SpongeBob SquarePants: Pop Culture Tsunami or More?

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"WHO LIVES IN A PINEAPPLE UNDER THE SEA? ABSORBENT AND yellow and porous is he. If nautical nonsense be something you wish" then hop on board and join what has been dubbed a popular culture cartoon tsunami, *SpongeBob SquarePants* (SB). Over 15 million viewers per week listen to that opening theme song and then watch the show (Armstrong 44). SB includes a menagerie of characters, including the lead character, his friend Patrick Starfish, his boss Mr. Krabbs, his surly neighbor Squidward, his pet snail Gary, a friend Sandy the Squirrel who lives under the sea, and a host of other characters. Plots revolve around SB's escapades at work, home, school, and play. The show is aimed at children in the 2–11 age group, and it is the top-rated children's show on network and cable in that particular market (Maughan 25). However, a variety of audiences are attracted to the show. Nielson Media Research reports that twenty-two percent of regular viewers of the SB show fall in the 18–49-year-old age group (Beatty A1). In fact, Nickelodeon, the network that airs the show, runs episodes at a variety of times throughout a day, including late at night, such as 11:30 p.m., obviously targeting an older crowd (A1). Some studies report that nearly a third of SB's audience is 18 years of age or older (Armstrong 44). Famous and vocal fans of the show include Bruce Willis, Jerry Lewis, Jennifer Love Hewitt, Dr. Dre, and Sigourney Weaver.

This children's show is atypical not just in terms of audience popularity but audience segmentation. Such segmentation is punctuated even more when examining the marketing and multimedia prolifer-

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ation of SB. Ruth Sarlin, vice-president of brand marketing at Nickelodeon, reports that SB is "a marketer's dream come true" (Wagner 26). Products geared for children include plush toys, dolls, fast food prizes, posters, costumes, slippers, party decorations, pillows, and even a Barbie special edition SB fan doll. Other atypical products geared for older children and especially adults include fishing poles, mud flaps, jewelry, toe rings, adult underwear, neckties, and bowling balls. During 2002, the SB franchise had generated over $750 million in merchandise alone (Elkin S4).

Multimedia marketing has moved SB beyond just a television show with lots of shelf merchandise. Computer games about SB have proven quite popular (Pham T4). Simon and Schuster book publishers issued four SB books in August 2000, which led to many more books, including a set of novelty plush books, which sold 120,000 copies in just one month (Maughan 25). A Yahoo! Search for "SpongeBob" will typically result in over 430,000 web results, including official and unofficial websites. Most unusual is the website titled the "Church of SpongeBob SquarePants," which is self-described as "a church that finds joy in the little things in life, and isn't afraid to say so" (Church of SpongeBob).

SB is big business, ultimately stemming from the successful television show of course, but what is most interesting from a media studies perspective is more than just the sheer popularity. How can a cartoon intended for a very defined young audience have such a broad based appeal? In order to pursue SB's appeal, this paper reviews pertinent media research on attraction to children's programming, which may suggest more insightful questions and guide an analysis of SB in order to explore how a seemingly innocuous television show can communicate powerful ideas to audiences.

Relevant Media Research

Since the popular and broad-based attraction of SB is so great, what does current media theory and research say about attraction and children's shows? Joanne Cantor and Amy Nathanson examine the attraction children have to violent television shows. While SB is not necessarily violent, Cantor and Nathanson's study, in a more general sense, highlights how children are attracted to shows that provide purpose and active viewer response. They conclude their study with a call for more

research into how children use television for specific purposes. Such research may yield additional insight into the attraction of a show for young audiences. A similar call for research in attraction and children's television is made by George Comstock and Erica Scharrer, whose review of the uses of television suggest researchers examine how television influences children while growing up and carries over to their interest in television, particularly content, and specifically children's programming, when they reach adulthood. While the authors encourage more longitudinal studies, their call for research that monitors the use of television over time and in different age groups is pertinent advice. Alisha Crawley et al. suggest a similar approach for such study.

Patti Valkenburg and Sabine Janssen focus on attraction and culture as opposed to a predominately American focus as with most other research cited. They investigate cultural differences of attraction between children in the United States and Denmark. Their study, interestingly, ended up proving that gender is more of a factor, as boys in both cultures are attracted by action and violence. Girls are attracted to innocuousness and comprehensibility. Such findings raise questions about gender as it relates to core appeals of shows in children. Valkenburg and Janssen suggest more research into this subject of attraction.

Ultimately, attraction of a children's show seems of interest to media researchers, but a caution about assumptions should be made. For example, Cantor and Nathanson operate from an antisocial media usage viewpoint. Barbara Wilson et al. also punctuate how much of children's television research focuses on antisocial effects. Not all children's shows are antisocial, of course. Much research, albeit more could be done, has been conducted on prosocial children's media (Mares and Woodard). Prosocial media children's programming has examined interaction styles, altruism, and stereotypes via content analyses, experiments, and correlational studies.

