



A Study on Audience Sense Making of Media Texts:

Betoch Drama in Focus

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Declaration

I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis is my original work and all sources of materials used for this study have been appropriately acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

A Study on Audience Sense Making of Media Texts: *Betoch* Drama in Focus

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Addis Ababa University, 2014

This study aims at finding out how the audiences make sense of *Betoch* drama and the interpretive lens they bring in their reception of the text as well as factors that might have contributed to such sense making. It also examines the gratifications the audiences derive from the experience of watching the drama.

To this end, active audience theory in relation to encoding/decoding model as well as uses and gratifications model were used as theoretical frameworks. According to the encoding/decoding model, audience can accept the dominant/preferred meaning, generate oppositional meaning or settle with a negotiated meaning in consuming a media text. Uses and gratifications model posits that audiences actively seek and consume media texts that gratify their needs.

A semi-structured in-depth interview was used for collecting a qualitative data in order to find answers to the research questions. Once the composition of the subjects was determined on the basis of literature on the topic, twenty-five subjects, excluding the producer of the drama, were selected for interview using convenience sampling. As per the literature on the subject, the study (during the data collection), took into account factors like age, occupation, gender, and education which were considered to be among the factors that could have a bearing on the way audience consume a media text.

The analysis of the data shows that most of the audience members interviewed (regardless of difference in gender, age, education and occupation) seem to, more or less, share similar

interpretations of the drama texts, which were largely in line with the dominant readings on offer. However, the analysis also reveals instances whereby the audience rejected the preferred meaning and constructed oppositional readings to the text. It seems that such oppositional readings in the context of this study were partly attributable to factors, such as family background, personal association and preferences. What is more, the study shed light on the varied gratifications the audiences have derived from consuming *Betoch* drama text.

As noted earlier, irrespective of the diverse nature of the audience selected for the study, the interpretive lens they brought to the drama texts was not that much diverse as one would have expected. As Seiter (1999) argues, this might be because the encoding/decoding model (used in this study) works better for news and current affairs programs than for entertainment programs.

Based on these findings, the study has suggested that more academic research be carried out in the area that aims at testing Hall's encoding/decoding model with this genre. In addition, it is recommended that relevant institutions should consider providing some form of sensitization training to producers of entertainment programs so as to enable them to create entertainment texts that would cater for the diverse group of audiences.

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List of acronyms

ETV- Ethiopian Television

TV- Television

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

The term 'communication' often conjures up many definitions. However, all these conceptualizations seem to agree on the fact that it is a process which can be formal or informal, verbal or non-verbal, written or oral, modern or traditional, and involves the sharing of ideas and experiences; and there are multiple channels through which communication is carried out and these are collectively known as media.

Television, a broadcast medium, as one invention of technology has, since the second half of the twentieth century, played a major role in the daily lives of people around the world. In fact in most industrialized countries, television is available in more than 95 percent of homes (Patrick and Andrew, 1996). Almost all the citizens in the developed world watch television, and television viewing has become the dominant leisure activity for the majority of people in these countries.

There is no doubt that television creates pleasurable effects through the entertainment programs. On the other hand, television is also perceived as having an impact beyond the experience of viewing (Casey et al., 2002). This means that there are also perspectives that contend that television constructs the existing world by encouraging violence and emphasizing difference.

Despite the central role that television played in the realm of culture, politics and economics in the second half of the twentieth century, a coherent discipline called television studies hardly existed (Holland, 2000, P.8). This means that studying television programs have always been left behind.

According to Glen (2001), in the academic world, the content of television was for sometime considered unworthy as an object of study. In addition, academic writing about a specific television program was limited by the time it took to publish an article or a book (2001, p.14). As a result, there were a limited number of literatures related to drama on television until significant contributors to the field have emerged. According to George Brandt (1981), television drama matters and is an important aspect of the culture of today. What is more, the written text creates complexity on the process of producing meanings and pleasures in culture. In highlighting the importance of consumers agency, Tulloch (as cited in Glen, 2001) is of the opinion that what people do with texts matter as much as what texts do to people.

In contrast to the earlier days, however, the last twenty years have been the genesis of a recognizable, legitimate body of research on television as a cultural phenomenon (Holland, 2002). As a result, television studies have tried to come to a more vital stage of research. As Andrew and Garry(2005) note , the study of the television audience w as wrenched from an obsession with 'effects' and became more concerned with the altogether more complex question of how audiences make meanings out of TV texts.

The development of modern mass media up to the age of television gave rise to a very media centric desire to 'know the audience'. The broadcasters need to know something about the people who are watching. Audience research has been crucial in such cases because it encompasses various methods and techniques to know more about the audience. Moreover, it is a means of providing essential information to aid the creative process of program making (McQuail, Golding and Bens, 2005).

According to Casey et al, (2002, pp.17-18), lately audiences were not seen as a category to be understood, but as a commodity to be sold to advertisers. The dispersed elusive nature of the experience being an audience makes the study of reception a complex endeavor. During the early times, television audience researches were the questions of media violence and the convergence of politics. This means, it focused on whether or how watching television affects the audience or how it affects political election.

These and other cultural studies approaches turned their attention to the audience. This is because many scholars have come to an assumption that a text is nothing without meaning created by the audience. And audience is one important element of broadcasting. Explaining the transformation of audiences and the respective research, Jacob Bjur (2009) writes:

The then emerging strand of audience research based in cultural studies, ethnography and anthropology made the social element of television its principal research object together with power structures and meaning making of individual viewers. Reception analysis, an impressive body of individual accounts of particular situation, has deepened our knowledge of how television takes place in everyday social life (p.32).

Gradually, there were many theories and a framework on the study of audience. The major theories of audience research have been 'effects' and 'the uses and gratifications' model'. But it was during the 1970's that the theory of cultural studies approaches to media audience began to emerge. A model called encoding/decoding developed by Stuart Hall (1987) has become an approach which sees audience as an active meaning makers. This model tries to falsify the linear

model of communication. In the linear model of communication, the *sender (encoder)* sends a *message* to the *receiver (decoder)* through a *channel* which can be interrupted by *noise*.

