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# Adolescents' Conformity to the Television Viewing Behaviour of their Classmates: A Longitudinal Study

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## Abstract

While it is well understood that demographic, cultural, and personality characteristics predict adolescents' television viewing, little is known about adolescents' conformity to the television viewing behaviour of their peers. In particular, there is a lack of research that investigates the similarity in television programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates. The current three-wave panel study involving 732 adolescents showed that, at baseline, adolescents watched one-fourth of the television programmes that their classmates watched. Adolescents were more likely to conform to the television programme preferences of their classmates than to the preferences of non-classmates. Latent growth curve modelling demonstrated that the similarity in programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates increased over time. Adolescents' overall television viewing predicted the baseline similarity in programme preferences and adolescents' degree of social viewing, access to a bedroom television, and the total amount of television viewing predicted the long-term growth in similarity.

## Keywords

adolescence, classmates, peer proximity, peers, television

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## Introduction

Adolescent television viewing has repeatedly been associated with undesirable attitudes and beliefs, risk behaviours, and negative health outcomes. For instance, adolescents' television viewing is associated with positive views of smoking (e.g., Paek and Gunther, 2007), and alcohol use (e.g., Russell et al., 2014), dysfunctional appearance beliefs (e.g., Vandenbosch and Eggermont, 2013), and stereotypical sexual beliefs (e.g., Eggermont, 2006; Vandenbosch and Beyens, 2014). Furthermore, adolescents' television viewing is associated with risky and unhealthy behaviours, such as smoking (e.g., Beullens and Van den Bulck, 2014), alcohol consumption (e.g., Van den Bulck and Beullens, 2005), and sexual risk taking (e.g., Chandra et al., 2008). Also, television viewing is associated with unfavourable health outcomes, such as poor fitness (e.g., Tremblay et al., 2011), overweight (e.g., Van den Bulck and Hofman, 2009), and sleep problems (e.g., Johnson et al., 2004).

While previous research has greatly increased our understanding of television effects among adolescents, it is not well understood why adolescents watch certain television content. Much of the research on the predictors of adolescents' television viewing has been focused on individual characteristics, such as age, education, and personality characteristics (e.g., Jordan et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2005). However, the role of social contexts, and peer contexts in particular, in adolescents' television viewing has received relatively little attention (Nathanson, 2001). The current study aims to address this lacuna.

Because peer groups play an increasingly important role in shaping the social context of adolescents (Steinberg and Monahan, 2007), we will investigate adolescents' television behaviour within the context of one of the most important peer groups for adolescents, namely, classmates (Rubin et al., 2006). In particular, we will examine the prevalence of similarities in television viewing preferences among adolescents and their classmates.

Furthermore, this study aims to investigate potential differences in similarity between adolescents' television viewing preferences and those of their classmates and non-classmates, respectively. In particular, adolescents may associate more with their classmates than with their non-classmates. Research has shown that close peers are more influential than distant peers (Paek and Gunther, 2007; Yanovitzky et al., 2006). In this view, classmates, who, Rubin et al. (2006) argue, are close peers, may share more television preferences when compared with non-classmates, who are distant peers. Also, in order to verify whether adolescents particularly conform to the viewing behaviour of their classmates, it is important to investigate whether the similarity in television programme preferences is stronger among adolescents and their classmates than among adolescents and peers who are not their classmates.

In addition, the current study aims to examine the factors that explain the development of similar television viewing preferences among classmates. In particular, we will investigate the extent to which structural features (i.e., the amount of total television viewing, social television viewing, and private television access) and attachment to peers affect the development of similar television programme preferences.

Finally, the present study contributes to the literature by using a longitudinal design, that allows us to investigate whether the similarity in adolescents' television viewing preferences increases over time. Prior studies on adolescents' television viewing have mostly applied a cross-sectional survey design (e.g., Jordan et al., 2010; Russell et al., 2014). Yet, longitudinal studies are needed to fully understand how the similarity

in adolescents' television viewing develops over time (Slater, 2004; Westlund and Bjur, 2014). Therefore, we conducted a three-wave panel study in a sample of 732 early adolescents. Because adolescence is marked by an increased susceptibility to peer pressure that starts in early adolescence and culminates in middle adolescence (Gardner and Steinberg, 2005), we followed adolescents from early through middle adolescence in the current study.

## **Prevalence of Similarities in Television Programme Preferences among Adolescents and their Classmates**

Peer influences on individuals' perceptions and behaviours have long been an object of inquiry (e.g., Bauman and Ennett, 1996; Kobus, 2003), in particular among adolescents (Jaccard et al., 2005) because peer groups play an increasingly important role in shaping the social context of adolescents (Steinberg and Monahan, 2007). Susceptibility to peer pressure increases during early adolescence, peaks during middle adolescence, and subsequently declines (Gardner and Steinberg, 2005). Several theories, such as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), as well as a considerable body of research have confirmed the impact of peer groups on a variety of adolescent behaviours (e.g., Gruber and Fineran, 2008; Wouters et al., 2010).