Typically, prosocial studies focus on magazine-type shows, departmentalized shows constructed of short segments and skits (Wilson et al. 14). Such shows include, for instance, the popular *Sesame Street* (Fisch and Truglio; Fisch, Truglio, and Cole). This issue of show type, or genre, seems important to consider here because of such prosocial associations. Jason Mittel argues in his 2001 article that television genre theory faces obstacles due to industry, audience, and culture. He suggests more work in the subject, although he focuses greatly on cultural genre analysis. Wilson et al. in their 2002 article argue that

the industry, rather than culture and audience, drives "an increasing emphasis on niche efforts and accelerated fragmentation" (13). J. Kaplan agrees by saying that "the availability of children's programming has increased and so too has the range of formats of program types within the genre of children's shows" (15). Wilson et al. say that children's shows are "not simply of one ilk" and can be cross-cultural (11). They identify five forms of children's television shows and how each serves different purposes. The five include slapstick, superhero, adventure, social relations, and magazine format. They suggest more research should be done in these subgenres, particularly their effects on children, both in terms of their form and the typical content they deliver.

James Chesebro's work on fictional entertainment genres is useful to media studies, thought it is not child specific. Chesebro notes five systems of fictional entertainment: ironic (rhetoric of the loser, like *Archie Bunker*), mimetic (slice of life, like *Happy Days*), leader centered (take charge central character, like the *Cosby Show*), romantic (ordinary people placed in extraordinary situations, like *Miami Vice*), and mythic (mystical experience, like *Star Trek*). Such classification may overlap with Wilson et al.'s child-specific system somewhat to yield new insights, especially since children's television is primarily fictional entertainment, though some might argue a few shows are more edutainment, a balanced mix of both education and entertainment. An example of the overlap might be the magazine-type show *Barney*, which includes elements of leader-centered television as well as some mimetic segments. *Teletubbies* is arguably a social relations–type show that is also very mythic. Such combinations of Chesebro's and Wilson et al.'s generic approaches may prove interesting in an analysis of children's shows like SB.

When combining this goal of genre study with the need for research on attraction and children's television shows, one may learn more about how a particular genre attracts particular audiences, no matter if the show is antisocial or prosocial. Of course, a goal of this paper is to operate from an unbiased point of view and then analytically determine what social message is perhaps being sent. What that message does, regardless of whether it is positive or negative, in its effects on children, seems worthy of scrutiny.

Especially relevant to the anti- or prosocial issue is what Lawerence Rosenkoetter argues. He says that television may contribute greatly to moral development, good or bad (464). Rosenkoetter's review of the literature in this area is inconclusive as to how large a role television

plays in the moral development of a child, but he argues that the conditions are "ripe for moving the television and morality question from its present obscurity to a priority issue for researchers" (472). From a more critical arts perspective, Karyn Rybacki and Donald Rybacki argue more definitively by saying that television shows in general, including children's programming, persuade audiences and promote social values (262). Other authors typically focus more on violence and only imply or provide tertiary comments on actual morality (Hillel; Walsh; Krcmar and Valkenburg). Other research suggests cultivation studies hold the greatest promise to determine television's influence on children (Potter). Of course, others do not have as much faith in cultivation theory, especially for studies on children and cultivation theory, since there is such a short time span of consumption (Harmon 406). Methods of research do indeed vary.

Summary of Literature and Research Goals

To summarize, the attraction to SB seems worthy of study since authors like Cantor and Nathanson justify the need for more research in that area. The atypical popularity of SB seems even more relevant in this endeavor. Further, research should not initially assume good or bad in the show but examine it for what it is, its type and function, and then seek to determine the social values that might be present in the show. Methodologically, one may take many directions. Dina Borzekowski and Thomas Robinson highlight the varied approaches taken by researchers to analyze children's television: questionnaires, case studies, interviews, logs/diaries, electronic monitors, and direct observations. As well, there exists an excess of critical studies that seek to explore similar issues. The present study blends methodologies somewhat in an attempt to answer two overriding questions: first, how does SB function as a children's show; and second, what do audiences perhaps gain from the show, either positive or negative? These questions should meet research calls dealing with the attractiveness of children's television programming, show type or genre, and social-morality issues in children's television.

