

BUYING FROM A FRIEND: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF TWO TEleshopping PROGRAMS

By Philip J. Auter and Roy L. Moore

A preliminary study was conducted to content-analyze random samples of two teleshopping programs (*The Fashion Channel* and *Quality Value Convenience Network*), using a measure of content interactivity and a locus of control message index. QVC spent more time in high parasocial interaction as well as low interaction, while *The Fashion Channel* was highest on medium interaction. QVC also offered significantly more external positive and negative messages than *The Fashion Channel*. Based on the indications of previous research, it appears that QVC was better tailoring its message for its intended target audience than *The Fashion Channel* was at the time of the study.



Structuring a program to attract the largest audience possible involves a variety of content variables – many of them visual. Behavioral styles of on-air talent may affect audience parasocial interaction – the perceived “interpersonal relationship” audience members have with TV personalities. Programs that sell products (or points of view) to audience members may vary in their use of compliance-gaining techniques. This could affect audience interpretation of messages. The goal of this preliminary study is to compare two teleshopping shows with different formats to see how they utilize parasocial behavior and compliance-gaining techniques. Teleshopping shows were chosen because (1) they are generally similar across variables not being studied and (2) because they are unique in their attempt to sell specific products directly to viewers.

Parasocial interaction (PSI) is the mock social relationship audience members develop with media personae. Television personalities encourage parasocial involvement in a number of different ways including duplicating interpersonal verbal and nonverbal style (small talk), and maintaining a supporting cast of “friends” of which viewers are members by extension.¹

It has been hypothesized that parasocial interaction is one of many important motives in audience use of television and selection of programming.² PSI has been found to be an important gratification sought and/or obtained by television viewers and has been linked to attention during viewing as well as intention to watch a program later.³ More recently, Conway and Rubin have found that “[PSI] may be more important for viewing intent and expectations

Literature Review

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than a program's content."⁴ As nearly all shows attempt to hold viewer interest, it seems important to measure the parasocial interaction potential of various programs within a television genre to determine the most effective ways of maintaining attention. The teleshopping genre seem to be an ideal medium for this analysis as these shows typically have fewer structural means (e.g., plot, specific beginning and end times) of holding viewer interest. Thus it would seem that efficient utilization of available methods of holding viewer interest - such as fostering PSI - would be even more important to producers of this type of programming.

Although several researchers have suggested that camera work and other technical aspects of program production could allow programs to mimic true interpersonal interactions, no system of content analysis has been developed to categorize television content based on its PSI potential.⁵ A primary goal of this study was to develop and test such an instrument. The researchers have chosen to label it the *Content Interactivity Level* (CIL) index since it categorizes television content based on its level of parasocial interactivity.

The study also looks at compliance-gaining techniques, using the social psychology theory of locus of control. *Locus of control* (the location of control over one's destiny) is typically divided into external vs. internal control. Rotter defined external control as the perception that one's destiny is controlled by chance or "powerful others," but not by oneself. People with an internal locus of control, on the other hand, believe that they are the master of their destiny.⁶ Marwell and Schmitt discovered a number of compliance-gaining techniques such as promise, threat and expertise that Wheeless, Barraclough and Stewart have said would be interpreted differently by internals than by externals.⁷ Internals are more interested in gaining information about a situation and the demands of a request while externals are more concerned with the desires of the requester. Externals appear to be more affected by threat and promise, while internals would be more interested in expertise. However, Phares also noted that internals can cope with potentially threatening situations.⁸

According to some studies, females tend to be more external than males.⁹ This is particularly salient since marketing research has shown that women appear to make up a larger portion of the teleshopping audience than men do. Kleiber and Crandall have linked the leisure ethic with externals - thereby adding more support to the hypothesis that television viewers, in general, and teleshoppers, in particular, are more likely to be externals.¹⁰ While no locus of control (I-E) instrument has been developed for message study, clusters of compliance-gaining techniques developed by Marwell and Schmitt lend themselves well to I-E message study.¹¹

