than scrutiny of the character's actions or motivations (see Raney, 2004).

To understand how television portrayals of UEUV workplace behaviors might be implicated in adolescents' VAS, we need to first identify what types of UEUV behaviors are frequently shown to adolescent viewers. Previous research on media portrayals of workplace behaviors has focused on a specific workplace discourse (e.g., gendered VAS messages in Hylmö, 2006), a specific program or a type of UEUV behavior (e.g., workplace bullying in *The Office* in Sumner, Scarduzio, & Dagget, 2016), or a certain career path (e.g., portrayals of social workers in Gibelman, 2004). Whereas these studies offer an in-depth understanding of a particular theme of VAS messages, occupation, or program, our aim is to capture the range of UEUV behaviors depicted across various occupational and organizational contexts via a content analysis of television series adolescents watched most frequently. Thus, we ask the following Research Question:

RQ1: What types of UEUV workplace behaviors (across various occupational and organizational settings) are portrayed in television series popular among adolescents?

Adolescents' Interpretations of UEUV Workplace Behaviors

Although exposure to televised UEUV workplace behaviors has the potential to shape adolescents' VAS, scholars have long recognized that moral learning occurs differently between individuals for numerous reasons (see Raney, 2004). For Bandura (as cited in Raney, 2004), audiences' agency in controlling the application of their moral codes and constructing their own reality has been the key aspect of moral learning based on media exposure. Given his emphasis on such human capacity to facilitate one's own observational learning, Bandura (2001) relabeled his social learning theory as social cognitive theory (SCT) to distance it from other theories casting a deterministic view of external stimuli on human learning. SCT offers a useful perspective to advance VAS research, which has often painted young adults as rather passive recipients of VAS messages. For example, VAS researchers have examined memorable messages shared by various relational sources (such as parents and teachers), which are believed to be stored in young adults' cognitive system and guide their career decisions (see Powers & Myers, 2017). Consistent with SCT, we position

televised UEUV workplace behaviors as important sources of VAS and adolescent viewers as capable of making their own judgements and meanings about their future careers based on the portrayals.

Scholars have adopted SCT in various types of research, including experimental studies aimed at testing media content's effects on audiences' behavioral modeling (e.g., Nabi & Clark, 2008) and content analyses of primetime television programs suggesting the possible effects of media portrayals' patterns (e.g., Mastro & Stern, 2003). Regardless of the methodology employed, researchers have supported SCT's agentic perspective that media portrayals influence audiences only to the extent that people attend to the content—and that viewers' attention varies because of different cognitive schemas, emotions, and/or individual backgrounds they bring to their viewing experiences. When it comes to moral learning, SCT-based research suggests the importance of viewer evaluations of behavioral consequences (see Pajares, Prestin, Chen, & Nabi, 2009, for a review); if viewers evaluate a negative behavior's outcome to be negative, they are less likely to engage in the same behavior, as compared with when it is positively rewarded. How viewers evaluate the portrayals of behavioral consequences is also important for their enjoyment of the media content and character liking, which, in turn, influences their moral reasoning (see Raney, 2004).

Although the above explanation about media portrayals of behavioral consequences has been widely accepted in the literature, there are a few reasons to believe that it may not be directly applicable to understanding adolescents' VAS via televised UEUV workplace behaviors. First, compared with antisocial behaviors that are evaluated as negative across contexts (e.g., unwarranted violence), the standards for what counts as a right or wrong workplace behavior can be highly contingent, multidimensional, and even paradoxical. Consider an employee's extended lunch with a coworker leading to a missed call from a customer. The valence of the outcome is unclear and relatively innocuous, compared with consequences of violence (e.g., physical suffering). However, as Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) showed, even though viewers like morally ambiguous characters (MACs) less than morally "good" characters, they find MACs equally as appealing and cognitively engaging as good characters. Thus, portrayals of UEUV workplace behaviors may activate divergent viewer interpretations, possibly making the predictability of the portrayals' effects on adolescent viewers' VAS low. Second, VAS research has shown that individuals' career-related interests and dispositions develop from early childhood through high school via a long-term socialization process (see Jahn & Myers, 2014). So, it is possible that adolescent viewers' existing beliefs about certain jobs precede their exposure to UEUV workplace behaviors on television. For instance, regardless of UEUV workplace portrayals' valence and behavioral outcomes, adolescents may justify morally questionable acts if they believe certain jobs are inherently good (e.g., service jobs) or necessitate inevitable moral norm violations to be successful (e.g., misleading advertising or sales tricks).