Methodology

The first research question is more than just a simple description of the show. While classification of show type may prove a useful starting

point, something more analytical is required to truly unearth the inner workings of SB. This portion of the analysis is more critical in nature. Noted media and television researcher and critic Paul Orlick, in his text, *Critiquing Television Content*, suggests an interesting and applicable approach to analyzing television programming, including children's, is to examine it from certain planes of perceptions, specifically the two planes that deal most directly with a general audience interpretation of a text. Such an analysis allows a critic to assess how the receiver may comprehend a text. The first perceptual plane is the sensuous, which "involves seeking out a stimulus for the pleasure of the sound or sight itself" (64). This plane is one in which receivers get lost in the television show because the programming offers some relief from boredom, pain, or the simple condition of reality. The expressive plane, on the other hand, "deals with the complex world of intellectual meaning" (65). Orlick notes that "the critic's role in helping delineate the expressive plane becomes crucial" (65). How so? Orlick explains that while sensuous viewership requires no guidance or keen insights to simply enjoy a show, comprehension in the expressive plane "requires more acuity than many people are prepared" (65). The meaning of a program "usually demands more of a credible critic's attention" (65).

Combining these planes of perception with Orlick's work on two other planes, biopsychological and cultural relativism, makes the method more complex and insightful (160). The biopsychological plane posits that humans are wired in certain ways to respond to certain stimuli. For example, laughter is a common global response to something funny. However, cultural relativism may dictate what is or is not to be considered humorous in a given situation or how particular audiences perceive and react to any form of content for that matter. At the root level, this dichotomy is the nature–nurture argument. Of course, neither of these sets of terms, sensuous–expressive and biopsychological–cultural, should be taken as either/or but as more or less critiques.

Orlick's ideas may prove useful in analyzing how SB functions as a show that has broad-based appeal. The method might yield additional insight into perhaps why viewers are attracted to it. However, more conclusive evidence on what the show actually means to children—what it teaches them—may best be done by a questionnaire. As for the methodological blend suggested here, questionnaire data is used but not so much for detailed statistical analyses. The locus of validity is

with the critical analyses, and the questionnaire research should either help validate or refute conclusions from that critical analysis. Open-ended questions may also contribute beyond validation and add to the analysis as a whole.

The one-page questionnaire (see Appendix A) contains two major sections. Section one requests from participants general demographic information including age, gender, and education. The remaining questions deal with SB. These questions determine amount of viewership of the show, favorite character, reason for watching, and lessons/themes learned from the show.

The questionnaire was created to administer to a variety of age groups including a K-4 grade sampling (early grade school), a 9–12 grade sampling (high school), and a college sampling (freshman and sophomore undergraduate). This is in an attempt to not only meet Comstock and Scharrer's call for more study into comparison of age groups but also to help determine the broad-based popularity of a show intended for a smaller market. Analysis of these groups should yield insight into what the show communicates to receivers in response to this study's second major research question.

The questionnaire was administrated to the K-4 group via the author and three assistants. Participants were members of an audience before the showing of a children's theatre production at a small college in the Midwest. Participants were chosen at random by the researchers during five different days of production. Participants came from a variety of surrounding grade schools (total seven different schools). Eighty-one participants were surveyed. No duplication of questions was permitted. The researcher and the assistants used the questionnaire as an interview sheet to insure completed responses and to ask follow-up probes if a young participant did not understand something.

High school and college participants were administered the questionnaire in survey format. The instructions at the top of the form were read and then participants were asked to complete the questions and turn in the form. High school students range in ages 15–19 with a mean age of 16. Students are from a small midwestern high school. Surveys were distributed in required general science courses to insure a general population of majors and interests. Sixty-nine participants answered the questionnaire. College participants ranged in ages from 18–42 with a mean age of 20. Two of the college participants are returning students of older ages. Thirty-five college students

completed the questionnaire and all attend a small midwestern two-year college.

Analysis and Discussion

Critical Approach

Genre. Cantor and Nathanson in their analysis of children's attraction to violent television suggest that the shows children view are probably leader-centered and mythic fictional entertainment. The descriptions of the shows also suggest they are mostly slapstick, superhero, and adventure children's shows. These descriptions are typical and expected. SB, however, seems atypical in terms of fictional entertainment and children's programming genres. Beginning with Chesebro's fictional entertainment classification seems logical prior to the more child-specific system of Wilson et al.'s.

As for Chesebro's typology, SB crosses the lines of genre separation. Obviously, SB is an example of ironic television, or the rhetoric of the loser. The main character is many times ignorant of the social norms and rules. While SB is no Archie Bunker, he does falter in social situations, such as the "Ripped Pants" episode where SB pushes a joke too far and offends people. Yet SB also has traits of mimetic television. Mimetic fictional entertainment is a slice-of-life-type genre, where common people exhibit common experiences. Conflict typically results from the main character breaking a rule, experiencing guilt, being mildly punished, and growing wiser from the experience. Does mimetic fictional entertainment have to be nonanimation and of human form? Not necessarily. Such qualities surely would increase a mimetic argument, perhaps, but most of the narrative traits are highly typical of SB episodes. Mimetic is not the same as verisimilitude. In the episode, "Ripped Pants," SB goes beyond social norms of pushing a joke too far. After being shunned by his friends, he feels remorse for his behavior. In the end, he learns valuable lessons about pushing humor on people and the need for attention.