However, encoding/decoding model goes beyond this linear process. According to Nick (2002, p.171), 'the premise of his encoding/decoding approach was that most media texts had specific meanings encoded within them but the audience receiving the text determined how they were read.'

Hall (1987) suggested that there are three types of readings open to the audience. The encoded 'preferred' reading of a text constrains the possible reading, the 'dominant' is accepted but never totally controls them but if rejected in favor of another it is 'oppositional' reading. The audience can also negotiate with the encoded message and reinterpret it in a way that reflects his/her own experience

Hall (1987) stresses that individuals understanding of a certain meaning varies depending on their social experience, class position and the range of cultural knowledge they have access to. This model gives theoretical ground for the basic premise of reception analysis which is that the viewers are seen as active members of meaning creators.

The content and the approach of a television program is the baseline to define the genre. But here it should be noted that which specific programs are shown depends on both economics and the traditions and the broadcasting system in a particular country (Patrick and Andrew, 1996) Television is used in many ways for many purposes in different contexts. There is no question that one of the most pervasive uses is the dissemination of dramatic entertainment (Klaus and Nicholas, 2002, p.93).

Academic interest in television comedy has tended to focus on two sub-genres, the situation comedy (or sitcom) and political satire. The latter has its focus on exposing falsity and fabrication of politics (Casey, 2002). Situation comedy, the focus of this study, is a genre of comedy that features recurring characters in a common environment accompanied with jokes as part of the dialogue.

According to Holland (2000), situation comedies are located in the entertainment rather than the drama department of the television organizations. They are fictional narrative series, which an impossible and insoluble solution reveals new comic possibilities in each week. Although the comedy may be resolved in each episode, the situation never is.

Though situation comedy is one of the major television genres, the analysis of audience reception has typically focused on two main genres, the news or current affairs programs and the romance or soap opera (Livingston, 1991, p.10). In fact, audiences can also be defined by their characteristic way of consuming the media. For example, Broadcast Magazine (2000) suggests that the comedy addicts are one classification (they focus on sitcoms and satirical programs) (Nick, 2002, p.185)

Since 1964, the Ethiopian Television has been providing diverse programs in different languages (Abel, 2005). The agency has gone through a lot of changes in structure, genre, format and overall system. However, there was no situation comedy until recently. *Betoch* is supposed to be the first sitcom family drama to be broadcast on ETV.

Betoch launched its first episode on November 2011 as being the first situation comedy on the Ethiopian Television. The episodes often last from 22-28 minutes and are aired every Saturday

evening. The drama is owned by Tilahun Gugsa Advertising and Arts Promotion Plc. It had finished the first season, i.e., 30 episodes and has started the second season at the beginning of this study.

The drama is a late night show which starts at 10pm local time. This time of the day is chosen because it is the moment where all the family members would finish their house chores and individual responsibilities. As Nick (2002) argues, the art of scheduling is to maximize the station's share of the target audience at anytime of the day. He claims that by studying the schedule, we can see who the media organization is targeting. According to a review of feedbacks from different professionals, celebrities, and ordinary audiences, it seems that the drama has a great deal of acceptance and has continued to be the most talked Ethiopian comedy drama. As has been discussed, TV sitcom is a new phenomenon in the ETV history, and as a result, there is lack of research in the area and this study aims to fill this gap.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

It is obvious that audiences are major element of any kind of communication media. They play an important role in the sustenance of any media. Thus, it would be of great importance to conduct research on audience reception of the media text in question.

Situation comedies exist on broadcasting media and are typically found on television. The western world takes this genre of drama as everyday element of a television station. However, in Ethiopia, situation comedy has a short time existence. There are studies on different programs and their receptions. However, it is hard to find studies conducted on the audience reception of situation comedy in Ethiopia. The researcher confirmed that there were many dramas and

comedy entertainment programs but *Betoch* drama is the first television drama in its kind with the basic format and criteria that fulfills a situation comedy genre. *Betoch* drama conveys at least a single message in every episode. Individual shows last for a maximum of thirty-minutes and is repeated at the same time each week. The comedy is in every episode but the situation is different every week. It involves a situational story in a family with a repeated setting (their home); and understanding how the audience make sense of the drama is very important. Many scholars have agreed that audiences interpret media messages differently. As Stuart Hall (1987) contends, the encoded meaning and the decoded meaning may not be necessarily similar. The intention of the producer or writer of a drama will be important but how the audience interpret it is equally significant.

There is no doubt that audience reception study is important, and scholars in the west conduct research in the area. However, as noted earlier, situation comedy drama is a recent phenomenon in the Ethiopian context and, as a result; it is difficult to find a comprehensive research on this genre. Moreover, people are usually heard talking about the drama but how the audience make sense of the text and what factors might affect such sense making are not yet well understood. Thus, this study is an attempt to fill this gap.

1.3. Objective of the Study

1.3.1. General objective of the study

The fundamental objective of this research is examining the audience decoding of *Betoch* drama as media text among a few selected residents of Addis Ababa city.

1.3.2. Specific objective of the study

The following are the specific objectives of the study:

- To identify the gratifications the audience derives from the drama text.
- To closely examine the interpretation of the drama's messages as decoded by the audience.
- To identify how similar or different these interpretations are in relation to the producer's encodings.
- To examine the factors that might affect the audiences' interpretations of the drama text.