In this vein, scholars have found that peer groups also play an important role in adolescents' media use (Nathanson, 2001; Suess et al., 1998; Suoninen, 2001). Media serve many social uses in peer situations (Lull, 1980; Suess et al., 1998). Media provide topics for conversations with peers, facilitate identification with peer groups, and strengthen relationships with peers (Lull, 1980; Suess et al., 1998). Media connect adolescents to their peers and contribute to their socialization with peers (Arnett, 1995; Suess et al., 1998; Suoninen, 2001). According to Arnett (1995), adolescents' media use is inherent to the socialization process in which adolescents who associate with their peer group adopt the behaviours of that peer group, including media use. Adolescents want to belong to their peer group (Goodenow, 1993) and watching the same television programmes as their peers may facilitate the connection with their peers (Suess et al., 1998). Adolescents' need to associate with their peers may thus be reflected in a similarity in television programmes.

One adolescent peer group that may particularly produce such a similarity effect is an adolescent's group of classmates, because early adolescents spend a substantial part of the day with their classmates (Östberg, 2003; Rubin et al., 2006) and because television programmes are one of the most popular conversation topics among adolescents at school (Suess et al., 1998). In Belgium, students typically share classes with a fixed group of classmates who engage in a common curriculum and spend all classes together (32 hours/week). Being part of a class group creates a need to participate in that group and associate with the classmates (Östberg, 2003) and to become accepted by the classmates (Olthof and Goossens, 2008). This need to belong with their classroom peers (Goodenow, 1993) motivates adolescents to behave in a similar way as their classroom peers, because adolescents assume that this will increase their chances to become accepted by these classroom peers (Olthof and Goossens, 2008). For instance, Olthof and Goossens (2008) found that the need to be accepted by their classmates predicted adolescents' engagement in antisocial behaviour. Others found that classmates influence adolescents' cognitive (Hattie, 2002) as well as non-cognitive outcomes (Van Landeghem et al., 2002).

Yet, it is not clear whether the socializing role of adolescents' classmates is also reflected in adolescents' television viewing. Qualitative research has demonstrated that adolescents' conversations at school often concern television programmes (Suess et al., 1998). Adolescents feel a need to watch the television programmes that their school peers watch so that they are able to engage in discussions about the programmes with their school peers (Suess et al., 1998). Moreover, Suess et al. (1998) state that certain television programmes may be so popular and important in adolescents' peer groups at school that adolescents need to watch every episode in order to participate in peer group discussions. Classmates may thus share a considerable number of television programme preferences. Yet, no studies exist that have quantitatively examined the prevalence of similarities in television viewing preferences among adolescents and their classmates.

As previous research does not allow us to specify how strong the similarity in television viewing preferences is among classmates, we pose the following research question:

*RQ1: How strong is the similarity in television programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates?*

## **Difference in Similarities in Television Programme Preferences between Classmates and Non-classmates**

The similarity in television programme preferences may be stronger among adolescents and their classmates than among adolescents and peers who are not their classmates (Paek and Gunther, 2007; Yanovitzky et al., 2006). According to the peer proximity thesis, which implies a distinction between peers at a proximal level and peers at a distal level (Bearman, 2002), different peers are expected to play differential roles and different mechanisms operate across peer group levels (Bearman, 2002; Bearman and Bruckner, 1999). At the proximal level, direct conformity is important, whereas among distant peers, subtle diffusion processes shape peer culture. Research studying the proximity hypothesis has found that close peers are more influential than distant peers (Paek and Gunther, 2007; Yanovitzky et al., 2006).

Applying this notion to adolescents' television preferences implies that the similarity in television viewing preferences is stronger among adolescents and their classmates than among adolescents and peers who are not their classmates. Based on these assumptions, we hypothesize:

H1: The similarity in television programme preferences is stronger among adolescents and their classmates than among adolescents and peers who are not their classmates.

## **Similarities in Television Programme Preferences among Adolescents and their Classmates Over Time**

Several indications exist that the similarity in television programme preferences of adolescents and their peers may increase over time. First, conformity to peer pressure increases during early adolescence and peaks during middle adolescence

(Gardner and Steinberg, 2005). As such, adolescents' tendency to watch the television programmes that their peers watch may also increase over time. Second, based on social network theory (Kobus, 2003; Wasserman and Faust, 1994), it can be expected that the longer adolescents share classes, the more they will consider their classmates to be reference points. Over time, the class group and classmates become more important and the norms of the class group become more significant. Ultimately, this may result in an increased similarity in television programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates. Therefore, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H2: The similarity in television programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates increases over time.