Given the ambiguous consequences of UEUV workplace behaviors on television, as well previous VAS experiences that adolescent viewers will likely bring to their interpretations of the portrayals, we take an exploratory approach to understanding the various possible effects of UEUV workplace portrayals on VAS. To do so, we chose to use focus group interviews following a content analysis we conducted to explore Research Question 1. Focus groups' open discussions could allow adolescent participants to generate breadth of meanings about the portrayals of UEUV workplace behaviors (captured from our content analysis), compare them with those of their peers in a safe environment, and connect the meanings to their desired career paths. Further, focus groups could encourage participants' reflective judgement (i.e., evaluating

messages retrospectively)—as opposed to online judgement (i.e., processing information while watching television)—which was important for this study because, as will be shown later, almost all of the television series included in our content analysis were fictional. As Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) note, although viewers' knowledge of a program's fictionality does not disrupt the processing of the media content, viewer reflections on the fictional information require activations—similar to when individuals try to articulate their tacit knowledge only when asked to do so. Thus, we reasoned that focus group interviews would help activate participants' interpretations of the fictional portrayals of UEUV workplace behaviors they observed from their favorite television series. Accordingly, we ask the following Research Questions:

RQ2: How do adolescent viewers interpret the UEUV workplace behaviors appearing in popular television series (as identified in RQ1)?

RQ3: How do adolescent viewers' interpretations of the portrayals of UEUV workplace behaviors shape their career aspirations and expectations (i.e., VAS)?

Method

Phase 1 (RQ1): Qualitative Content Analysis

Data

We obtained from the Nielsen Company a list of the 20 most popular broadcast and cable television series among individuals between the ages of 13 and 19 years for a one-year period: April 29, 2013, to May, 18, 2014. We modified this list by combining repeats of the same programs that aired twice a week and were thus ranked as two different programs (i.e., a performance episode and a voting result episode each week for *America's Got Talent*, *American Idol*, and *The Voice*), and then merged the three programs into one category ("talent shows") because of their similar occupational foci and organizational context (i.e., celebrity judges interacting with other judges and noncelebrity contestants). Further, we removed an after-show program (*Talking Dead*, which is a show that discusses each episode of *The Walking Dead*). After these modifications, we had a total of 13 programs and 385 episodes that aired during the one-year period. Table 1 shows the name of each program, the number of episodes included in our data set, and program ratings.

Preparation and Operationalization

To gain familiarity with the programs, we watched at least one full episode of each program together and learned about the main characters, their jobs, and relationships. Afterward, we discussed portrayals of workplace behaviors that we each noted from the episode and brainstormed ways for determining when a portrayal should be considered UEUV. As a result of this initial process, we operationalized "workplace behaviors" as portrayals of individuals performing their jobs at work or other settings where their professional identities were enacted (e.g., a police officer interacting with citizens on the street). We defined a "UEUV workplace behavior" as a character's action that violated general ethical standards and/or failure to be at his or her best while engaging in work-related activities, based on our earlier discussion on "virtuousness" standard (Cameron & Winn, 2012). That means, to count as a UEUV behavior, an act had to limit characters' own or others' job performance or well-being at work, although the

implied or explicit outcome of the act in other aspects could be positive and/or negative. For example, if employees appeared to be drunk from alcohol at work, their apparent inability to complete a work-related task (e.g., helping customers) would be the reason why the portrayal was coded as a UEUV workplace behavior, not the drinking behavior itself or the outcome of the behavior, which could be either positive (e.g., bonding with coworkers) or negative (e.g., unhappy customer), or both.

Table 1. Top 13 Programs Among Adolescent Viewers Between 2013 and 2014.

Rank	TV series title	Number of episodes analyzed	Average Number of adolescents who watched	Number of focus group participants
1	<i>The Walking Dead</i>	38	1,133,000 (3.91%)	8
2	<i>Pretty Little Liars</i>	43	813,000 (2.83%)	7
3	<i>Family Guy</i>	25	721,000 (2.49%)	10
4	<i>American Horror Story</i>	13	653,000 (2.25%)	8
5	<i>The Big Bang Theory</i>	50	652,000 (2.26%)	5
6*	Talent Shows	69	644,000 (2.24%)	7
7	<i>American Dad</i>	13	627,000 (2.17%)	8
8	<i>Teen Wolf</i>	53	614,000 (2.13%)	4
9	<i>The Boondocks</i>	11	546,000 (1.88%)	0
10	<i>Ravenswood</i>	12	519,000 (1.79%)	0
11	<i>The Bachelor</i>	10	518,000 (1.78%)	4
12	<i>Once Upon a Time</i>	23	511,000 (1.77%)	7
13	<i>The Simpsons</i>	25	498,000 (1.72%)	6
Total		385		74

Note. We obtained permission from the Nielsen Company to publish the data.

*The reported ranking reflects the average ranking of three talent shows, including *The Voice*, *America's Got Talent*, and *American Idol*.