1.4. Research Questions

The study set out to answer the following research questions:

- What gratifications does the audience derive from *Betoch* drama text?
- How is *Betoch* drama as media text interpreted by the audience?
- How similar or different are such interpretations vis-a-vis the producers' encodings?
- What factors might have affected the audience's interpretation of the drama texts

1.5. Significance of the study

Nowadays, research on audience reception has become an important area of study. Apart from its scholarly values, such research has become an important input for the media industry for content production. Situation comedy genre is one of the dominant entertainment genres in television industry in the west; it attracts a large number of audiences, and, hence, generates a lot of advertising revenue for the industry. In addition to boosting the bottom-line, it also communicates messages in subtle ways so as to influence the cognition and behavior of the viewers. As *Betoch* drama is the pioneer situation comedy in the Ethiopian context, studying how the audience receive the drama is with no doubt necessary. First and foremost, the study would

serve as a spring-board for other researchers who might be interested in conducting further research in the area. A body of knowledge the study made available as a result of this study would serve as an important reference for students, media practitioners and other individuals whose careers might be directly or indirectly linked to cultural production. It would be beneficial to entertainment genre producers in terms of understanding the agency of the audience in determining the final shape of the meaning of the media text; and such understanding would help them produce media texts that would potentially have a wider audience appeal, which would in turn enable the producers to have their cultural texts create more impact on the audience as well as boost their revenue generation potential.

1.6. Scope of the Study

The study focused on the investigation of how audiences interpret *Betoch* drama as a media text; and it did not attempt to analyze the impact of *Betoch* drama text on the audience. It paid particular attention to what the audience did with the media text in question rather than what the media text in question did to the audience. To this end selected dwellers of Addis Ababa city were targeted. Thus, it was limited to the Addis Ababa city, and in the city, it was limited to a few selected inhabitants of the city.

1.7. Organization of the Study

This thesis is made up of five chapters. The first chapter deals with an introduction; the second chapter focuses on the review related literature. Chapter three is dedicated to discussions on the methods employed in the study. Data presentation and analysis is in chapter four, whereas conclusion and recommendations are presented in the chapter five.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITRATURE

Introduction

This chapter mainly focuses on important concepts related to audience research. These include television, situation comedy (sitcom), audience, reception, meaning and interpretation. Moreover, the chapter will provide an explication of the historical background of audience research and the theoretical framework of the study.

2.1. Audience

The concept of audience is as old as theorizing about communication. However, defining audience has never been an easy task. According to Berger (2003), the word is derived from 'audire,' meaning to hear. And a close look at the history of the term audience reveals that it has been in use long before the introduction of pre-broadcasting modes of accessing information. The word audience refers to groups of people who are linked by ties of more enduring socio-cultural significance or it may refer to relatively small, local groups or congregations. But when we think of 'media audiences,' it is time to re-examine such assumptions and to expand our definitions of what 'media audiences' mean since there is an increased complexity of the media environment and the growing diversity of audience engagements (Ross and Nightingale, 2003, pp. 4-5).

According to Branston and Stafford (2002, pp.160-1), an audience is best understood as a category rather than as a way of being and in media studies, the category of audience refers simply to the act of viewing, reading or listening to media texts. What is more, in media studies,

audience refers to the groups and individuals addressed and often partly constructed by media industries. Regardless of the definition, Lacey (2002, p. 180) writes, “The audience has been an essential feature of media text.”

2.1.1. An overview of audience research

According to Croteau and Hoynes (2003), the concept of active audience is the underlying principle of current audience research. They contend that media consumption is often an active processing of information, not a passive reception of media words and images. The discovery of the ability of audiences to make meaning has produced ‘active audience theory’, which has established itself as the new orthodoxy in media studies (Williams, 2003, p. 191).

Scholars such as Croteau and Hoynes (2003, pp.266), prefer to think of audiences as active readers rather than passive recipients. We see the meaning of media texts as something that these active audiences construct rather than something that is prefabricated by media producers. They put two good reasons for conceptualizing the audience in this way:

- It fits with their own experiences as media consumers and as members of various audiences.
- A large body of research demonstrates that media audiences are active interpreters of meaning.

The idea that the audience is active arose in opposition to the notion of all encompassing ideological dominations. It is driven by a kind of populism that views people, not only media institutions, as wielders of power in their relationship with media messages (Ibid, p. 266).

2.1.2. Audience research

Audience research is a broad term that, in principle, denotes the systematic study of any audience for any purpose. In practice, the term usually connotes efforts to describe and analyze patterns of media consumption, often for some commercial or administrative purpose. Research into audiences has been far from straight forward, and different models tend to get different kind of funding (Gray, 1998). Until recently, scholars and critics did not take media audiences very seriously and research into audiences has been largely confined to determining the effects of exposure to the mass media.

Contemporary media scholarship has moved away from examining how particular messages influence people, to exploring the nature of media audiences. Building from the cultural approach, media researchers are more interested in what audiences say about the influence of the media in their lives. Media theory now concentrates on how audiences generate meaning, and enquiry into media effects has been replaced by examination of the creativity of audiences in the generation of meaning (Williams, 2003, pp. 190).

Nick Lacey (2002) argues that the main theories of audience research have been the 'effects debates', the 'uses and gratification' model, the encoding/decoding model and ethnography. The next subtopics provide reviews on the most dominant models of audience research.

According to Casey et al (2002), members of the *Frankfurt School of Social Research* stated that mass culture was crude, formulaic and ideologically repressive; as a result, mass audiences were manipulated or merely distracted. Though their work was regarded as too pessimistic, their thesis

provided a framework for the emerging effects traditions of audience research. According to Paul Attalah (2010), the most enduring form of television research is undoubtedly what has come to be known as “effects studies”; effect studies are the single most popular, abundant, and influential form of television research. In this regard, the two areas of particular concern during the early years of television research were the question of media violence and the coverage of politics.

In the early days of media effects research, there was the tendency to treat the media as “all-powerful” in determining the way audiences think and act (Fourie, 2001, pp.243). It tends to focus on what the media do to the audiences and how meanings are injected into the mass audience by all powerful, syringes like media. New technologies, especially the internet, has a significant role for entertainment forms (Branston and Stafford, 2002, pp.148-66).