### **Antecedents of the Development of Similarities in Television Programme Preferences among Adolescents and their Classmates**

Several mechanisms may stimulate or curb the similarity in television programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates over time. Prior research suggests that structural television viewing factors and peer attachment may predict the development of similarities in television preferences among classmates.

Consistent with structural theories that suggest that characteristics of television exposure may affect the likelihood that a viewer will watch a specific television programme (Cooper and Tang, 2009), three structural factors are considered. First, adolescents' total amount spent watching television could affect the similarity in adolescents' television preferences over time. More specifically, adolescents who spend a substantial amount of time watching television have more opportunities to select programmes in accordance with their peers (Cooper and Tang, 2009). Thus, over time, the overall amount of television that an adolescent watches may increase the similarity in programme preferences.

Second, social viewing may affect the similarity in adolescents' television preferences over time. Indications exist that the television programmes that adolescents watch depend on social viewing of television programmes with other people, in particular with family members (Livingstone, 2002; Wonneberger et al., 2011). When an adolescent is watching television with others, television programme selection depends on the 'socially negotiated choices' of the audience (Bjur, 2009; Taneja and Viswanathan, 2014). For instance, when adolescents watch television at home, they will likely need to negotiate with other family members (e.g., a sibling or parent) on what programme they will watch. Therefore, when adolescents watch television with others, it is possible that they watch television programmes that others prefer but that they themselves do not necessarily prefer (Webster and Wakshlag, 1983) and that are not consistent with the television programme preferences of the adolescents' classroom peers. As such, adolescents who regularly watch television with other people may have less opportunities to watch the television programmes that their classmates watch and adapt to the television viewing preferences of their close peers. Hence, we expect that, over time, higher frequency of social viewing decreases the similarity in television programme preferences among adolescents and their peers.

Third, private access to a television set could influence the similarity in adolescents' television preferences over time. Prior research already demonstrated the importance of having a bedroom television for adolescents' television viewing (Jordan et al., 2010). By having a bedroom television, adolescents have much more privacy and freedom to select their preferred television programmes, which increases the possibility to watch television programmes that their classmates tend to watch (Cooper and Tang, 2009). As such, having a television set in one's bedroom increases the opportunity for adolescents to conform to the programme preferences of their peers and, thus, increases the similarity in television programme preferences among adolescents and their peers over time.

Overall, we formulate the following hypotheses regarding the structural factors of television:

- H3<sub>a</sub>: Over time, a higher amount of television viewing increases the similarity in television programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates.
- H3<sub>b</sub>: Over time, a lower frequency of social viewing increases the similarity in television programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates.
- H3<sub>c</sub>: Over time, private television access increases the similarity in television programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates.

Adolescents' attachment to their peers may be the second major factor that predicts the level of similarity in programme preferences over time. Bowlby's attachment theory explains that adolescents with strong attachment ties are more 'socially' adaptive (Bowlby, 1982). Individuals with strong attachment ties are more likely to connect with important others. For instance, peer attachment in adolescents has repeatedly been related to reaching out to peers (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987; Greenberg et al., 1993). Also, media use gives adolescents a sense of connectedness to their close peer network, which is characterized by specific peer norms and values (Arnett, 1995; Suess et al., 1998). Arguably, adolescents with higher levels of peer attachment are more likely to reach out and connect to their classmates and thus may share more similar television programme preferences.

Based on these assumptions, we seek to investigate whether peer attachment explains similar programme preferences among close peer groups. We formulate the following hypothesis:

- H4: Over time, a higher attachment to peers increases the similarity in television programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates.

## **Method**

### *Participants and Procedure*

Approval for the quantitative survey was granted by the institutional review board of the authors' university. Informed consent was obtained from the school head, as is customary in Belgium. Nine schools participated in the study and attention was given



to ensuring that the sample represented students from different education levels and different regions in Belgium. The selected schools were visited by a research team during three consecutive years, with a 1-year interval. All students in the 7th, 8th, and 9th grades who were present during the researchers' visits completed pencil and paper surveys respectively at Waves 1, 2, and 3. The students were told that the study aimed to investigate their leisure habits. To increase confidentiality, the researchers ensured that the students were unable to discuss or view the answers of their peers and instructed the students to write their identification data on separate forms so that survey answers could be processed separately from identification data.

In Waves 1, 2, and 3, adolescents from, respectively, 51, 46, and 48 different class groups participated. In Belgium, the educational system in secondary school has a strong classroom structure. Class groups in secondary school are composed of grouping together students with the same subject choice and specific curriculum and with a fairly homogenous learning ability (Belfi et al., 2012). As such, adolescents spend all classes with the same group of peers. The class groups in our study consisted of 19 (Wave 1), 18 (Wave 2), and 15 (Wave 3) students on average.