The format of most teleshopping shows is simple. Products are showcased by one or more salespersons ("hosts") and viewers use toll-free numbers to purchase items. Teleshopping has been described as "video wallpaper," something that viewers can tune in and leave on all day, but some researchers and industry analysts consider parasocial interaction the key to teleshopping's \$1.7 billion annual success.¹² A friendly, club-like atmosphere is fostered by audience participation games, theme songs, and especially live phone calls.¹³ In fact, a positive correlation has been found between parasocial interaction and number of items purchased in a survey of people buying from a major teleshopping service.¹⁴

Relatively recent studies have shown that, contrary to popular belief, the typical teleshopper is generally more affluent and better educated than the average consumer.¹⁵ Audience make-up varies throughout time frames, with women dominating in the mid-morning and men during prime time. Analysts

believe that women make up the largest total audience of these programs.¹⁶ Regardless of gender, the regular customer makes 15-17 purchases a year and is the mainstay of the teleshopping network.¹⁷

As parasocial interaction has been found to correlate with both viewing attention and intention, as well as buying behavior in teleshoppers, it was expected that a more successful show – ultimately defined in terms of sales, but initially in terms of viewing attention – would need to manipulate content so that segments of more interactive programming could be included. It was also felt that, based on an analysis of the demographic and psychographic makeup of teleshopping viewers, the best message mix from a compliance-gaining standpoint would focus primarily on externals. Such a message mix should consist of positive external reinforcement, such as promise, and limited use of negative external reinforcement such as threat. A limited amount of such negative messages, combined with internally oriented messages such as expertise about a product, should foster compliance in the smaller number of internally oriented viewers as well. Two teleshopping shows with different formats were intentionally chosen to test the CIL and compliance-gaining instruments.

Method

A random sample of two teleshopping shows – *The Fashion Channel* and Quality Value Convenience Network (QVC), a much more interactive program than *The Fashion Channel* with on-air phone calls and several viewer games – was drawn over a one-week period from October 5-11, 1988. These particular shopping programs were chosen because they both were readily available in the market area of the study and appeared to be quite different in their program content. *The Fashion Channel* segments usually consisted of two salespeople who chatted with each other about the product on sale at the moment. QVC primarily relied on one host who either pitched the product to the general audience or conversed directly via telephone with a viewer/customer. Two-hour samples of each network were stratified into fifteen-minute segments so each was represented by two first quarter hour segments (:00-:15), two second quarter hour segments (:15-:30), two third quarter hour segments (:30-:45) and two fourth quarter hour segments (:45-:00). Two segments that were missed due to VCR mechanical difficulties were replaced with the next available randomly stratified times from the original list of times drawn.

Each segment was content analyzed for amounts and levels of parasocial interactivity as well as number and types of compliance-gaining messages. Coding was done separately for video and audio components of each segment because it was felt that these two message channels might be used differently. Only separate analyses would reveal such differences. It was also felt that coders would more accurately perform their task if they were only required to attend to either the audio or video as these programs appeared to be extremely message-rich, which could have distracted coding efforts. Examples of each coding category were provided to the coders.

A four category content interactivity level (CIL) instrument was developed, and both audio and video messages were timed and categorized. Messages were categorized as *No Interaction*, *Low Interaction*, *Medium Interaction* or *High Interaction*. *No Interaction* messages contained absolutely no visual or audible interaction with the salesperson. In *Low Interaction* messages a salesperson could be seen or heard, but they were not felt to be interacting with other people. In *Medium Interaction* messages the salesperson interacted visibly or audibly with on or off stage crew. *High Interaction* messages consisted of direct

interaction with the viewers. A video example of this was a salesperson waving to customers. Audio examples included salespeople conversing on-the-air with a customer. In another study, intercoder reliability for the audio and video instruments were found to be .92 (r^2) and .97 (r^2), respectively.¹⁸ Amounts of each type of CIL content were totaled and reported in number of seconds.