The effects tradition has been subsequently criticized for its failure to overcome a number of conceptual or methodological problems. According to Casey (2002, pp. 79-80), these have to do with the tendency of seeing mass communication as a simple, linear relationship between messages and receiver (hypodermic needle approach). The other thing is that it has found it difficult to resolve the difficulty of tracing long-term, more diffuse effect, and lastly, effects research tradition has also tended to ignore the ideological complexity of media messages. Furthermore, Fourie (2001) contends that in large measure, the discussion of media effects ignores living, breathing people. People exist only as receptacles for media messages, passive groups whose behaviors and attitudes are the result of external force. The implicit assumption is that to understand the media’s effect on people, all we need to know is what the messages say.

The second mainstream study is the uses and gratification approach which will be elaborated more on the theoretical subsection of this chapter.

2.2. Television

Studies imply that television is the dominant form of media in the late twentieth century. Television occupies so much of our leisure time and it is more than just the most popular medium in terms of audience size (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003, pp.176- 77).

According to Fourie (2005, as cited in Laswell, 1948 and Wright, 1960), one of the purposes which mass communication texts fulfill is entertainment. This is through media texts that fulfill the media purpose of play and pleasure, rather than inform; the media offer audiences relief from problems and represent leisure activities. People watch television in order to escape from tensions and problems of the real world and to relax and to find out solutions out of it. As Griffin (2012) asserts, the main reason people watch television show is that they find the whole experience enjoyable. This might be the most basic motivation to consume any media.

Television has been the preferred medium of decoding studies. This is because television seemingly offers the bulk of pleasurable experience for the public at large (Jenson, 2002, p.163.). This has a powerful implication for theories which imply a very concentrated relationship of viewer and text (Branston and Stafford, 2002, pp.160-1). A critical aim of qualitative reception studies so far has been to explore the audience response to generic attributes across individual media texts. The purpose is to describe in depth what may be certain general interpretive procedures that audiences apply to major genres. The ambition is found in much decoding research (Livingston, 1999, p. 168).

There are many reasons why people watch television. These reasons vary between each individual. When considering these reasons, uses and gratifications (which vary due to different characteristics) need to be considered although there are criticisms on uses and gratifications theory as has been discussed previously.

2.2.1. Polysemic nature of television texts

Media messages matter because they possess meaning. Audiences construct meanings while exposed to any media platform. For Croteau and Hoynes (2003), some meanings will be easier to construct because they draw on a widely shared cultural values and sets an assumption about the way the world works while other meanings will be less commonly derived because they require substantial rethinking or depend on the use of alternative informational resources. So we can say that there are grounds behind every meaning making.

John Fiske (1986) proposed the idea of polysemy to mean that television texts are relatively open and sometimes contradictory and we can read (interpret) them in various ways. And in the field of cultural studies, many scholars seem to agree on the notion of polysemy. But here there is a controversy on whether these multiple meanings are the result of different audiences with different interpretations or whether the texts themselves are open to make multiple readings. In this regard, Fiske (1986) notes that talking with other viewers also creates different meaning. He has also argued that media texts contain an “excess” of meaning. However, he was criticized for exaggerating the interpretive power of audiences. What has achieved broad consensus is the notion that texts do not have fixed and absolute meaning, for what the text means to one person is not necessarily the same as it means for someone from another group.

2.2.2. Meaning making

As discussed earlier, recent researches are interested in ways readers interpret media texts. Many scholars agree that if audiences are active, they generate different interpretations. For example, Fourie (2001) defines interpretation as the result of the process of negotiation between texts and readers situated within specific social and cultural contexts. Croteau and Hoynes (2003, p. 267) explain how this interpretations are created by noting that “the meanings of media messages are not fixed; they are constructed by audience members. This construction comes from a kind of engagement with media texts, generally through routine acts of interpretation.”

Crouteau and Hoynes (2003, p. 267) give detail explanation on the significance of interpretation and the relationship between the intended message and the decoded interpretation. They argue that this interpretation activity is crucial because it is in the process of audience reception that media texts take on meaning. Producers construct complex media texts, often with a very clear idea of what they intend to say, but this intended message is not simply dumped into the minds of passive audiences. Instead, audiences interpret the message, assigning meanings to its various components. Sometimes there will be a very close correspondence between the intended meaning and the ways a particular audience interpret the message.

But still there is no guarantee that producers will get their messages across the implicit references; they may draw on a different interpretive framework, or they may focus on different components of the message than the producers had planned. Audiences, then, may not construct the meaning intended by the producer, nor will all audience members construct the same meaning from the same media texts (Ibid, 2003). Fourie (2001) further states that the communication process is not complete until the audience members interpret messages.

In addition to these individual interpretations, audiences can interpret media socially. As Croteau and Hoynes (2003) further argue, audiences do not simply watch, read or listen to media texts or stay independent on their interpretation; rather they can also sometimes give collective interpretation.

On the other hand, Williams (2003) argues that audiences interpret media messages and their ability to do this is determined by a range of individual, social and cultural factors. Scholars increasingly focus on the contexts within which the reception of media message takes place. Moreover, they attempt to identify the factors that shape their interpretations and understanding of the output. They also have sought to examine how different groups of people interpret and make sense of messages in different ways. Williams (2003) also adds that in doing so, these scholars have moved away from the notion that the media have direct power to determine the interpretation and understanding people have of media messages.

In this regard, Croteau and Hoynes (2003, p. 274) write that in addition to our own understandings, our discussions with friends and family about the meaning of media messages provide strong evidence that audiences indeed interpret media in diverse ways. Television viewing is often structured by gender, age and power relations. Meanwhile, they also question that where these interpretation come from. One answer to the question has to do with the relationship of meaning to social position. "Our social position provides the frame through which we view the world and shape the tools we have available for interpreting media images" (Ibid, 2003, p. 277).

Our age, occupation, marital status, race, gender, neighborhood, educational background and the like help structure our daily lives and our media experiences. Not only these but our location in

various groups also matters because it shapes whom we talk to, what we perceive to be our own best interests and most importantly what kind of interpretive framework we bring to mass media (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003).