A total of 1,102 adolescents participated in Wave 1, 1,085 adolescents participated in Wave 2, and 773 adolescents participated in Wave 3. A total of 732 students completed the questionnaires for all waves and were included in the analytical sample of the current study, representing a response rate of 66.4 per cent. At baseline, 51.8 per cent were boys, 48.2 per cent were girls, and the average age was 12.13 years ( $SD = 0.48$ ). Tests exploring differences among students participating only in Wave 1 and students participating in the three waves showed that boys (63.3 per cent) were less likely than girls (70.3 per cent) to participate in each wave ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.09$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and that adolescents who participated in each wave ( $M = 1.45$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ) had a higher educational level than adolescents who did not ( $M = 1.29$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ;  $t(622.71) = -4.15$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

## Measures

### *Similarity in Television Programme Preferences*

Respondents indicated on a five-point scale ranging from *never* (= 1) to *almost every week* (= 5) how often they watched each of the television programmes that had been broadcasted on the five general interest television channels during the preceding 6 weeks in Belgium (i.e., the mainstream television channels). Television programmes included soap operas, news, sports, reality shows, and drama. The programme list included 100 (Wave 1), 88 (Wave 2), and 93 (Wave 3) programmes, respectively. First, we determined the level of *similarity in programme preferences between each respondent and his/her classroom peers* for each wave. Frequency tables of viewership for all television programmes were generated for each class group to assess the total number of programmes regularly viewed by the class group (i.e., the number of programmes that were viewed by more than one student in each class group). Next, we divided the number of programmes viewed by each pupil by the total number of programmes regularly viewed by the class group. For example, students of class group A regularly viewed 35 programmes of the programme list. Tom, a member of class group A, watched four of the 35 programmes that were viewed by his class group. Thus, Tom's level of similarity was  $4/35 = 0.11$ . Second, we determined the



level of *similarity in programme preferences between each respondent and his/her non-classroom peers* for each wave, using a similar procedure as for classroom peers. Frequency tables of viewership for all television programmes were generated to examine which programmes were viewed by more than one student. Next, we divided the number of programmes viewed by each student by the total number of programmes regularly viewed by the peer group.

#### *Total Amount of Television Viewing*

Respondents reported how much television they watched using seven timelines. A timeline ranging from 7 a.m. to 1 a.m. the next day was presented for each day of the week. Each hour on the timeline was divided into two checkboxes, each representing 30 minutes. Respondents marked a checkbox if they were watching television during the corresponding 30 minutes. Weekly television viewing time in hours was calculated by summing across the marked checkboxes for the seven timelines. To convert this estimate into hours, the total sum was divided by two (because 1 hour on the timeline was divided into two checkboxes each representing 30 minutes). This procedure has been applied successfully in prior television research (see, e.g., Vandenbosch and Eggermont, 2011; Van den Bulck and Hofman, 2009). Television viewing was defined for the participants as ‘every instance in which they watch television, a video, or DVD on a television set’.

#### *Social Television Viewing*

Based on prior research (Greenberg et al., 1993), participants rated four statements (e.g., ‘When you are viewing television during the evening, is there someone else in the room?’) on a scale ranging from *never* (= 1) to *very often* (= 4) ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ). The scale was created by averaging the four items. Higher scores indicate higher social viewing frequency.

#### *Private Television Access*

Participants indicated if they had a television in their bedroom (*no* = 1; *yes* = 2).

#### *Attachment to Friends*

Participants rated 25 statements (e.g., ‘If I talk with my friends, they are interested in my opinion’) of the Attachment Scale (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987) on a five-point scale ranging from *(almost) never true* (=1) to *(almost) always true* (=5) ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ). The scale was created by averaging the items. Higher scores indicate higher levels of attachment.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the main variables at Waves 1, 2, and 3. At baseline, adolescents watched 22 hours of television per week on average ( $M_{\text{wave1}} = 21.99$ ,  $SD = 11.46$ ). Most adolescents did not have a television set in their bedroom (74 per cent) and adolescents often viewed television with

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Sample and Means, Standard Deviations and Percentages for the Study Variables ( $N = 732$ )

	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
Gender (%)			
Boys	51.8	51	48.5
Girls	48.2	49	51.5
Educational level (%)			
General secondary education	76.1	70.4	61.5
Technical secondary education	19.1	10.4	25.0
Vocational secondary education	4.8	19.3	13.5
Television viewing (hours per week)	21.99 (11.46)	24.08 (12.32)	24.21 (12.90)
Social television viewing	3.45 (0.66)	3.34 (0.70)	3.34 (0.73)
Attachment to friends	3.73 (0.55)	3.81 (0.52)	3.76 (0.53)
Private television access (% yes/% no)	26%/74%	32.9%/67.1%	33.8%/66.2%
Similarity in television preferences among classmates	0.26 (0.15)	0.29 (0.16)	0.30 (0.17)
Similarity in television preferences among non-classmates	0.17 (0.11)	0.21 (0.13)	0.15 (0.10)

**Source:** Authors' own.

others ( $M_{\text{wave1}} = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ). Attachment to peers was moderate ( $M_{\text{wave1}} = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ).