Coding Procedure

We trained 22 undergraduate research assistants (RAs), who were in their late adolescence (19–21 years of age), as coders. To ensure consistency, we assigned at least two coders to each program, and instructed them to code for UEUV workplace behaviors individually by recording (1) a description of the UEUV behavior portrayed, written in the form of a VAS message that informs adolescent viewers about some aspects of the job (e.g., “a restaurant server can attend to personal needs while on the job”); (2) a description of the specific context in which the character engaged in the UEUV behavior (e.g., “Penny hangs out with her friends for an extensive amount of time and does not attend to customers”); and (3) the time in the episode at which the VAS message appeared. After the RAs finished coding individually, they compared their results with those of other coders and then discussed differences until they reached an agreement. The total number of UEUV codes generated from the 13 programs was 276. On average, 21 UEUV codes appeared per program, ranging from 0 to 73. The two programs that did not have any UEUV codes were

The Bachelor and *Once Upon a Time*. This meant that the content from certain programs in our data set contributed more to the content analysis than others. This was not a concern for exploring Research Question 1 because the selection of these programs was not random, but representative of what adolescents actually watched.

Analysis

Once coding was complete, the authors analyzed the VAS messages captured across the 13 programs through a two-phase strategy. First, we grouped similar types of behaviors into 10 categories, including sexual advances, lying, and drug use while at work. Second, we generated four higher level themes that encompassed the behavior categories, and linked each behavioral category to one of the themes (see Table 2 for behavior categories and themes). To identify these themes, we paid close attention to the contextual information for each type of behavior that coders noted in the coding sheet. For example, when employees leaked confidential information or engaged in inappropriate relationships at work, even though these were different behaviors, the characters commonly acknowledged that they were not supposed to engage in those behaviors. Thus, we labeled those behaviors as “knowingly violating workplace norms.” This way, we responded to Research Question 1 by generating themes reflecting workplace implications of the UEUV behaviors, rather than specific kinds of behaviors per se. Throughout the analytic process, we refined the themes through corroborating, which involved rewatching original scenes to ensure that the themes correctly reflected the context of the UEUV behaviors.

Table 2. Themes Generated Based on Coded Behaviors.

Coded UEUV workplace behavior*	Higher level theme
Direct insults or verbal harassment	Rude or unfair treatment of others in the workplace
Nonverbal and indirect aggression	
Discriminatory acts	
Lying	Knowingly violating workplace norms
Inappropriate relationships (e.g., a teacher agreeing to date a student)	
Leaking confidential organizational information	
Using company’s resources for personal needs	Abusing power given by one’s organizational position
Inappropriate sexual advances	
Drug and alcohol use at work	Neglecting duties
Counterproductive acts (e.g., napping, pranks)	

*When the same behavior seemed relevant to more than one category, we chose a category with the strongest fit through discussions among the authors and coders.

Phase 2 (RQ2 and RQ3): Focus Group Interviews

Participant Recruitment

We recruited participants at a large West Coast university in the U.S. by sending out invitations to a total of 13 different focus group sessions for each of the 13 television programs we analyzed. To qualify, participants had to have watched the program on a regular basis (80% or more of the specific season we analyzed) so that they could discuss the program with an adequate level of familiarity. The same participant could not participate in other focus group sessions even if he or she met the qualification. A total of 74 individuals, whose ages ranged from 18 and 20 years, participated in exchange for extra course credit. Because we conducted the focus groups two years after the episodes originally aired, it meant that the participants were between 16 and 18 years old at the time the specific seasons of the programs aired. Thus, our participants fall between middle (ages 15–17) and late adolescence (ages 18–21) according to the American Academy of Pediatrics's (2018) adolescent development stages. Each focus group had four to 10 participants (see Table 1 for the number of participants for each focus group), excluding two canceled sessions: *The Boondocks* and *Ravenswood*. Fewer than three people signed up for focus groups for the two programs, who were then given the option to either withdraw from the study or participate in a different focus group session. Among the 74 participants, 44 were female and 30 were male. Comparing responses from male and female participants, we did not observe any clear response patterns related to participant sex.

Focus Group Procedure

We trained the RAs who were coders during Phase 1 to facilitate the focus group sessions. Each focus group session began by asking participants for their verbal consent for recording the discussion, and all participants agreed. Participants were instructed to refer to themselves by the unique number assigned to them at random for anonymity. The facilitators then asked participants to briefly introduce themselves (e.g., major, interest, career goal). After the introductions, the facilitators asked participants to share (1) their overall thoughts about the program and why they liked it, (2) what kinds of UEUV workplace behaviors they remembered seeing from the program, (3) whether and why they believed the portrayals of UEUV workplace behaviors seemed (in)appropriate, and (4) how those portrayals affected their career expectations. When discussing the third question, facilitators played a few short video clips randomly selected from the television program of focus to remind participants of the details of the content (e.g., characters and their jobs) and to stimulate discussions. We made sure to not disclose the types of UEUV workplace behaviors we identified from Phase 1 until after participants finished discussing UEUV behaviors they brought up on their own, so as not to limit or interrupt their interpretations. The focus groups, which ranged from 40 to 65 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed into 150 pages of single-spaced text.