In addition to the above factors, different cultural contexts create different meaning making. Liebes and Katz (1993, as cited in Croteau and Hoynes, 2003) conducted a study on the 1980s American television program *Dallas* to corroborate this argument. This drama focuses on families with love affairs, betrayal, business deals, and the like. This program was watched by the people all over the world but the message the audiences take from this drama varies depending on their cultural situations and complexities.

Programs with humor and irony are tricky because they are full of the kind of ambiguity that can be interpreted in different ways. Jhally and Lewis (1992, as cited in Croteau and Hoynes, 2003) explore this issue in their study of audiences of *The Cosby Show* in the United States of America. According to the study, the black and white audiences drew very different lessons about race relations from the show. Both black and whites could enjoy the program even though they interpreted it in very different ways.

2.3. Comedy

According to Lacey and Stafford (2003), the term 'comedy' has a very long history and is often paired with 'tragedy'. These are the two basic forms of drama. Comedy effect is produced using pre-recorded or live 'gag'. They stress that the performance of this 'gag' often makes the comedy funny rather than the story itself. According to Smith (2005, as cited on Williamson (2008), recording laughter was first popularized in the early twentieth century genre of phonographic laughing songs and laughing stories. Television continues the practice of live audiences and

moved to the insertion of wholly recorded laughter. Moreover, Bergson (2010) on his Laughter theory states that laughter needs an echo, as it provides the illusion of a wider audience. It also acts as a signal as to when the viewer is supposed to laugh.

According to Jeremy (1994, pp.296-97), several genres acquire their definitions from how the critic presumes the viewer will respond. For this, comedy and horror are the two genres. Television comedies are virtually unique and more clearly marked than are theatrical film comedies because television often includes audience response in the text itself. This is by providing laughing track sound effects.

2.3.1. Situation comedy

A situation comedy is a genre of comedy which is usually a weekly series. with episodes of about 26 minutes on average. There is also a high degree of comedy responded to by canned audience laughter. It also consists of set characters occupying specific locations usually related to a domestic or work setting accompanied with jokes as part of the dialogue (Jeanne and Amanda, 2005, p.245).

According to Williamson (2008), due to its status as one of the televisions' most enduring genres, the sitcom has historically been understood as an established and easily recognizable form that has developed little since its inception. Williamson (2008, as citing in Lawrence Mintz, 1985) states that the most important feature of the sitcom is that its episodes are closed off and finite. With a narrative that is circular rather than linear, the characters are returned to their original status by the end of each episode in preparation for a new situation to occur the following week.

As Casey et al (2002) notes, the repetition of locations and actors plays economic or institutional function and also provides the viewer with a sense of familiarity. The audience might particularly watch the show for entertainment and escape reasons. They continue to contend audience recognition of some conventions and everyday situations contribute to the feeling of realism that the genre provokes and increase audience identification with both character and humors.

But here Williamson (2008, p.6) contends that there has been a distinct lack of academic work carried out on the topic. As a result, perception of the sitcom within the academy and in journalistic discourse (if not always on the part of the industry and the audience) remains rooted in earlier incarnations of the form and thus need to be reassessed.

Paul Attallah (2010) in his doctoral dissertation entitled *Television discourse and situation comedy* gives profound explanation on challenges and prospects about television and situation comedy. He contends that situation comedies, despite their popularity and continuing presence in television schedule, remain almost totally absent in television writing. It is difficult even to draw up a list of clichés about sitcoms. They are seen as having little or no social importance and as being, therefore, unworthy of attention or television lavishes its time and resource on other forms. Furthermore, the absence of sitcom in television writing might then simply be the structural effect of the institution (ibid, 2010, p.16).

Attalah (2010) adds that as a rule, one does not talk about situation comedy asserting that “there has been virtually nothing written about television sitcom as a specifically television form”. This is due to the way television is talked about in general, to the unworthiness of it and its products, to its institutional functioning, and to the various modes of availability of its products. Even so,

there could be diversified point of views when the issue of situation comedy is raised. The first is an industrial view which focuses on success of earning enough money, and the others are social scientific and critical views which both claim that sitcom has no contribution to the society. Meanwhile, historical point of view magnifies the attempt to classify types of humor or retrace the origins of sitcom (ibid, 2010, pp. 13-4).

Though many have been said on worthiness of sitcom, Livingstone (1991) stresses that no matter what the genre is, the issue of genre is an important one for reception theory. She claims that the analysis of readers' expectations of genres is important not only for our understanding of genre, but also for understanding the role of the reader interpreting texts. Moreover, she adds that familiarity with genre conventions helps us to understand and interpret a text, i.e., we are able to make connections and associations between storylines and characters. These connections and associations to a great extent determine our involvement with and interpretation of program types (genres).

Brett Mills (2005, p.9) also puts forward a number of social, cultural and institutional reasons as to why the sitcom is a significant form. Beginning with the financial rewards involved in the successful production of situation comedy, he also notes how sitcom is often examined for the way it reflects changes in society and for what it says about issues of representation. In this ways, sitcom becomes not only representative of a culture's identity and ideology, it also becomes one of the ways in which that culture is defined and understood. He further notes that there has always been an element of flexibility 'within audiences' reading techniques (2005:p.25).

What is more, Attalah (2010) argues that there is a strong sense in which television and everything connected to it is seen as unworthy. The entertainment it provides has long been considered inferior to the entertainment provided by books or films or plays. This is the reason why there are very few journals devoted to television, there is no enquiry into the forms and language of television, no network of references, debates and response.

The 'comedy of situations' appears to come from a whole host of ingredients mixed together in a particular way. It is generally agreed that characterization, that is, the way in which a character behaves, interacts with other characters, their surroundings, is the most important contributory factor in good situation comedy.

Once there is more than one character to play with, the way one of these characters interacts with another, and how the other then responds, verbally and/or via action, provides our main vehicle for the delivery of humor.

2.3.2. *Betoch*

Betoch is a situation comedy that launched its first episode on November 2011 on the Ethiopian Television. It has started its second season while this research was in progress and continued to reach its audience every Saturday night. The episodes can last for 22-28 minutes and are aired every Saturday evening. The drama is owned by The producer is Tilahun Gugsa (Tilahun Gugsa Advertising and Arts Promotion Plc) who is also playing as Zeru Molla in the drama.