### Research Question 1

Our first research question asked how strong the similarity in television programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates was. The findings showed that, at baseline, adolescents watched one-fourth of the programmes that their classmates watched ( $M_{\text{wave1}} = 0.26$ ,  $SD = 0.15$ ). At Waves 2 and 3, adolescents watched almost one-third of the programmes that their classmates watched ( $M_{\text{wave2}} = 0.29$ ,  $SD = 0.16$ ;  $M_{\text{wave3}} = 0.30$ ,  $SD = 0.17$ ).

### Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the similarity in television programme preferences would be stronger among adolescents and their classmates than among adolescents and peers who are not their classmates. The results showed that within each wave, adolescents shared a greater amount of programme preferences with their classmates when compared with non-classroom peers. For instance, while adolescents watched less than one-fifth of the programmes that non-classmates watched at baseline ( $M_{\text{wave1}} = 0.17$ ,  $SD = 0.11$ ), they watched one-fourth of the programmes that their classmates watched ( $M_{\text{wave1}} = 0.26$ ,  $SD = 0.15$ ).

Paired-samples *t*-tests in each wave indicated that the level of similarity in program preferences among adolescents and their classmates ( $M_{\text{wave1}} = 0.26$ ,  $SD = 0.15$ ;  $M_{\text{wave2}} = 0.29$ ,  $SD = 0.16$ ;  $M_{\text{wave3}} = 0.30$ ,  $SD = 0.17$ ) was significantly

higher than the level of similarity among adolescents and peers who were not their classmates ( $M_{\text{wave1}} = 0.17$ ,  $SD = 0.11$ ;  $M_{\text{wave2}} = 0.21$ ,  $SD = 0.13$ ;  $M_{\text{wave3}} = 0.15$ ,  $SD = 0.10$ ;  $t_{\text{wave1}}(556) = 30.09$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $t_{\text{wave2}}(556) = 34.02$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $t_{\text{wave3}}(457) = 32.25$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Hypothesis 1 was thus supported.

## Hypothesis 2

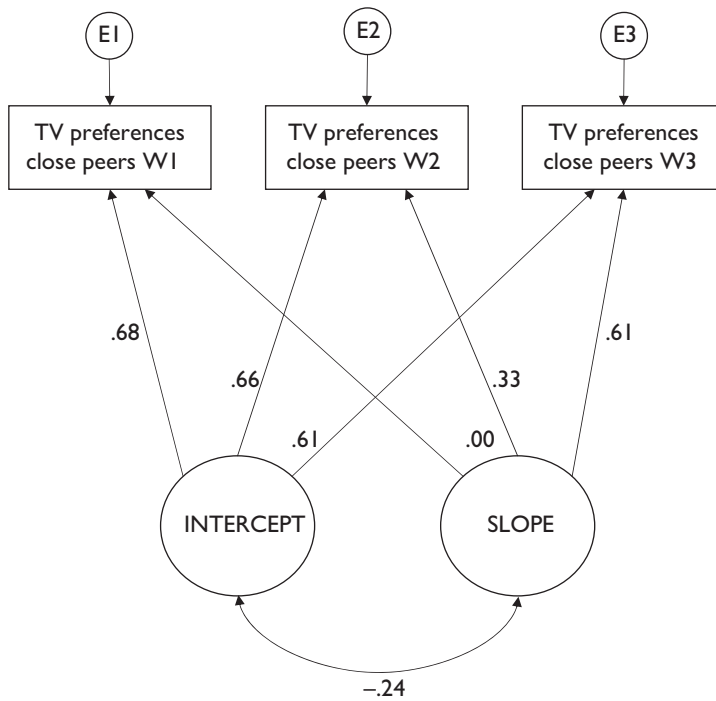
Hypothesis 2 predicted that the level of similarity in television programme preferences within a class group would increase over time. Latent growth curve modelling (LGM) was performed to analyze change in individual growth of the similarity in television programme preferences over time. LGM was preferred because it is a powerful method to model changes over time as well as to analyze factors that explain the long-term growth (Byrne, 2010). LGM can only be tested when three conditions are met. First, the outcome variable needs to be continuous. Second, the time interval has to be the same for all individuals. Third, three or more occasions of data collection need to be organized (Byrne, 2010). The current study data met all these conditions.

The LGM model was created with the variables of similarity in television preferences among classmates at Waves 1, 2, and 3 (Model 1). Within the LGM model, the intercept parameter represents adolescents' score on similarity in television preferences among classmates at Wave 1. The slope parameter describes a change in the similarity of television preferences between classmates. If the mean score of the slope parameter is positive and significant, the change in an adolescent's score on similarity in television preferences with classmates over time is significant, and Hypothesis 2 is thus supported. Based on the procedure outlined by Byrne (2010), the paths from the intercept were fixed to 1 and the paths from the slope were fixed to 0, 1, and 2 in line with the respective data collection points.