Segments were also coded using a Locus of Control (I-E) content analysis instrument adapted from Marwell and Schmitt's compliance-gaining techniques study. For the purposes of this study, Marwell and Schmitt's first three factors – rewarding activity, punishing activity and expertise – were renamed *External Positive Messages*, *External Negative Messages*, and *Internal Messages* to better fit the locus of control language. *External Positive Messages* fell into one of three distinct subgroups: *Pre-giving* – evidence of something being offered before compliance is requested; *Liking* – when the salesperson creates a friendly, likable mood; and *Promise* – when an inducement is offered for compliance (purchasing a product). *External Negative Messages* were subdivided into the following two groups: *Threat* – when the threat of punishing activity is used to pressure compliance, such as use of a time limit clock or counting down the diminishing number of items left to buy; and *Aversion Stimulus* – when “punishment” is meted out to those who didn't comply as when “sold out” signs are posted on the screen. *Internal Messages* all dealt with salesperson expertise about the specific product being offered at the time and/or about how the product could be purchased. A fourth category, *Neutral Messages*, was used to code station logos and any messages that were not compliance-gaining attempts and did not fit into the first three categories.

The total number of instances of each type of Locus of Control message was tabulated. Coding these messages was a much more complicated task than coding amounts of CIL, however. Each individual video message was noted and put into one of the four categories. Each new camera cut (from product to salesperson, to a different shot of the product, etc.) was coded as a new message. Each individual text message or video inset was also coded as a separate message. When new messages replaced old, either in the videotape or the videotext areas, they were recorded as new messages. Each individual audio message was also noted and categorized. Each complete thought – whether about a product attribute or a customer's family – was coded as a separate message. When new messages (thoughts) replaced old (new topic, changed subject, etc.), they were recorded as new messages. A thought could be discussed by more than one individual, but it was still considered one message.

A one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed for each instrument and subcategory to attempt to establish similarities and differences in the message content of the two programs. Omega², “an estimate of the strength of association between the independent variable and the population dependent variable” was calculated for each significant F value.¹⁹

Results

Message segments in the PSI analysis were time coded and did not overlap. Thus, the grand total of all message categories should equal 900 seconds (15 minutes) for any segment coded. Some coder error undoubtedly occurred; the fact that the minimum and maximum total times were 777 and 978, respectively bear this out. But, although the minimum was 2:03 minutes shy of 15:00, the standard error of the mean was only 7.91 and the standard deviation was 44.74. Such error is therefore probably due to outliers.

The differences on the CIL instrument were very pronounced (see Table 1). There was no significant difference between programs in the no interaction

category, however. This finding may be deceptive, because, as noted later, there was a highly significant difference at the no interaction level for both the audio and video subcategories. The differences run counter and cancelled each other when added. The rest of the instrument was significant at the $p < .01$ level. ANOVA results revealed that QVC contained significantly more low and high PSI content (see Table 1). *The Fashion Channel* was much higher in medium PSI than QVC, devoting more than a third of its programming time to medium levels of parasocial interaction (see Table 1). These variances were expected and appear to be the result of the different program formats utilized by the two shows. Because QVC almost never had more than one on-air host, the program was dominated by high and low interaction and was almost devoid of medium interaction. On the other hand, the Fashion Channel segments consisted almost exclusively of medium interaction due to the fact that they always had two hosts but never provided viewers a chance to phone in and chat.

When Video only was analyzed, the results were essentially the same (see Table 2). QVC dominated low interaction content and also had significantly more high interaction video content. *The Fashion Channel* had significantly more medium interaction content. However, in the case of video only, *The Fashion Channel* dominated the no interaction category as well.

All audio message ANOVAs were significant at the $p < .01$ level and again ran to form with the exception of no interaction, which was mostly QVC (see Table 3). *The Fashion Channel* nearly always had someone talking and therefore segments rarely contained no interaction content. QVC had a significantly greater amount of low and high interaction audio content. *The Fashion Channel* had a much greater amount of medium interaction audio content than QVC. It is interesting to note that QVC's high interaction audio content (25 percent of the audio message) far outstrips its video high interaction because phone calls are often heard over close-up shots of the product. And sometimes,