The show's regular cast of character is (re)introduced to the audience every episode. It has nine main characters: a mother, father, four children, two house maids and one house guard. The situation goes on its usual pattern until someone or something upsets the routine. The storyline takes the characters through a series of dramatic yet comic adventures, each one building until

the climax of the show. Along the way, the audience is exposed to “running gags” and a comedy dialogues. At the end of the drama, the adventure is solved, and the characters are back to where they started. *Betoch* primarily centers on the home but might just often change to a social gathering place such as a cafeteria, on streets or a work environment. The show is taken as family drama because the major characters are groups of one family member. But it also includes friends, coworkers, neighbors and other members of the society.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

This section identifies two theoretical frameworks to inform the study. Accordingly, uses and gratifications theory and the encoding/decoding model, under a broader cultural studies paradigm, are deemed relevant to explicate this study. Within the encoding/decoding model, nationwide study is used to demonstrate how the model works and to add a few more constructs that might have bearings on audience encoding/decoding of media texts.

2.4.1. Uses and gratifications theory

The second phase of mainstream research, after the effects research, was introduced in the 1960's with the birth of the uses and gratifications theory. This theory was a turning point in the history of effects studies because of its assumption that audience members are actively involved in selecting messages to gratify individual needs. This model suggests that viewers, listeners and readers actively use mass communication along with other sources in their community to gratify particular needs and reach their goals (Ivala, 2007, p. 31).

As Casey (2002, pp. 247-48) argues, uses and gratifications approach developed in response to the failure of early effects research. This model shows that media performs a certain specific

functions. The approach conceptualizes a more complex, interactive relationship between media and audiences. The uses and gratifications framework attempted to liberate audiences by substituting a concern with what media did to the people with the more optimistic question of what people did with media. This perspective was regarded by many as a step forward audience theory, since it allows us to see audiences as active participants in the creation of meaning and as a heterogeneous population with different needs and motivations.

As stated on Griffin (2012, pp 361-62), one of the most comprehensive typologies of media uses and gratifications was proposed by communication scholar Alan Rubin in 1981. Rubin (1981) claims that his typology of eight motivations can account for most explanations people give for why they watch television. Each category describes both a reason for TV *use* as well as a potential *gratification* experienced from that use.

1. **Passing time.** Consider the waiting room at the doctor's office. The primary reason for watching TV is to simply pass the time until you're called in for your appointment.
2. **Companionship.** When sports fans get together to watch the big game on the small screen, some fans are there primarily for the chance to get together with friends. Watching the game is secondary.
3. **Escape.** Instead of focusing on that anxiety-causing term paper due in two weeks, a college student might just turn on the tube to escape the pressure.
4. **Enjoyment.** Many report that the main reason they watch a TV show is that they find the whole experience enjoyable. This might be the most basic motivation to consume any media.
5. **Social interaction.** TV viewing provides a basis for connecting to others.
6. **Relaxation.** After working all day, many people report that they find watching TV to be relaxing.

7. Information. Watching TV is all about keeping up with the latest information of the day. If they don't get to watch TV for several days, they report feeling uncomfortable about the information they know they've missed.

8. Excitement. Sometimes media consumers are after an intense sense of excitement.

Moreover, Blumier and Katz (1975) identified four main uses of media consumption as follows: Surveillance as our need to know what is going on in the world, personal relationships as our need for interacting with other people by forming virtual relationships with characters, personal identity as our need to define our identity and sense of self, and diversion as the need for escape, entertainment and relaxation.

Though the uses and gratifications theory pointed out uncovered issues, there were criticisms. It grants audience unlimited freedom to choose without taking into account the context within which media use takes place (Fourie, 2001). Another criticism against uses and gratifications theory is that it offers us no understanding of the connection between our individual psychological needs and the influence of cultural and social contexts on our media use and interpretation of media messages. Although uses and gratifications research helps to investigate media functions on a macro level, it is not sensitive enough to explain and investigate micro processes such as interpretation (Ibid, 2001). And it can ignore the role the media play in creating needs. Besides, it might grant audiences too much power (Casey, 2002). Furthermore, Lacey (2002) also criticizes the assumption that individuals have complete autonomy from the media as unrealistic perspective.

Quite recently, however, this theory has been followed by a range of new theories and traditions for studying audiences. As Reimer (1998, p.134) notes, uses and gratifications theory and research have been challenged by more humanistic, critical (qualitative) traditions such as

reception analysis and ethnography. Reimer (1998) refers to this challenge as a 'qualitative' turn in audience studies.

According to Williams (2003), the new audience research focuses on how audience members generate meaning from the media in the broader context of the exercise of power in a society. Like the uses and gratifications model, the approach is interested in what audiences do with the media. Particularly, the new audience research is more interested in understanding how audience actively engage in the process of generating meaning and the factors outside the media that shape the sense they make of media messages.

2.4.2. Reception theory

Also known as audience reception analysis, audience reception theory is a humanistic approach of audience study which has come to be widely used as a way of characterizing the wave of audience research, which occurred within communication and cultural studies during the 1980s and 1990s. According to Fourie (2001), reception theory as applied to mass communication has its roots in two schools of thought: German reception aesthetics (also called reception theory) as well as the encoding/decoding model of reception developed by one of the founding fathers of the *Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies*, Stuart Hall (which will be discussed later).

Reception analysis scholars believe that media texts are open to different interpretations depending on the audience's background and knowledge. The scholars hold an assumption that few messages are self explanatory and transparent enough to be interpreted in an identical manner. The concept of reception in media audience studies focuses on the way readers interpret media texts. In other words, when we use reception theory to investigate readers, we investigate theoretically and empirically the process of interpretation (sense making). Against this

background, we can define interpretation as the result of the process of negotiation between texts (e.g. television programs) and readers (e.g. viewers) situated within specific social and cultural contexts (Ibid, 2001).