Results for Model 1 are shown in Figure 1 and Table 2. Model fit was considered acceptable (Byrne, 2010),  $\chi^2 = 5.07$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.09, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.98.<sup>1</sup> The average score for the intercept of similarity in television preferences among classmates was 0.27. This score significantly increased over time with a slope of 0.02 ( $p < 0.001$ ). The covariance between the intercept and slope was not significant, indicating that there was no relationship between adolescents' initial score on similarity in television preferences with classmates and how this score evolved over time.<sup>2</sup>

## Hypotheses 3 and 4

Hypotheses 3 and 4 predicted that similarity in TV programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates would be predicted by the total amount of television viewing ( $H3_a$ ), social television viewing ( $H3_b$ ), private access to a television set ( $H3_c$ ), and attachment to close peers (H4) (all Wave 1). Again, LGM was performed to test these predictions. In this model (Model 2), it was hypothesized that access to a television set in the bedroom, total amount of television viewing, social television viewing, and attachment to close peers (all Wave 1) predicted both the intercept and slope of the similarity in television preferences among adolescents and their classmates.



**Figure 1.** Latent Growth Curve Model for the Level of Similarity in Television Programme Preferences among Close Peer Groups over Time

Source: Authors' own.

**Table 2.** Latent Growth Curve Models

	Model Fit Measures			Intercept and Slope Estimates	
	$\chi^2$ (df)	CFI	RMSEA	Intercept	Slope
Model 1: Similarity over time	5.07* (1)	0.98	0.09	0.27***	0.02***
Model 2: Predicting the similarity	17.49** (6)	0.98	0.05	0.20***	0.09**

	Predictors of Intercept and Slope for Model 2					
	Intercept			Slope		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
Television viewing	0.00	0.00	0.37***	-0.00	0.00	-0.15*
Social television viewing	0.01	0.01	0.09	-0.01	0.01	-0.16*
Private television access	-0.02	0.01	-0.07	-0.02	0.01	-0.15*
Attachment to friends	-0.00	0.01	-0.00	0.01	0.01	0.09

Source: Authors' own.

Notes: (1) Estimates in the upper part of the table represent model fit measures and estimates for intercept and slope for each model; estimates in the lower part of the table represent estimates for the predictors of the intercept and the predictors of the slope for Model 2.

(2) \*p < 0.05. \*\*p < 0.01. \*\*\*p < 0.001.

Gender socialization literature suggests that gender may be an important control variable when studying the extent to which the proposed antecedents predict the similarity in television preferences between classmates. Research has noted that boys and girls have different television viewing preferences (Roe, 1995). Boys watch television more frequently than girls do (Wiecha et al., 2001). Girls, on the other hand, are more prone to social comparison processes when compared with boys and invest more effort in relationship maintenance with close peers (Lever, 1976, 1978). As such, gender was included in the model as a control variable and was also modelled to predict the intercept and slope.

Results for Model 2 are shown in Table 2. Model fit was considered to be acceptable (Byrne, 2010),  $\chi^2 = 17.49$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , RMSEA = 0.05 and CFI = 0.98. In line with H3<sub>a</sub>, the results showed that the total amount of television viewing positively predicted the initial value of similarity in television preferences among adolescents and their classmates,  $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $B = 0.00$ ,  $SE = 0.00$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Adolescents' degree of social viewing (H3<sub>b</sub>), access to a bedroom television (H3<sub>c</sub>), and attachment to peers (H4) did not predict the initial value of similarity in television preferences among adolescents and their classmates.

Looking at the development of the similarity in television preferences among classmates over time, the results indicated that social television viewing negatively predicted growth in the similarity in television preferences,  $\beta = -0.16$ ,  $B = -0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . Adolescents who watched less television with others increasingly conformed to the television programme selection of their classmates over time. In addition, the results showed that access to a television set,  $\beta = -0.15$ ,  $B = -0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ ,  $p < 0.05$  and total amount of television viewing,  $\beta = -0.15$ ,  $B = -0.00$ ,  $SE = 0.00$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , negatively predicted growth in the similarity in television preferences among classmates. Unexpectedly, adolescents who had a bedroom television and adolescents who watched more television showed a smaller increase in the similarity score over the 1-year period. Finally, in contrast to H4, no significant influence was found for attachment to peers on growth in the similarity in television preferences among classmates.

## Discussion

The current three-wave panel study investigated adolescents' conformity to the television viewing behaviour of their classmates. The results showed that, initially, adolescents watched one-fourth of the television programmes their classmates watched. The fact that adolescents, as members of a class group, desire to participate in the class group (Östberg, 2003), associate with their classmates (Östberg, 2003), and become accepted by their classmates (Goodenow, 1993; Olthof and Goossens, 2008), may stimulate adolescents to conform to the television preferences of their classmates. In particular, adolescents' need to watch the television programmes that their classmates watch (Suess et al., 1998) may have resulted in a conformity to the television viewing behaviour of the classmates, in that adolescents watch a considerable number of television programmes that their classmates watch.