Analysis

Finally, we analyzed the transcripts to identify patterns in participants' interpretations of televised UEUV workplace behaviors (RQ2) and their effects on participants' VAS (RQ3). First, we read each transcript carefully to select only those responses that related to the two research questions. For Research Question 2, after we confirmed that the majority of participants interpreted the portrayals of UEUV behaviors as

plausible and understandable, we looked for and categorized their moral reasoning through thematic analysis. For Research Question 3, we analyzed the ways in which participants related their interpretations of the portrayals to their career expectations (e.g., “I do/do not want to pursue this job because . . .” or “If I pursue the job, I expect it to be this way . . .”). As a result, we found two major themes for each research question, as discussed in detail in the Results section.

Results

Research Question 1: Types of UEUV Workplace Behaviors Portrayed on Television

We identified four major types of UEUV workplace behaviors through our qualitative content analysis of television programs most watched by adolescents. Table 3 shows how we defined each category, examples, and how frequently they appeared across the 13 programs (385 episodes in total) we analyzed. Other than those included in the “knowingly violating workplace norms” category showing explicit violations of professional code of conduct, most portrayals we captured were unvirtuous behaviors through which television characters contributed to lowering the social and psychological well-being and productivity in the workplace, which led to mixed, unclear, or no consequences.

Table 3. Four Major Types of UEUV Behaviors Identified.

Category (% of codes)	Definition	Example
Rude/unfair treatment of others (25.7%)	Making others in the workplace, including coworkers and customers, feel offended, discouraged, embarrassed	People in entertainment business make fun of a female magician who tries to make it in the industry (<i>America’s Got Talent</i> , S08E09); scientists make fun of coworkers’ failures (<i>The Big Bang Theory</i> , S07E18)
Knowingly violating workplace norms (23.9%)	Engaging in behaviors that violate professional and/or organizational code of conduct despite one’s understanding of the potential consequences	A bartender serves a shot to a baby (<i>American Dad</i> , S10E16); a male scientist and his girlfriend decide to have sex in the science lab even though they saw the safety warning sign at the door (<i>The Big Bang Theory</i> , S7E15)
Abusing power (15.2%)	Using one’s job or position for personal gains or interests, and making others do their bidding	A nurse prioritizes helping people she knows (<i>Teen Wolf</i> , S03E09); news reporters change facts to reflect their personal beliefs about a scandal (<i>The Simpsons</i> , S25E03)
Neglecting duties (15.2%)	Not fulfilling one’s job responsibilities while on duty by showing lack of care, passion, or effort	A doctor watches television and does not pay attention to patient while in the operating room (<i>Family Guy</i> , S12E02); a teacher sleeps while students watch a science video (<i>The Simpsons</i> , S25E13)

**Research Question 2: Adolescents' Interpretations
of UEUV Workplace Behaviors on Television**

In the Phase 2 of our study, focus group participants discussed their interpretations of the four categories of UEUV workplace behaviors we identified in Phase 1. Overall, they reported that the UEUV behaviors were “the most exaggerated version of the unethical side of each job,” but that “there is truth in everything.” This indicated our participants’ general agreement on narrative realism (i.e., plausibility and logical consistency within the narrative) of the UEUV workplace portrayals, which allowed them to process and draw meanings from the portrayals—even though their perception of external realism (i.e., consistency with the actual world) was not high (see Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Below, we present two themes emerged from our participants’ moral reasoning based on the portrayals of UEUV workplace behaviors.

Coping With High Demands, Stress, and Boredom at Work

One way by which participants made sense of the UEUV behaviors on television was reasoning that such behaviors helped television characters deal with stressful and demanding situations in the workplace. For example, a participant interpreted a scene from *Pretty Little Liars* in which a stressed high school teacher became quickly angry and yelled at a student while discussing college applications (“rude/unfair treatment of others” category) by saying, “Even though he was pretty snappy, people can have bad days.” Another participant agreed by saying, “If it was every day, it wouldn’t be okay, but I think once in a while it is acceptable.” In a focus group session for *The Simpsons*, participants also discussed how teachers seemed burned out and easily annoyed by students. One viewer commented on a female teacher’s lackadaisical attitude and smoking behaviors in the classroom (“neglecting duties” and “knowingly violating workplace norms” categories) by saying, “She smokes and always has bags under her eyes. You get the feeling that, what they [teachers] do is so much underappreciated and underpaid.” Similarly, participants interpreted alcohol and drug use by other professionals, such as a pilot and artists, as reasonable and even necessary to perform their duties effectively:

They [*Family Guy*] show a pilot, like in a movie *Flight*, where he does drugs. I mean, media show that people need cocaine to be alert and stuff. If you’re old enough to understand what cocaine does to people, then you understand that these high-demanding jobs require a certain level of attention to detail that require help.