Assumptions of reception theory are:

- Because very few messages are self explanatory and transparent, we must engage with or act upon a text to produce meaning. In other words, we must internalize and appropriate a message in order to make it our own.
- A text always contains blanks (gaps) which only readers can fill. The act of interpretation requires that we fill these blanks with our knowledge, our private and public experiences and frame of reference, which is an inescapable part of our social and cultural life world.
- When studying readers' involvement with and interpretation of texts. their horizons of expectation should also be considered.

The theory suggests that social and daily experiences can affect the way audience reads a media text and reacts to it. According to Livingstone (1999, p. 10), the analysis of audience reception has typically focused on two main genres; the news or current affairs programs and the romance or soap opera. Furthermore, William (2003, pp. 198-99) adds that a great number of reception studies in the 1980s were on popular entertainment forms and also pays much attention to one segment of the audience reception analysis emphasized the ability of audiences to appreciate the meanings they wanted from popular media and cultural forms.

Although reception study acknowledges the active role assumed by readers, it is criticized in that it doesn't study actual audience (Fourie, 2001). In other words, we should also study real

audiences in order to determine how they create meaning and pleasure in their daily interaction with television programs and other mass media.

2.4.3. Encoding/Decoding model

Unlike in effects approach, which ignored the role of audiences in the creation of meaning, this model entirely, conceptualizes meaning as a main component. As Fourie (2001) states, it is during the 1970s that the influence of semiology and theories of ideology informed a cultural studies approach to the media audiences. This approach, based upon the encoding/decoding model developed by a founding father of reception studies in media studies, Stuart Hall, combined a more complex notion of media power with the idea that audiences were both active and constrained in making meaning.

This model adopts the cultural effect approach focusing on mass communication process in its totality and suggests that any understanding of modern media culture must focus on the fit between the discursive construction of the message and the interpretive understanding of the audience. Hall (1987) argues that certain groups may have the power to impose their value and that the media could take the central role in the process, which in turn may result in encoding of several messages in one dominant meaning enforced by the dominant group in the society. Moreover, it also focuses on the relationship between a media message as it is constructed or encoded by a media producer, and the ways the message is interpreted or decoded by audiences (Williams, 2003, p. 195)

Stuart Hall (1987) developed a model which shows how television messages are encoded and decoded to three possible coding positions (also called reading or interpretation strategies).

These are;

- *Dominant* (or 'hegemonic') reading - in this position viewer accepts the dominant ideology produced by the text, or as McQueen (1998) puts it, viewers accept the assumptions of the encoder (the person who composes the message). A text is open to a number of readings but normally 'prefers' one.
- *Negotiated* reading - produced by viewers who agree to act upon an extent with the dominant ideology but reserve the right to modify their views. This means it occurs when people understand the preferred reading, reject it and decode meaning according to their own values and attitudes. In other words, they can negotiate a position somewhere between accepting and rejecting the ideological messages of a text.
- *Oppositional* ('counter-hegemonic') reading- where viewers "see through" the dominant ideology to allow them to reject the dominant ideology encoded in the text. Oppositional readers thus make decoding (interpretations) that defy or work against the dominant ideology (Fourie, 2001).

The encoding/decoding model is the starting point of active audience approach. The traditional effect theories focusing on influence have ignored larger historical benefits, questions of political process and formation before and beyond the ballot box. Issues of social political power, of social structure and economic relations' were simply absent, not by chance, but because they were outside the frame of reference (Hall, 1987).

As Lacey (2002, p. 171) writes, "Hall stresses that 'meaning structure 2' may not be the same as 'meaning structure 1'; audiences must understand the codes in 'meaning structure one' in order to access the intended meaning". Hall acknowledges that a number of messages could be encoded in media texts. However, he argues that there is one dominant message coming from the media's tendency, consciously or unconsciously, to produce the meaning preferred by the most

powerful groups in media society. On the audience side, the process of understanding or decoding the messages is open to a range of interpretations. The ability of the individual to interpret media texts is shaped by the specific social circumstances or situations in which he or she is located (Williams, 2003, pp. 196-97).

In relation to encoding decoding model a *Nationwide* study has put some remark on audience reception study. As Williams (2010) writes, *Nationwide* was a 1970s news magazine program broadcast by the BBC after the early evening news. David Morley and Charlotte Brunson were the one who studied the audience to determine meaning people took from their interaction with the program. The approach was highly influenced by Hall's encoding/decoding model which says messages are constructed according to certain 'codes'.

However, *Nationwide* study argues that beyond the decoding, these messages require knowledge of the convention of the medium and the working of the culture. This study particularly focuses on the role of social class in interpreting media messages. As a result, it gives significance explanation on factors of interpretation.

Audience readings on decoding of current affairs magazine, *Nationwide*, revealed that audiences diverged along political lines in their interpretations as a function of their socio-economic or labor position. Morley (1986) discovered that different groups made sense of the messages in different ways. According to his findings, social background and experience did not necessarily determine people's understanding of the content of the media.

Morley (1986) suggests a very simple approach: people can read preferred meaning, they can develop a "negotiated" reading, or they can draw extra textual resources to construct an "oppositional" reading. The question for Morley (1986), as Croteau and Hoynes (2003, p. 276)

argues, focuses on which groups produce negotiated or oppositional meanings. Morley (1986) tackled this question in his study of the British television magazine program *Nationwide*. He analyzed texts to determine “preferred” meaning of the messages. He interviewed groups of people from different social backgrounds who had viewed the program to see if and how social positions and meaning making are related (Ibid, p. 277).

The *Nationwide* study indicated that there was a tendency for people from different socio-economic classes to interpret the meaning of the television program in different ways. According to this study, workers and media managers (the subjects of Morley’s study) constructed very different interpretations, groups of middle class students and black working class students derived different meanings.

Morley later acknowledged he had oversimplified the relationship between someone’s class position to the meaning he or she gave to the television’s program and suggested other social variables such as age, gender and ethnicity as relevant as class background in shaping the way in which people decode media messages (Williams, 2003, p. 197).