Adolescents shared significantly more television programme preferences with their classmates than with non-classmates. This finding is in line with peer proximity research, which has shown that peers who interact with each other on a frequent

basis play a more significant role in the development of adolescent behaviours than other, more distant peer groups (Paek and Gunther, 2007; Yanovitzky et al., 2006). The difference also indicates that adolescents particularly conform to the television preferences of their classmates, beyond the larger peer group.

The similarity in television programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates increased over time. While adolescents initially watched one-fourth of the television programmes that their classmates watched, they watched almost one-third of the programmes that their classmates watched at Wave 2 and Wave 3. The increase echoes previous research demonstrating that conformity to peer behaviour increases throughout adolescence (Gardner and Steinberg, 2005). Adolescents and their classmates may view more television programmes in common over time because they have spent more time together and had more time to conform to each other's choices, or because they are entering a developmental stage where conforming to peers is more important to them. Our findings suggest that the longer the adolescents share classes, the more they may consider their classmates as reference points for their television viewing behaviour. In line with the assumptions of social network theory (Kobus, 2003; Wasserman and Faust, 1994), our findings suggest that adolescents' classmates and the class group norms regarding television viewing become more important over time. An important next step is to investigate whether television viewing similarity among classmates culminates in middle adolescence and declines during late adolescence and whether the impact of other, more distant peer groups decreases over time.

Adolescents' overall television viewing at baseline positively predicted the initial level of similarity in programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates, but negatively predicted the growth in similarity over time. At baseline, adolescents who watched television more frequently shared a greater amount of programme preferences with their classmates. Yet, adolescents whose baseline television viewing score was high demonstrated a slower growth in the similarity score over the 1-year period than adolescents whose baseline television viewing score was low. These findings suggest that overall television viewing may have exerted a substantial influence on the similarity in programme preferences at baseline. Consequently, the growth in similarity may have been slower over time among heavy television viewers as most of them had already started to watch a considerable amount of the same television programmes as their classmates at baseline. Similar observations have been found in psychological research and are referred to as the 'law of initial values' (Wilder, 1950).

Contrary to our expectations, social television viewing, private television access, and peer attachment did not predict the initial similarity in programme preferences. However, social television viewing and private television access significantly and negatively predicted the rate of increase in the similarity score over time. For social television viewing, this indicates that, over time, adolescents who watch less television with others increasingly conform to the television programme selection of their classmates. Because, for these adolescents, programme selection less strongly depends on the 'socially negotiated' selection of others (Bjur, 2009; Taneja and Viswanathan, 2014), these adolescents probably have more opportunities to watch the television programmes that their classmates watch and conform more to the television viewing behaviour of their classmates.

It is also possible that parental mediation of adolescents' television viewing (Nathanson, 2001) plays a role in adolescents' television selection and, as such, in the conformity to the television viewing behaviour of their peers. In particular, adolescents who receive more restrictive mediation may be discouraged by their parents from watching particular programmes (Nathanson, 2001) and may therefore conform less to the television viewing behaviour of their peers. However, it should be noted that *parental* mediation is not the only form of mediation that adolescents receive (Nathanson, 2001). Given that peer groups play an increasingly important role for adolescents (Steinberg and Monahan, 2007), *peer* mediation of adolescents' television use occurs more often than parental mediation and is also more powerful than parental mediation (Nathanson, 2001). As such, peers may outweigh parents in the case of adolescents' television viewing.

Adolescents who owned a television set in their bedroom showed a slower growth in the similarity score over the 1-year period than adolescents who did not have a television in their bedroom. The current study is the first study to report this finding, which is in contrast with the expectations that we developed in the literature review. One speculative explanation may refer to the functional value of a television in the bedroom for adolescents. According to Larson (1995), having a television in the bedroom is associated with more isolated television viewing, which allows adolescents to engage in more personal television viewing experiences. Larson (1995) notes that watching television in the bedroom enables adolescents to unwind and relax after a long school day in which they engage in multiple interactions with their peers. From this perspective, it seems that television in a bedroom is used to disengage from peers. As such, adolescents who own a television in their bedroom may be more slowly conforming to the television preferences of their peers. Because the current stage of research in this field does not allow us to draw precise conclusions in this respect, this explanation should be explored in future studies.

The findings also point to other interesting avenues for future research. In particular, research is needed to examine why adolescents' television programme selection is not related to attachment. Arguably, adolescents try to fit in irrespective of how attached they feel to their peers. For instance, it may well be that adolescents want to be able to engage in discussions about television programmes with their classmates (Suess et al., 1998) and become accepted by their classmates (Goodenow, 1993; Olthof and Goossens, 2008) and therefore watch the television programmes that their classmates watch, whether they feel attached to their classmates or not.