TABLE 1
Oneway Analysis of Variance for Content Interactivity Levels by Program

Category	Program	Mean Seconds	SD	Source	DF	Mean Squares	F	Omega ²
No PSI	QVC	234.50	215.63	Between	1	100800.50	1.15	
	Fashion	346.75	359.48	Within	30	87859.43		
	Total			Total	31			
Low PSI	QVC	518.44	185.60	Between	1	772213.78	18.29**	.35
	Fashion	207.75	223.55	Within	30	42211.50		
	Total			Total	31			
Medium PSI	QVC	4.13	8.24	Between	1	828828.13	18.03**	.35
	Fashion	326.00	303.13	Within	30	45977.39		
	Total			Total	31			
High PSI	QVC	135.69	124.96	Between	1	115320.03	13.07**	.27
	Fashion	15.63	45.01	Within	30	8820.37		
	Total			Total	31			

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

TABLE 2

Oneway Analysis of Variance for Content Interactivity Level Video Subcategories by Program

Category	Program	Mean Seconds	SD	Source	DF	Mean Squares	F	Omega ²
No PSI	QVC	413.75	159.66	Between	1	303876.56	17.91**	.51
	Fashion	689.38	91.91	Within	14	16968.53		
	Total			Total	15			
Low PSI	QVC	428.88	211.30	Between	1	500910.06	19.80**	.54
	Fashion	75.00	77.11	Within	14	25295.78		
	Total			Total	15			
Medium PSI	QVC	3.63	7.13	Between	1	51529.13	11.04**	.39
	Fashion	117.13	96.36	Within	14	4668.34		
	Total			Total	15			
High PSI	QVC	45.25	55.01	Between	1	8055.06	5.32*	.21
	Fashion	.38	1.06	Within	14	1513.81		
	Total			Total	15			

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

without sound as a guide, it would be hard to determine if a salesperson were talking directly to someone. Although coders credited *The Fashion Channel* with a small amount of audio high interaction, the researchers believe this to be the result of misinterpretation of comments which were not directed at a specific individual but at the audience in general.

TABLE 3

Oneway Analysis of Variance for Content Interactivity Level Audio Subcategories by Program

Category	Program	Mean Seconds	SD	Source	DF	Mean Squares	F	Omega ²
No PSI	QVC	55.25	26.49	Between	1	10455.06	24.96**	.60
	Fashion	4.13	11.67	Within	14	418.88		
	Total			Total	15			
Low PSI	QVC	608.00	104.10	Between	1	286225.00	7.98**	.30
	Fashion	340.50	246.71	Within	14	35850.00		
	Total			Total	15			
Medium PSI	QVC	4.63	9.69	Between	1	1124660.25	25.56**	.61
	Fashion	534.88	296.47	Within	14	43992.91		
	Total			Total	15			
High PSI	QVC	226.13	108.35	Between	1	152490.25	19.62**	.54
	Fashion	30.88	61.72	Within	14	7773.84		
	Total			Total	15			

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

TABLE 4
Oneway Analysis of Variance for Locus of Control Categories by Program

Category	Program	Mean Number	SD	Source	DF	Mean Squares	F	Omega ²
External Positive	QVC	23.06	5.48	Between	1	247.53	5.29*	.12
	Fashion	17.50	7.97	Within	30	46.76		
	Total			Total	31			
Pre-giving	QVC	3.44	4.15	Between	1	57.78	5.92*	.13
	Fashion	.75	1.48	Within	30	9.76		
	Total			Total	31			
Liking	QVC	10.69	4.57	Between	1	63.28	3.80	
	Fashion	7.88	3.52	Within	30	16.64		
	Total			Total	31			
Promise	QVC	8.94	3.59	Between	1	.03	.00	
	Fashion	8.88	6.33	Within	30	26.49		
	Total			Total	31			
External Negative	QVC	4.75	3.73	Between	1	60.50	4.74*	.10
	Fashion	2.00	3.41	Within	30	12.77		
	Total			Total	31			
Threat	QVC	3.69	3.09	Between	1	24.50	2.38	
	Fashion	1.94	3.32	Within	30	10.28		
	Total			Total	31			
Aversion Stimulus	QVC	1.38	1.51	Between	1	8.00	7.53**	.17
	Fashion	0.00	0.00	Within	30	1.06		
	Total			Total	31			
Internal	QVC	75.88	16.39	Between	1	1725.78	3.04	
	Fashion	45.75	20.53	Within	30	567.79		
	Total			Total	31			
Neutral	QVC	9.13	3.87	Between	1	24.50	1.61	
	Fashion	5.50	5.01	Within	30	15.18		
	Total			Total	31			