Somewhat paradoxical to the ironic loser and the common mimetic person is the leader-centered fictional television show. SB is probably less of this type than the other two, yet in many episodes SB exhibits—albeit in a role-reversal of sorts—leader-centered traits. He becomes a take-charge character. The many episodes featuring two retired

superheroes Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy, often include SB as a leader who is concerned with stopping social ills and injustice. Other similar episodes cast SB as a crusader for the repressed, like in the "F.U.N." episode where SB innocently but aggressively decides to befriend the town's popular enemy. SB is also the more dominant friend over Patrick.

In other episodes SB is placed in extraordinary circumstances suggesting more romantic-type fictional television. Lastly, SB also exhibits mythic fictional television in that "the central character transcends the mundane world of the audience and is confronted with a mystical experience" (Chesebro 260). SB is a sponge who lives under the sea with assorted invertebrate friends. Visually, backgrounds and colors are psychedelic. Viewers are shown a world unknown and mysterious to most. While this is no trip to Mars or through time, SB does tap into mythical qualities of fictional television.

Are all five types of children's television programming recognizable in SB? Yes, and one could stretch arguments for other shows as well. The key question is, are all five genres equally recognizable? No, ironic and mimetic types are most apparent, but elements of the others are present. Perhaps that is a reason for such popularity not just among the target audience (2–11 age group) but also older children and even adults. Since Chesebro's classification is general in approach to fictional television, that explanation seems warranted. But what of children-specific programming genres?

Wilson et al.'s children-specific programming genres illustrate similar findings about SB as Chesebro's fictional television types. Their classification also complements Chesebro's in useful ways, as the upcoming analysis will illustrate. SB is definitely a slapstick-type genre, illustrating "anthropomorphized characters [who] engage in farcical physical acts" (13). Slapstick shows also have simple plots that are typically described as silly (13). As for anthropomorphic, sponges, starfish, crabs, squids, lobsters, and fish of all sorts on SB are given distinct personalities and complex human traits such as verbal communication and sophisticated tiik yse. SB episodes are only eleven minutes in length, following, typically, a single plotline. SB has been diced up into pieces and put back together on various episodes. The show is full of sight gags and other overt comedy techniques, strongly suggesting the slapstick genre.

At times, SB exhibits qualities from the superhero genre. In the "F.U.N." episode, SB wears a super sponge cape and looks for the town's enemy, Plankton. The adventure genre is remotely obvious in some

episodes like "Sandy, SpongeBob, and the Worm," where SB and Patrick babysit a caterpillar that eventually turns into a butterfly. SB and Patrick think the butterfly is a monster that has eaten the pet caterpillar named "Wormy." They face invented potentially threatening situations, resulting in total chaos in the town of Bikini Bottom. The puzzling situation is finally unraveled at the end of the episode, a mark of adventure-type children's television.

More obvious than the superhero and adventure genres in SB is the social relationship genre, where characters must learn to get along and group interaction moves toward resolution. This is the best argument for suggesting that one genre is most dominant and might suggest that this could be a key to success for future programs that are developed. Most episodes deal with SB's innocent view of life irritating his neighbor and coworker, Squidward, or other peripheral characters. The social relationship genre is pervasive in the series, with a strong dose of slapstick.

Finally, as for the magazine genre, which is marked by short segments and skits, SB is least like this genre than the others. The eleven-minute episodes are narratives and not sketches. SB simply does not match the prerequisites of this genre.

Genre: Conclusions

A number of crucial conclusions may be made about the analysis thus far. First, Wilson et al.'s call for work in classification of children's television is partially based on the need to find out what attracts children to certain shows, an obvious link to the overriding purpose of this paper. Second, to examine SB from a generic standpoint, critics must prescribe to the process of accretion, the process "by which something builds up as material is added over time" (Rybacki and Rybacki 256). A single episode cannot tell the whole story.

One may also conclude that simple classification of SB does not explain much, except how to pigeonhole a show. While narrowcasting, aiming a program at a particular audience, is commonplace and expected in television entertainment, children's shows are not intricately divided, and what is intended for a five-year-old is also recommended for a ten-year-old. Since children at different ages have different tastes in entertainment, one may assume that SB exists as a show of many types for many people, including adults. So this portion of the analysis does tell much in terms of how the show functions to appeal to various

audience segments. The revelation of questionnaire data later in the paper may or may not help validate this conclusion.