In addition to stress and high demands of jobs, participants also discussed coping with boredom at work in relation to unvirtuous behaviors—especially those in the “neglecting duties” category. Characters who had the same jobs for a long time were portrayed as feeling “stuck” at jobs they disliked. Focus group participants sympathized with the characters and interpreted their unvirtuous (but not necessarily unethical) behaviors as ways of coping with the fact that they needed their jobs to make a living. For example, in *The Simpsons* focus group, participants described how Homer, the main character of the show, came back to work at a nuclear power plant after quitting the job briefly for “a more fun job” that did not pay well. Homer’s counterproductive behaviors (e.g., low-energy voice and slow movement) demonstrated that he was bored at work. One participant commented on the scene: “You can tell from that, he [Homer] doesn’t want to be there. But he’s there because he needs to support his family.”

Revealing Complexities of Human Nature and Organizational Life

The second theme in participants' interpretations of televised UEUV workplace behaviors was the notion that the portrayals revealed the complexities of human nature and organizational life. Participants discussed that television programs reflected how people, even those who were "good," could engage in actions that did not align with moral expectations of the society and/or the workplace—thus sending a socialization message that "no one can be perfect." One participant's statement exemplifies this theme: "Television programs reveal dualities of people. Like the characters, you can be really good sometimes, but you can be tempted to do really bad things." For example, one participant from the *Once Upon a Time* focus group² recalled a character who was a politician and leaked information about a private investigation to a third party:

It shows how the mayor is not necessarily 100% for it [leaking the information] at first. He has inner conflicts. . . . You can see he is trying to use his logic to get out of doing what's not right. It makes people see that things are not just black and white in the real world, and that even people with these powerful jobs, they struggle to choose between right or wrong.

Further, participants stated that portrayals of UEUV workplace behaviors helped them see how individual professionals' moral values could change over time. One participant put it this way: "[Television reflects] how there is fluidity in the spectrum of who you can be." For instance, participants from *The Walking Dead* focus group discussed how a pastor, who used to preach the value of respecting humanity and life, became convinced that killing was a necessary act to survive in the post-zombie-apocalypse world. All participants from this focus group expressed that they enjoyed how the characters, even those who were once selfless and caring for others, changed their values to prioritize their self-interest over their professional duties, which seemed reflective of the innate human nature. One participant from the same focus group discussed a scene in which a nurse was deciding whether to stay in the community for those who needed her help, or to run away and protect herself from more dangers that were coming to the community:

I feel like it's acceptable if she leaves. When it boils down to it, we are all human, and we should take that into account before anything. As long as you can do something without directly harming others, you should do it. And if there is a fair chance that you might get hurt by doing your job, you shouldn't do it.

In relation to this theme, five participants discussed how they had been in similar situations as the television characters engaging in UEUV behaviors. One of them noted the catharsis young viewers might feel when seeing UEUV behaviors on television: "I feel like people would relate to the unethical behaviors . . . because most of us have been pushed to do something we didn't want to for one reason or another."

² Because we had no UEUV code from the particular season of this program included in our data set (Season 3), participants discussed portrayals of UEUV workplace behaviors they recalled from other seasons.

**Research Question 3: The Impact of Adolescents' Interpretations
of UEUV Portrayals on Their VAS**

Based on their understanding that the televised UEUV workplace behaviors were realistic and reasonable representations of what it meant to have jobs, our focus group participants discussed how the portrayals shaped their own career interests and expectations in two main ways. In the first theme, participants generated VAS messages about extrinsic values based on depictions of UEUV workplace behaviors; in the second theme, they extracted VAS messages about intrinsic values based on what was not communicated in those depictions.

Learning About Potential Benefits Associated With UEUV Behaviors

The first theme was related to television characters using their jobs for personal gains ("abusing power") and not giving their full effort on the job ("neglecting duties"). Participants reported how they could see perks to having a job that allowed such unvirtuous behaviors, even when the portrayed UEUV behaviors led to some negative outcomes—yet seemingly tolerable ones such as embarrassment, reduced credibility, or damaged relationships—instead of positive reinforcement. Their interpretation that television reflected complexities or gray areas of realistic organizational life (i.e., the second theme identified in response to RQ2) seemed to facilitate their sensemaking that UEUV workplace behaviors were not always bad, as long as they did not cause significant damage to others and the employers.