*p<.05 **p<.01

When the locus of control instrument is analyzed as a whole, significant differences were discovered for external positive messages (see Table 4). QVC had almost twice as many external positive messages per 15 minute segment as did *The Fashion Channel*. The entire difference in the two programs was made up of the subcategory, pre-giving. Pre-giving had been defined as offering customers something with "no strings attached." QVC did this chiefly through its Lucky Number game, in which any member viewer could win "shopper dollars" if his or her membership number matched the randomly drawn number. Not only did QVC segments contain more external positive messages, they also carried more external negative messages (see Table 4). All of this difference fell under the subcategory of aversion stimulus. QVC was more likely to tell viewers that it was too late to buy a product ("sold out") and that

TABLE 5
Oneway Analysis of Variance for Locus of Control Video Subcategories by Program

Category	Program	Mean Number	SD	Source	DF	Mean Squares	F	Omega ²
External Positive	QVC	25.25	3.49	Between	1	612.56	20.60**	.55
	Fashion	12.88	6.88	Within	14	29.74		
	Total			Total	15			
Pre-giving	QVC	5.25	5.23	Between	1	110.25	8.06**	.31
	Fashion	0.00	0.00	Within	14	13.68		
	Total			Total	15			
Liking	QVC	12.50	2.51	Between	1	45.56	3.82	
	Fashion	9.13	4.19	Within	14	11.92		
	Total			Total	15			
Promise	QVC	7.50	3.34	Between	1	56.25	5.57*	.22
	Fashion	3.75	3.01	Within	14	10.11		
	Total			Total	15			
External Negative	QVC	5.88	2.80	Between	1	138.06	35.22**	.68
	Fashion	0.00	0.00	Within	14	3.92		
	Total			Total	15			
Threat	QVC	4.50	3.16	Between	1	81.00	16.20**	.49
	Fashion	0.00	0.00	Within	14	5.00		
	Total			Total	15			
Aversion Stimulus	QVC	1.38	1.51	Between	1	7.56	6.67*	.26
	Fashion	0.00	0.00	Within	14	1.13		
	Total			Total	15			
Internal	QVC	75.88	16.39	Between	1	3630.06	10.52**	.37
	Fashion	45.75	20.53	Within	14	345.03		
	Total			Total	15			
Neutral	QVC	9.13	3.87	Between	1	52.56	2.62	
	Fashion	5.50	5.01	Within	14	20.06		
	Total			Total	15			

*p<.05 **p<.01

they should be quicker next time. The threats of products selling fast, limited quantities, etc. were essentially the same for both programs. There was no significant difference in either internal (product oriented) or neutral messages.

No significant difference in the audio portion of the messages was detected with the locus of control instrument. All of the significance can be attributed to the video portion of the segments (see Table 5). External positive messages again appeared most frequently on QVC. Pre-giving again was dominated by QVC. The subcategory of promise was also significant, but only at the p<.05 level. While both shows used "on-air price" discounts and "introductory price" discounts as promise incentives, QVC also has two games that customers may play only if they are making a purchase.

External negative video messages were used exclusively by QVC. Aver-

sion stimulus messages consisted of purchase time-limit clocks – which were represented on virtually every product sold – and the less frequent “sold out” signs. *The Fashion Channel* used no visual external negative messages. Internal messages were significantly different as well. QVC did have a busier video image than *The Fashion Channel*. There was no significant difference in neutral messages.

This study was a preliminary attempt to analyze current teleshopping programming and suggest a better mix of messages based on audience demographics. Levels of content interactivity fell along specific but predictable lines. In terms of compliance-gaining techniques, QVC used more of all types of messages, virtually inundating audiences with a message-rich picture.