Another conclusion that may be drawn is that there seems to be a bias in children's programming in terms of the magazine format. *Sesame Street*, *Barney*, *Mr. Rodgers* and other similar educational, prosocial (Mares and Woodard; Fisch and Truglio) are of that programming type. Is the magazine format show the prized way to construct educational television? Can SB, obviously not a magazine format show, still teach valuable lessons? Can a social relationship format show placed in a mimetic drama teach as much or at least as well as a magazine format? These are questions beyond SB, but they are issues to be explored.

Chesebro's and Wilson et al.'s classification systems do yield insight into the nature of SB, and the systems do raise valuable questions that eventually go beyond the analysis of SB. There is still room for more exploration in terms of classification and especially in regard to Orlick's schema.

Planes of Perception

Genre study accents Orlick's approach by giving the critic a descriptive base by which to assimilate the information into a more complex and provoking analysis. Since SB is highly mimetic and ironic as well as more of a slapstick and a social relationship–type show, what might that say about children and other audiences and attraction to television programming? Orlick's schema should help answer this question, and should also aid in understanding how audiences may identify with SB. Once Orlick's ideas are used to analyze SB, this essay explains how genre ideas accent Orlick's planes of perception.

At first glance, a viewer might dismiss SB as being just another mindless, bizarre, and visually interesting cartoon. One must look closer. For example, San Francisco painter Megan Archer, an avid SB fan, says that the show deals with feelings. She states, "Someone may be mad and doesn't know why, so they try to forget it all together" (Levine A5). Beyond that effect, Joshua Meyrowitz, professor of media studies at the University of New Hampshire, says in the same article that SB is more sophisticated than one might assume. The show is more than just an emotional crutch. This cartoon is a sort of brain balsam for an anxious society, yet it is not merely sensuous. People swim in shark tanks all day at work, in traffic, and at school. SB

relieves such stress by providing easygoing, simple stories with common yet valuable virtues such as, honesty is the best policy, as illustrated in the "Balloon Day" episode, where SB and Patrick steal balloons from a vendor and then suffer great guilt only to find out that it was free balloon day. Each episode turns into, as *Los Angeles Times* film critic Bettijane Levine says, a little morality play. The almost absurd optimism of SB punctuates an archetype theme of "innocence prevails" ("SpongeBob SquarePants" 136). Because of such comments, SB lies more in the expressive plane, a surprising conclusion for some, but one that is really easy to see if the show is examined closely. Initial perceptions of SB may be sensuous, a fun narrative hook of sorts for audiences who want to "veg out" in front of the television. That hook turns quickly into a moral lesson, masked as cheap fun. It contains social virtues while retaining lowbrow, with some highbrow, humor. Such formula appeases appetites for brain candy yet provides social and moral nutrients as well. Perhaps this is a reason why audiences vary: SB successfully combines cheap entertainment with substance in a uniquely interwoven manner.

What about the other plane of perception, cultural or biopsychological? On the surface, SB is very culture oriented in a metaphoric way. The main cast is a melting pot, including a sponge, a starfish, a crab, a squirrel who lives under the sea, a squid, and a plankton. However, there is a stronger case for a biopsychological perspective. For example, Stephen Hillenburg, the creator of SB, states, "Our characters act silly [. . .] and most of our jokes don't come out of pop cultural references [. . .] everyone can laugh at basic human traits that are funny" (Shattuck 13). Hillenburg says the characters are intentionally bizarre and have strange shapes and that they all share the same strangeness. The key word here is same. Yes, everybody is different, but not really. The characters are odd, special, even asexual in large part (Beatty A.1). The show stresses sameness in all its different colors and shapes. Metaphorically, Hillenburg makes an interesting observation about the main character, SB. He states, "He's a cellulose sponge. Sponges are a colonial animal, which basically means they're a bunch of cells who work together in order to survive" (Chambers 67). It is that metaphoric unity of a sponge that seems to pervade the content and social relations of the show. Biopsychological relativism also explains why mass audiences can identify with SB, a conclusion perhaps even stronger than the previous claim about expressive and sensuous appeals in the show.

One must also consider the cartoon's setting. The colors can be described as quasi-Pacific islander, but not overly so. It tries to take audiences out of real places unlike *Rug Rats in Paris*, which is very culture and site specific. True, Sandy the Squirrel is from Texas, but her placement is unnatural now. She is a squirrel who lives under the sea. Furthermore, the music is difficult to pin down to a specific type or culture as well. The show mixes island sounds, old sea songs, jazz, punk, and even diluted heavy metal. The whole show, including the music, suggests psychedelic surrealism.