To illustrate, participants from the *American Dad* focus group discussed a character named Stan, who works for the CIA. They described how he often used his access to exclusive work materials for personal gains ("abusing power"). In one episode, as recalled and detailed by one participant, Stan used "special CIA equipment" to plan a family vacation. The participant had little knowledge about being a CIA agent, but she assumed, based on the television show, that Stan's job seemed to give him "some high status." She stated, "Maybe people in really high positions like that do use things for themselves. . . . Watching it makes me think, wow, if I ever do get to that position, look at all the stuff I can do." Another participant added: "If you achieve that kind of a job, you could flaunt your authority to others who don't know how much power you actually have."

However, focus group participants did not necessarily wish to pursue the same jobs possessed by television characters who seemed to gain perks from engaging in UEUV behaviors. Rather, they learned that those behaviors could provide them similar opportunities in their future workplace if they saw some relevance of the portrayals to their career goals. If they found little relevance between the characters' occupations and their own career interests, they used their interpretations to develop expectations about others' jobs. As an example of the former case, one participant, who was interested in pursuing a business career in the future, commented on a character named Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons*. Mr. Burns owns a nuclear power plant and has a personal assistant. The participant described Mr. Burns's assistant as "very submissive and does all 'bitch work,'" and said that it was "sad to see that being an assistant to someone in so much power is like that." Despite his sympathy toward the assistant, the same participant later commented on Mr. Burns's behavior that reflected "abusing power" (e.g., using his wealth for extravagant things while having the assistant do all the personal chores) and said, "Mr. Burns has so much time on his hands because the assistant does everything

for him. If I could own a whole company and enjoy mansions or whatnot—I would do that!” As an example of the latter case of developing expectations about others’ jobs, a participant discussed a character named Peter from *Family Guy* and said, “Peter works at a brewery, and what I get from the show is that people with jobs like that, they can just drink all day at work” (“neglecting duties”). Another participant agreed and added, “It’s like they don’t have to do much to keep their jobs!”

Motivation to Pursue Televised Profession and Change Negative Stereotypes

The second theme in response to Research Question 3 was related to portrayals from the “rude/unfair treatment of others” at work and “knowingly violating workplace norms” categories. Participants who were interested in the same or similar jobs as the televised occupations reported that even though such portrayals represented “ugly truths” about the professions, they were not very well balanced with ethical and virtuous ones—thus perpetuating negative stereotypes about the jobs. Seeing the negatively stereotyped behaviors associated with their desired careers further motivated the participants to pursue the careers and “do the job right” so that they could contribute to changing the societal bias against the professions.

To illustrate, participants from the talent show focus group debated about Simon Cowell—a judge who is known for his harsh criticism for contestants (coded as “rude/unfair treatment of others”). The debate was about whether his insensitive and offensive criticisms toward young contestants were morally acceptable or not. One half of the participants said his behaviors were acceptable because his criticism gave the contestants realistic evaluations for deciding whether or not they should continue to pursue their dreams. The other half said that he could deliver the same message without being so rude or inconsiderate of the contestants’ feelings. Those who interpreted the judge’s brutal criticism unethical indicated that the portrayals gave them opportunities to ask themselves “How could I do the job more ethically than him?” if they were to end up in a similar position to evaluate and mentor others in the future. One participant said,

There’s a line that Simon crossed, and I am not okay with that. I’d be honest with the people about their abilities, but even if they’re not good, I wouldn’t make them stop doing what they enjoy. There’s a way to be honest with someone without being rude.

In focus groups sessions for *Pretty Little Liars* and *The Simpsons*, participants focused on teachers in their discussions. They agreed that high school teachers in the two programs were frequently portrayed to violate professional norms, such as having romantic relations with their students and not using appropriate teaching methods during classes (coded as “knowingly violating workplace norms”). For example, a participant, who had always wanted to become a teacher, discussed how watching such portrayals made her feel even more strongly about pursuing the occupation rather than feel discouraged. The participant stated:

Watching the shows that portray teachers so negatively pushes me to pursue teaching jobs even more. Those portrayals are obviously exaggerated, but of course, it really is happening. That’s why I feel that it is important for some people to take from this and

aspire to actually correct what is wrong. And push towards the right path of what this type of job is supposed to be.

The comment above exemplifies adolescent viewers' construction of VAS messages about intrinsic motivation to counteract the negative stereotypes reflected in television portrayals of UEUV workplace behaviors. A similar sensemaking process occurred in focus groups for *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons*, where the stereotypes associated with business professionals became the focus of the discussions. Participants noted how business owners and managers from the two programs were often portrayed as greedy and mean to their employees or customers. One participant, who aspired to start his own business someday, said that he would not change his career interest because of the televised business owners' UEUV behaviors; rather, he hoped to "prove that it is not how business owners are and that there are nice, compassionate ones." These examples demonstrate how participants' interpretations of UEUV workplace portrayals contributed to further motivating their career pursuits and their determination to engage in ethical and virtuous behaviors in the future.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a number of implications for understanding television as a source of adolescents' VAS. To begin, our content analysis highlighted the range of UEUV workplace behaviors shown across various television genres enjoyed by adolescents (RQ1). Among the 13 most watched programs, only two series did not involve any UEUV workplace behaviors. The other 11 series—none of which focused on the workplace—depicted characters in various settings either performing or talking about their job-related activities in ways that did not meet moral standards. This suggests that, to fully understand television as a source of adolescents' VAS and its unintended effects, it is important to examine programs beyond content targeted toward the age group or focused on workplace settings (e.g., *The Office*).