At the time of this study, *The Fashion Channel* did not appear to be as effective in communicating with the average audience member as QVC. The primary difference lies in the parasocial interaction breakdown. Grant et al. found a positive relationship between parasocial interaction and number of items purchased.²⁰ Since sales are shopping networks’ primary goal, high interaction should not be continuous. QVC averages one on-air call per item. The program would seem to benefit by increasing medium level interaction and in fact appears to have done so since this study was performed. *The Fashion Channel*, however, with essentially no high interaction in the study sample, was apparently not hitting the mark. “Eye contact” with the camera was rare even with medium interaction.

In terms of compliance-gaining techniques, QVC again appeared to better tailor its program to the audiences’ needs. Both programs devoted the majority of their air time to internal messages. This was necessary as one important goal is to inform viewers of the attributes of a product and how that product can be purchased over the telephone. Still, QVC used extremely large amounts of external messages. QVC also used more internal messages than *The Fashion Channel*, but the analyses of variance suggest that the differences in number of external messages were much stronger than the difference in internal messages.

One interesting footnote – QVC acquired the CVN Network in late 1989 and purchased all rights to the affiliation agreements and the satellite transponder formerly held by *The Fashion Channel*. Initially, *The Fashion Channel*’s format was altered to appear much more like QVC but *The Fashion Channel* eventually folded and re-emerged as The QVC Fashion Channel with 24-hour programming.²¹

The closeness to the average total message time of 900 seconds, combined with the high F values and levels of significance, suggest the CIL instrument is relatively clear, concise, and well-suited to program analysis. But more work needs to be done. The instrument may be too basic in its present design. A measure with more categories – each more discriminating than those of the current instrument – may be a stronger categorization tool. Further, the instrument should be converted into a measurement scale – such that different programs within and across genres could be compared based on their content interactivity level score.

A more comprehensive test of the instrument would be to compare a broad range of programming identified as fostering PSI. And, reliability and validity need to be established through repeated use. External validity of this measure was not checked in this study because the current research was focused on comparing the content differences in two different programs within the same

Conclusions

Directions for Future Research

genre. To address the question of external validity, an empirical relationship must be established between content analysis results of programming using the CIL instrument and audience scores on a PSI measure such as Rubin, Perse and Powell's in a post-viewing environment.²² Although this has not been done in the teleshopping genre, a study of this sort was recently undertaken in the genre of situation comedy.²³ Two versions of the same sitcom were showed to different audiences who then filled out the Rubin PSI scale. The tapes were essentially the same, but were edited so that levels of High PSI content varied. As hypothesized, respondents viewing the version perceived as more interactive—based on a content analysis using the CIL instrument—scored significantly higher on the PSI scale than their counterparts — $t(91.35) = 3.17, p = .001$. Although these are the results of just one small study, they appear to begin to address the question of the CIL measure's external validity. Finally, another important external validity check that should be performed would be to compare these results to results based on a content analysis performed without separating audio and video messages. This would help to determine which method of coding — separate or combined — better reflects a program's true content interactivity level.

Interactive shopping via home computers is an area of communication that may also lend itself well to research on parasocial interaction. A 1989 survey by Response Analysis found that "electronic shopping will not only increase but also affect mail and 800-number purchasing behavior."²⁴ One service, Prodigy Interactive Personal Service (a joint venture of IBM and Sears), is already on board with dozens of national merchants offering entertainment, information and shopping via on-line home computers.²⁵ Although the technology and presentation of interactive computer home shopping are different from cable home shopping, both tout convenience, service and quality as their hallmarks, with consumer interaction the key to success. Will parasocial interaction be the essential element for this newer service, as it apparently was for cable home shopping?

Using clusters of compliance-gaining techniques to categorize television messages is also promising, but may be more limited as much TV does not ask for compliance from viewers in the strictest sense — only that they continue watching the program. Still, with further refinement, this category system could be used to study the effectiveness of various message mixes across a variety of programming, including: broadcast advertising, "infomercials" television ministries, and political advertising. Like the CIL instrument, future research using the compliance-gaining instrument should look first at external validity. Does a certain message mix, aimed at an audience believed to be of a certain I-E orientation, actually induce compliance?

NOTES

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