How does this information relate to a biopsychological perspective? The basic premise is anticlassification, or stereotyping, which is an interesting claim especially coming off the initial part of this critical analysis. But show type and humanity are not the same thing here. Hillenburg intends on steering the same kind of whacked out characters and the look and sound of the show away from any particular culture or subculture (Levine A5). The show emphasizes sameness among creatures that seem different. In fact, SB is televised in over ten languages, including French, Russian, Japanese, and Spanish. The attraction to the show is broad in global terms. These findings also seem to support Valkenburg and Janssen's empirical study that suggests attraction to children's shows is less cultural than presumed.

Planes of Perception: Conclusions

What can one conclude now that SB seems to exist in the expressive–biopsychological plane of perception? To help address this question, the other possibilities of perception must be put into perspective. As for sensuous and cultural, most critics would label *Looney Tunes* (e.g., Bugs Bunny) as such. This is brain candy for certain taste buds, or culture specific, such as those who mostly enjoy slapstick. The next quadrant is where one would find *Sesame Street*, educational television that celebrates diversity and nurturing. The third quadrant, sensuous and biopsychological, is where one might place *Teletubbies*, brain candy for any culture, typically under three years of age. Finally, SB exists in a quadrant not typical of fictional children's television shows. The show teaches us basic humanitarian values that are cross-cultural and cross-generational.

This combination of expressive and biopsychological is unique. All humans deal with anxiety, some fear being alone, being rejected, being

the underdog. SB taps into those common insecurities experienced by everyone. He is the little nerdy squared geek inside everyone, and he shows audiences not a way out of their lives, but the calm within themselves, illustrating a unique means of identification for many.

What additional insights might one make about audiences? This cartoon plays to a very stressed out audience. Vicki Berdon, a doctoral candidate in philosophy at Indiana University, says to her, the show is happy and carefree. She states, "I don't want to think about the Middle East, terrorist threats, or all the other issues out there, so I turn on SB, but you have to know how to read between the lines" (Levine A5). That is a conclusion Professor Meyrowitz agrees with as he states, "The show is very hip in the way it is presented. There is irony and parody. It's very edgy. Because of the multilayered appeal of SB the audience is so diverse and captivated" (A5).

So, to integrate and summarize genre and the planes of perception, SB teaches audiences core, primal lessons (expressive and biopsychological). The identification audiences may have with SB's naiveté (ironic television) may strengthen the mimetic force of the moral lessons one may learn from the show. The slapstick, zany engagements and plots seem to cater to a complex society looking for relief as well as improved social relations, a very core message as humans are social creatures. Orlick's ideas help further understanding about identification audiences may have with the show. For one, content sneaks up on audiences, and two, the human mind is wired in such a way that it is attracted by humor that strikes at the core of humanity.

In conclusion, Chesebro's and Wilson et al.'s genres do aid in the processing of Orlick's schema. Hopefully, this phase of the analysis has fulfilled the critic's role as described by Orlick: "It thus is the critic's job to help both creators and their publics achieve a fuller comprehension of the work's totality" (68). In terms of this study's goals, perhaps audiences will now have greater insight into how SB functions as a children's show that attracts huge child and even adult audiences.

Questionnaire Research

K-4 Group. Respondents from the K-4 group indicated they watch SB a lot, the highest on the scale defined as more than three times a week. Gender did not seem to play a role in responses. Sixty-three out of eighty-one of them answered this way for a seventy-eight percent

rate. Everyone surveyed had seen SB and only one answered that he rarely (once a month) watched SB. The rest of the participants report they either occasionally or often watch SB. Forty-six of the eighty-one answered SB is their favorite character, with assorted responses divided among other characters.

As for reasons why they watch the show, responses center on a recurring theme. Select but common responses include: "it's funny," "it's silly," "it's cool," "fun to watch," "he makes me laugh." Sixty-two participants responded in nearly identical ways or closely resembled these samples. A few exceptions, only five, note that they believe being underwater is an attraction to the show.

When asked what lessons they gain from the show, responses vary. Thirty-five, a forty-three percent rate, responded with the theme: "treat people nice" or some slight derivative of that theme. The second most popular response for eighteen of the children, a twenty-two percent rate, is that they do not find themes; they just watch because it is fun. Other themes reported are less than ten percent each in response rate but include comments like: "be a good friend," "don't cheat or steal," how to help people," "don't destroy or steal things." Interestingly, boys and girls responded in highly similar ways on all portions of the questionnaire.

This data seems to strongly support the critical conclusions about the expressive plane. As for biopsychological, the argument is weaker to make. More research into humor style and core human reactions to things that are funny needs to be conducted. This data does support, however, the claims made about the attraction to the ironic loser who teaches real-life lessons, a mimetic force. The ironic loser is a champion of powerful social relationships, even though he is flawed. His slapstick style makes his messages palatable for audiences who seem to identify with a silly little sponge who tries his best to live a good and respectable life.