The four categories of UEUV workplace behaviors we identified from the content analysis (i.e., "unfair treatment of others"; "intentional violation of workplace norms"; "abusing power"; "neglecting duties") add to the VAS literature by showing how socializing messages from television can contain negative moral values associated with adolescent viewers' potential career options. Previous research has shown that VAS messages from relational sources, such as parents and teachers, mainly communicated positive personal values (e.g., "Pursue jobs that can help fulfill your passion": Jahn & Myers, 2014) or neutral information about particular careers (e.g., "The industry is not very stable"; Powers & Myers, 2017). One reason why UEUV messages or message containing negative moral values have not been identified in past VAS research may be due to relational socializers' "interest in encouraging adolescents to accept the attitudes, beliefs, and values that they have, in order to preserve social order" (Arnett, 1995, p. 526). That is, relational sources may be cautious about sharing VAS messages that do not align with socially acceptable moral norms, while television offers unfiltered UEUV career messages that adolescents do not receive from other sources and therefore plays a unique role as a socializing agent.

Next, we examined adolescents' interpretations of the UEUV workplace behaviors we identified from the first phase to explore Research Question 2. As argued earlier based on SCT, we expected that adolescents would bring their own various inputs to interpreting portrayals of UEUV workplace behaviors.

For example, our participants made sense of the UEUV workplace behaviors through their emotional responses (e.g., empathy, sympathy, catharsis) to characters coping with demanding jobs and complex decision making at work. At the same time, they engaged in self-regulation of their thought processing during sensemaking (Bandura, 2001) by putting boundaries in their responses, such as, “but if it was every day [teacher getting angry at students], it wouldn’t be okay” and “I am not saying they *have to* do illegal drugs [to stay alert on demanding jobs].” This suggests the importance of considering individuals’ both emotional and cognitive processing of observed behaviors simultaneously in SCT-based research, even though the theory focuses primarily on cognitive elements of observational learning.

To reflect on each of the two themes we identified in response to Research Question 2: the first theme (i.e., coping with high demands/stress/boredom at work) seemed consistent with our expectation that adolescent viewers’ existing beliefs about certain jobs—regardless of their accuracy—might precede their evaluations of the television characters’ UEUV workplace behaviors (cf. disposition-based theories in Raney, 2004, and SCT-based explanations about moral learning in Pajares et al., 2009). How or when the participants developed their beliefs about certain occupations was beyond this study’s scope, but it was apparent that their application of their own beliefs about the televised jobs (e.g., teachers are underpaid/undervalued) contributed to their justifications of the characters’ morally questionable acts via cognitive and emotional responses, as stated earlier. The justifications did not seem necessarily related to their liking of the characters, considering that some of the characters discussed were minor and nonrecurrent ones. Further research will be needed to better understand how young viewers’ dispositions toward televised jobs are related to their moral evaluations of the (un)professional behaviors portrayed, character liking, and VAS.

The second theme we identified in response to Research Question 2 (i.e., revealing complexities of human nature and organizational life) was distinct from the first theme in that it did not necessarily involve participants’ justifications of the UEUV workplace behaviors, but their appreciation for the portrayals. According to Oliver and Bartsch (2010), although enjoyment is associated with positive affective reactions such as thrills and excitement, appreciation is related to more poignant media experiences that have been typically associated with serious genres like documentaries. This distinction allows for a nuanced way of understanding viewers’ gratification. Given that the television series we discussed in focus groups were those that our participants self-reported to have enjoyed watching regularly, enjoyment was assumed. But, based on this theme, which emerged in our participants’ discussion that UEUV workplace portrayals offered meaningful, relatable, and deep human experiences, we may conclude that appreciation (possibly in addition to enjoyment) is key to adolescents’ use of television content as a source of VAS. Following Oliver and Bartsch’s (2010) explanation, when adolescent viewers see television characters in complex workplace situations requiring difficult decisions to (or not to) engage in UEUV behaviors, appreciation would likely arise as they are cognitively stimulated and challenged through their observations of the character’s behaviors (yet not overcharged).