Another explanation may be that our measure of attachment (i.e., attachment to friends) does not capture attachment to classmates. Although it has repeatedly been shown that adolescents show close patterns of friendship with their classmates (e.g., Pratt and George, 2005), it may well be that adolescents have friends with whom they do not share classes. As such, attachment to peers, measured in the current study as attachment to friends (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987), may explain similarities in television programme preferences among friends, but not among classmates.

While past research has increased our understanding of the potential effects of television viewing on adolescents (e.g., Beullens and Van den Bulck, 2014; Russell et al., 2014; Vandenbosch and Eggermont, 2013), the current study has increased our understanding of the predictors of adolescents' television viewing. Understanding why adolescents watch particular television programmes is important if we want to



reduce the effects that television viewing may have on adolescents. Also, by investigating adolescents' peer context, our study expands past research, which has mainly focused on demographic, cultural, and personality characteristics as predictors of adolescents' television viewing. Our study indicates that adolescents' selection of television programmes partially depends on what programmes their peers view, in particular their classroom peers. Because adolescents who watch the same television programmes as their peers may become more connected with these peers (Suess et al., 1998), research is needed that examines whether adolescents who conform to the television viewing preferences of their classmates ultimately feel more accepted by their classmates.

Further, given the potential negative influences of television viewing on adolescents' attitudes and beliefs, their behaviour, and their health (e.g., Beullens and Van den Bulck, 2014; Johnson et al., 2004; Russell et al., 2014; Vandebosch and Eggermont, 2013), research is needed that examines whether such negative effects would be stronger among adolescents who have adopted the television programme preferences of their peers. For instance, future studies are needed to investigate whether peers might especially stimulate the viewing of antisocial television content. Increased exposure to such television content may negatively affect adolescents' attitudes and behaviour. This seems very likely, since peers encourage positive views towards antisocial television (Nathanson, 2001). Adolescents who want to conform to the peer norms about television may also be more likely to base their attitudes and behaviour on this television content. Overall, our study demonstrates that research on television viewing and the potential influences on adolescents' attitudes and behaviour may need to incorporate the role of adolescents' peers.

The aim of this study was to investigate the similarity in programme preferences among adolescents and one particular and important close peer group, that is, adolescents' classmates. It is important to note that classmates are 'forced' peers, because adolescents do not choose what classroom they are placed in. From this perspective, it is important to consider that even though adolescents spend a lot of time with their classmates, classmates may not be adolescents' closest peers. In that sense, other peer measures used in previous research on adolescents and their peers could have produced other findings. For instance, previous studies have asked participants to think about their 'close friends' and to nominate friends (Jaccard et al., 2005) or measured popularity (Wolters et al., 2012). Yet, while classmates are 'forced' peers and not chosen based on existing preferences, it is essential for adolescents to participate in this 'forced' group of peers in order to become integrated in the peer group (Östberg, 2003). Therefore, the findings of our study are important for our understanding of how adolescents conform to their group of classmates.

This study investigated television programming on television, or a video or DVD viewed on a television set. Of course, in today's new media environment, much television programming is available online and can be watched on a computer or mobile device, such as a cell phone, laptop computer, or tablet computer. Also, new media provide opportunities for adolescents to associate with their classmates in other ways. For instance, adolescents may associate with their classmates in a more direct way by interacting with their classmates on social networking sites. We encourage future research to examine whether the increased mobility of adolescents' media use would also increase the similarity in adolescents' media preferences.

Finally, while the latent growth curve models that we tested in this study enabled us to investigate the development of similarities in television programme preferences among adolescents and their classmates over time, we were not able to control for possible class group changes. Future research should examine the implications of a change of class groups and, as such, a change of classmates.

## Notes

1. Model quality was measured using three measures of fit that have been proved to be reliable in large sample sizes (Byrne, 2010): the  $\chi^2$  statistic, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the comparative fit index (CFI). The  $\chi^2$  statistic reflects the discrepancy between the unrestricted sample covariance matrix and the restricted covariance matrix; the RMSEA indicates how well a model fits the population covariance matrix, and the CFI reflects the comparison of the hypothesized model with the null model (Byrne, 2010).
2. To ensure that the similarity of programme preferences is not a general trend between peers that intensifies over the course of adolescence, we also examined the growth in similarity of programme preferences between adolescents and their non-classroom peers. A LGM was tested with the variables of similarity in television preferences with non-classroom peers at Waves 1, 2, and 3. This model tested whether growth over time could be detected in adolescents' similarity in television preferences with non-classmates. However, the model fit of this model turned out to be unacceptable,  $\chi^2 = 93.86$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , RMSEA = 0.36, and CFI = 0.71, suggesting that our data did not support growth in the similarity in television preferences among adolescents and non-classmates over time.

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