High School Group

High school students watch SB significantly less than the K-4 group, but thirty-four respondents, or forty-nine percent, still report they watch SB occasionally or more. Such reports seem consistent with other national surveys cited earlier in this essay. Of interest is that the chosen

favorite character among high school students is SB's sidekick, Patrick. Both males and females choose Patrick as their favorite character. On the whole, twenty-four respondents, thirty-five percent, choose Patrick over all other characters. SB is second at thirty-one percent.

A large majority of respondents say they watch the show because it is "funny," "entertaining," and "hilarious." Forty-one participants, fifty-nine percent, respond this way. A few minor responses include other reasons such as "it's creative," "I just love it," and "it's something my whole family can watch."

As for self-reported lessons learned from the show, participants present a variety of comments. Twelve report the lesson from the show is to "be a good friend." This is divided equally between male and female respondents. Other top responses include "be kind to others" and "just watch for fun." The parallels to the K-4 group are striking. The top responses are remarkably similar, exhibiting altruistic and compassionate qualities. The second top response for both groups is a nonrecognition of any strong themes. High school participants are less specific than the K-4 group with certain themes, possibly due to specific episode recollection from the K-4 group.

As for how this data works with the critical analysis, there seem to be very similar conclusions as those drawn in the K-4 group. While fewer children in the high school age group watch SB, a significant number still do, and they seem to exhibit the K-4 group's effects. While cognitive and social abilities differ drastically between these two groups, SB seems to tap into great commonalities between young and older children. Perhaps there is more going on here biopsychologically, but evidence does not warrant any strong conclusions. Character identification seems highest with SB's sidekick, Patrick, who is also easily branded an ironic loser, perhaps even more so than SB since Patrick is, in large part, a follower of SB anyway.

A final comparative note between K-4 and high school groups deals with identification and the development of self. Despite obvious physical and psychological differences between the groups, child development research says that both groups are still developing "the self" (see Siegler 349–52 and Caissy). K-4 children are typically more open to create themselves. They negotiate behavior and responses to try to fit existing expectations of older children and adults, but they are in negotiation—the classical formative years (Siegler 360). They are tabula rasa of sorts, open to being marked up somehow. High school

children, however, encounter more stereotypes and peer groups. Gaining group acceptance is crucial and adolescents typically demonstrate loyalty to peer codes and leadership (Caissy 77). High school audiences also tend to develop more hierarchies than younger age groups, and that may explain why a significant number of high school students identify with Patrick more than the lead character; there are simply more followers in high school. Patrick is easier for them to identify with as opposed other to characters.

College

College respondents report they watch SB significantly less then the K-4 and high school groups. Out of seventeen males and eighteen females, only eleven, thirty-one percent, say they watch the show occasionally or more. Only two say they watch SB a lot. Gender plays a more significant role than other groups. Of males, eight out of fifteen, or fifty-three percent, report they rarely or never watch SB. Of females, seventeen out of twenty, or eighty-five percent, report they rarely or never watch the show. That is a forty-seven percent male and fifteen percent female watch rates. Another gender difference not seen in other groups is that the genders split on favorite characters. SB and Patrick tied for males, while females chose Patrick first. Gary, the snail pet of SB, and SB tied for second for females.

As for reasons why they watch the show, college students respond overwhelmingly they find the show funny. However, many chose to leave this question blank, as the response rate is only slightly over forty percent. That is due to so many students who do not watch the show. Similar low response rates occur in regard to lessons learned from the show. Aside from four reporting no lessons learned, ten record assorted themes such as "be a good friend," "treat others as you want to be treated," "be kind," "be nice," "be yourself," and other prosocial comments.

Data from this group differed significantly from the other groups. A sizeable audience for SB is still present, especially among males. The expressive plane as well as mimetic and social relationship genres are supported by the findings but only weakly. Many adults seem to watch SB for more sensuous reasons. The brain candy argument seems strong. Post-high school audiences are more anomalous than the other two groups in terms of appeal and identification, and this conclusion seems

to correspond to the critical analysis portion of this study. Audiences looking for brain candy at the end of a stressful day may not detect the virtuous overtones of the show. The effects of the show may be there for audiences but not obvious to them. Of course, some adults do find social and moral value in the show. SB is like a buffet; if one wants a lot of dessert, it is readily available. However, meat and potatoes are also an option. A mere speculation might also be a wish from audiences to return to a simple premodernist, well-made play where there are protagonists who defeat their problems. Of course, the antagonist is not without faults. In such a shrinking yet complex global village, Bikini Bottom gives relief. Such broad conclusions are, as framed, conjecture but at least worth considering. Ultimately, more study into character identification and the role of gender, as well as social needs in relation to media, seems in order from this part of the analysis.