Finally, Research Question 3 explored how adolescents applied their interpretations of televised UEUV workplace behaviors to their own career expectations. One of the two main themes we identified (i.e., learning about potential benefits associated with UEUV behaviors) is consistent with findings of past research that watching glamorous media portrayals of occupations leads to young viewers’ development of extrinsic

work values—more so than intrinsic ones—and desire for jobs requiring minimum effort (e.g., Hoffner et al., 2008; Signorielli, 1993). The unique contribution of our finding is showing that such development can occur through viewing portrayals of workplace behaviors that do not meet moral standards. Our focus group participants understood that television characters' extravagant lifestyles were associated with the characters' morally undesirable behaviors, but they were able to separate the moral values from the extrinsic values of the profession in forming their career expectations. As we discussed earlier, this may be, in part, because the valence of behavioral consequences is often unclear and mixed when it comes to depictions of the workplace. Morally undesirable behaviors at work can be seen as having personally rewarding outcomes (e.g., overloading an assistant with personal chores), while desirable professional conducts can have personally negative outcomes (e.g., medical professionals risk their safety to save others). This suggests the importance of considering the multidimensional nature of UEUV workplace behaviors in research examining professional moral learning based on media exposure; for example, future research can examine whether and why television series' VAS effects might be stronger when television portrayals of UEUV workplace behaviors are shown to have more personally desirable outcomes than professional, or vice versa.

Another theme we identified in response to Research Question 3 (i.e., motivation to pursue televised professions and change the negative stereotypes) can offer an explanation about the socializing effects of televised UEUV workplace behaviors leading to mixed outcomes. As discussed in our findings, focus group participants who had been previously exposed to the televised occupations and committed to pursuing similar careers reacted defensively to and drew their intrinsic motivation from portrayals of UEUV behaviors. This indicated that adolescents, who have experienced extensive VAS before media exposure have likely developed skills to selectively adopt, reject, or critique VAS messages from ambiguous portrayals of UEUV workplace behaviors. Based on this finding, we may expect that televised UEUV workplace behaviors' outcome in the personal dimension matters more than their consequence in the professional dimension for adolescents who have little exposure and commitment to pursuing the televised occupation, compared with those who have relatively higher previous exposure and commitment to the same occupation (cf. Nabi & Clark, 2008). For instance, portrayals of "mean business owners" who enjoy personal wealth from overworking employees would not easily affect the professional moral values of the adolescents who are experienced in and/or determined to pursuing business careers, whereas adolescents with less exposure and/or commitment may be more easily enticed by the personal benefits the television characters seem to enjoy.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is not without limitations. First, our focus group participants consisted of middle to late adolescents, and not early to middle adolescents (between the ages of 13 and 16) who may just begin to form interests in their future career options. In addition, the fact that all of our participants were college students should be noted, because individuals who do not attend college can have different outlooks on their careers and morally (in)appropriate workplace behaviors. Although the findings of our qualitative study were not intended to be generalizable, this limitation in our sample warrants a caution in interpreting the data.

Second, the two-year gap between the first and second phase of our study meant that the adolescent viewers had time to process VAS messages from the television series. This was not a major concern, because this study's goal was to examine their reflective moral reasoning, but the time gap raises potential limitations

to consider. For example, in focus group interviews, we showed two or three video clips from the television programs to refresh our participants' memory, which could have prevented us from capturing the natural processes of reflections on various scenes they could have recalled voluntarily if the time gap was narrower. Also, the focus groups could not systematically capture how participants' interpretations might have changed over time. Future research may consider adding a turning-point analysis to examine what or how distinct VAS messages from other sources or experiences contribute to shifting or enhancing adolescents' moral reasoning since their initial exposure to televised UEUV workplace behaviors, which would offer useful information for educators and career counselors.

Lastly, this study did not consider genre differences, which could reveal insights about the genre patterns of UEUV workplace portrayals and their implications on VAS. The 13 most watched television series among adolescents (i.e., our content analysis data) represented four genres: drama/thriller ($n = 6$), animated comedy/sitcom ($n = 4$), reality ($n = 2$), and comedy/sitcom ($n = 1$). On average, 40 codes appeared per comedy/sitcom genre; 34 per animated comedy/sitcom; 10 per drama/thriller; and one per reality. The fact that the comedy genre most frequently showed UEUV workplace behaviors warrants a separate analysis of this specific genre to identify nuanced ways in which such portrayals are embedded in the comedic narratives (beyond humorizing and downplaying the negative behaviors) and the mechanisms by which young viewers process them. As Bilandzic, Hastall, and Sukalla (2017) note, though genre boundaries are often "softened" by the commonalities found across genres (e.g., our focus group participants generally agreed on realism of UEUV workplace behaviors found across all four genres), genre differences can help to explicate the differential VAS effects of media content. Thus, future research can examine topics such as how adolescents' professional moral cues acquired from various other VAS sources or genres interact with their processing of satirical representations of UEUV workplace behaviors shown in the comedy/sitcom genre.

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