Conclusions

There are multiple conclusions to be drawn from this project in direct relation to the major research questions concerning the function of SB and the show's influence on audiences. This current project was driven by needs expressed by media researchers, particularly those needs in the areas of attraction, genre, and social values/morality. Thus, conclusions about both the SB analysis and broader theoretical issues of this study are warranted.

Most useful from the study in direct relation to SB is what was found concerning what audiences gain from the show. Orlick's expressive plane of perception explains how SB teaches most audiences. Questionnaire data, for the most part, support this, such as how the K-4 and high school groups report strong lessons concerning three significant genre categories: social relationships, mimetic force, and the ironic hero. As for the second most popular response of "no theme," one might wager that there could be a distinction between active versus passive viewers in the audience sample (Binkham, Wright, and Huston). High school groups parallel the same findings as in the K-4 group, but the college group suggests a more sensuous plane. It seems children do learn from the show while adults watch SB, in large part, to escape.

As for attraction of SB to audiences, Orlick's method explains how the biopsychological approach of the show is a significant draw for

audiences. Television genre theory further explains that the humor of the show is to great extent grounded not just in culture but also in basic human traits. Of course, more study into the humor of this children's show would be useful. For example, how universal is slapstick humor in SB, or for that matter, other children's television? Is there something about that brand of humor that is at core in humans? What can be learned about humor and children before time and culture greatly influence what is or is not funny? As for the present study, questionnaire data provide for speculation of a biopsychological claim but lacks solid enough evidence to fully support Orlick's biopsychological thesis. Genre theory benefits from the questionnaire data the most in that responses tended to help ground generic claims concerning the appeal of slapstick, the ironic loser, mimetic force, and social relations.

This study of SB ultimately contributes to both the need for attraction research, which may also include genre appeal, and the exploration of prosocial children's television. How kids use television for specific purposes is a major issue in media studies about children (Wilson et al.). The study explains how character identification with the ironic yet lovable loser is powerful and perhaps reflective of a world in which there is a need to recognize being common is not necessarily equated with being a loser. Thus, SB is almost somewhat subversive of the genre labeled ironic loser. Additionally, genre study and attraction study form an interesting partnership, and the fusion of such ideas in the study of children and mass media is worthy of future analysis. Children, and for that matter adults, are attracted to SB, a show that seems to promote highly prosocial messages. The altruistic and compassionate messages reported by audiences suggest this finding. Morality and children's television are worthy of study, as Rosenkoetter reminds us, and this study illustrates how a seemingly brainless show can and does communicate powerful virtues, such as honesty and kindness, to audience, both young and old. Of course, the older crowd also watch SB for apparently passive purposes.

Genre research has much room for development, and this study contributes to such an agenda. The initial question of how SB functions as a children's show, and for that matter as one that attracts a significant adult audience, is answered in large part by what Chesebro and Wilson et al.'s ideas allow. The terminology and analyses have far to go, but the effort seems worth it as the present study illustrated the power of these

genres to help explain how and why audiences are attracted to a show like SB. When combined with Orlick's ideas, the usefulness of these genre approaches is apparent.

Much study still needs to be done in media attraction, children television genre, and morality in the media. This study contributes to these research areas by utilizing critical and simple questionnaire methodologies. This combined methodological approach is an alternative to Potter's suggestion that cultivation is the preferred method for analyzing television and values. Longitudinal cultivation-type studies may prove beneficial, but other research foci can be beneficial to critic and researchers as well, particularly to unearth values gained from media and different age groups. The analysis of SB tells us much about the show's diverse appeals to multiple audiences who, for the most part, do seem to learn from the show with a less expressive plane of perception function as viewer age increases. Ultimately, more study on the show and in the prescribed research areas is encouraged.

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Appendix A

Please fill in the information below. This information may be used in a study on popular culture and television. Your help is appreciated. The survey should take less than five minutes to complete.

1. Age: _____
2. Gender: _____
3. Education (check one):
   _____ Elementary (K-4)
   _____ Middle/Junior High (5–8)
   _____ High School (9–12)
   _____ College and/or Adult
4. How often do you watch SpongeBob SquarePants? (Check one.)
   _____ Never
   _____ Rarely (about 2 times a month)
   _____ Occasionally (about once a week)
   _____ Often (a few times a week)
   _____ A lot (more than three times a week)
5. Who is your favorite character? _____
6. Why do you enjoy watching SpongeBob SquarePants? (Please be as detailed as possible.) _____
   _____
   _____
7. What lessons (e.g., themes) have you learned from any episode of SpongeBob? _____
   _____
   _____

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