Livingstone (1998) criticizes this study as a project which begins to appear dated as Britain comes no longer so clearly stratified by social class as was before. But she adds that we never have to underestimate the contribution for new perspectives of audience reception studies.

Stuart Hall’s work and the David Morley’s *Nationwide* studies are important because they saw both audience and text as social structures, with in the relationship of power which opened an interest in more empirical studies of television audiences. They also drew attention to the place of entertainment and fiction forms and specific domestic contexts in which viewing usually takes place (Branston and Stafford, 2002, p.159).

Conclusion

Researches on audiences have gone through many phases. The principle of active audience and multi-interpretation and reception studies are recent trends of study. Sonia Livingstone (1998) in her argument on the future audience reception studies claims that reception studies have advanced media theory through a series of arguments which contrast sharply with previous approaches. Thus, media and communication research has moved on, irreversibly, from the assumption that media texts have fixed and given meanings. Moreover, audiences are plural in their decoding, and the cultural contexts also matter in interpretations of meanings.

New audience reception study in general provides us with a basis to explain that media use is a process of negotiation between readers and texts. It takes a closer look at what is actually going on when an audience encounters a media text. Reception analysis concentrates on the audience themselves and how they come to a particular understanding of a text. Besides, media are seen as passive wear, whereas audiences are seen as active and strong (Morley, 1980 and 1986; and Ang, 1985).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Introduction

In order to find answers to research questions a study posed, it is of great importance to identify an appropriate research methodology and describe in detail the sampling procedures, data collection tools and analytical procedures to be followed; this chapter intends to do exactly that. In other words, the chapter pays attention to the description of the research design, the data collection instruments, sampling procedures, and procedures for data analysis.

3.1. Research Design

As the study focuses on how *Betoch* drama audiences interpret the media text and makes sense of it, a qualitative research design was chosen to be the appropriate design for the study. According to Yin (2011, pp. 7-8), it is challenging to arrive at succinct definition for qualitative research because of its diversity, relevance to different disciplines and professions. Yin (2011) argues that instead of arriving at a single definition, it is better to describe the main features of qualitative research. These are:

- Studying the meanings of people's lives, under real world condition;
- Representing the views and perspectives of the people;
- Covering the contextual conditions within which people live;
- Contributing insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human social behavior; and
- Striving to use multiple sources of audience rather than relying on a single source alone.

According to Hansen et al. (1998, p. 257), discovering how audiences make sense of media messages is not easily done through survey research, for it is much less suited for telling us about the why or how such relationships form, examining the dynamics of what experiential knowledge and frames of interpretation audiences bring to bear in their use of media content, what role media use has in the everyday life of audiences, or how audiences use the media as a resource in their everyday activities. For such purposes, it is necessary to turn to more qualitative methods, which allow us to observe a more 'natural' setting than that of survey or the laboratory experiment for how audiences relate to media.

According to Deacon et al, (1999, p. 65), "the key difference between qualitative and quantitative research is that within the qualitative tradition, samples tend to be seen as illustrative of broader social and cultural processes, rather than strictly and generally representative." Here Wimmer and Dominick (1991) argue that qualitative research differs from quantitative research since it has no single reality and exists only in reference to the observer.

3.2. Sampling Techniques

As Kothari (2004) argues in qualitative research, the samples are likely to be chosen in a deliberate manner known as purposive sampling; it could also be chosen according to convenience to the researcher known as convenience sampling. First it was determined that the subjects to be chosen for the study must be regular viewers of the drama; regular here was meant watching the drama at least 2-3 times a month. As was learned from a conversation with the producer of the drama, the drama is not serial, which means that missing one episode does not have that much impact for understanding the next episode. Hence, watching the drama 2-3 times a month could constitute the viewer as a regular viewer.

Then, the categories of the subjects (such as age, gender, education and occupation) were determined based on information in extant literature. Once these categories were identified, twenty-five regular viewers of the drama (on top of the producer of the drama) were sampled on the basis of convenience.

According to Deacon (1999, p. 43), it is in qualitative research that the automatic assumption on sample size is 'big is beautiful' most directly challenged. This is because a lot of qualitative studies are less concerned with generating an extensive perspective (producing findings that can be generalized more widely) than providing intensive insights into complex human and social phenomena in highly specific circumstances. Here, Kothari (2004, p. 90) argues that there is no formula for defining the desired number of instances in a qualitative study.

This means that the qualitative research tends to use comparatively small samples which are generated more informally and organically than those most typically used in quantitative research. Moreover, these 'emergent and sequential' samples do not aim to build up large numbers of similar cases for the purposes of making broader inferences but rather stop gathering information on the research when it reaches 'saturation point' (where the data collection stops revealing new things and the evidence starts to repeat itself) (Ibid, 1999, p. 44).

Within a qualitative tradition, samples tend to be seen as illustrative of broader social and cultural processes, rather than strictly generally representative. According to Quick et al. (2003, p. 22), small samples tend to be used and findings cannot be treated as a statistically reliable measure of the audience as a whole. However, qualitative research can be invaluable in exploring the complexities underlying audience behavior, helping to explain why audience members behave in the way that they do.

Yin (2011) argues that in most qualitative studies, the number of interviews, practices, policies or actions included in a study can easily fall in a range of 25-50 units. For this study, 25 interviewees were selected based on the accessibility and proximity of the subjects once the criterion of regular viewer was met and demographic categories were determined.

3.3. Data Collection Method

Reception researchers mainly use the two main alternatives of in-depth interviews, focus group and individual interviews, to study how people make sense of a media product. As has been described earlier, this research used in-depth interviews to gather the most relevant and plentiful data for the subject under investigation.

3.3.1. In-depth interview

This is a one-to-one dialogue between a researcher and a single participant in order to get the detailed response of the participant. According to Mack et al (2005), in-depth interview is one of the most common qualitative methods as it is effective in giving a human face to research problem and offer the opportunity to express to respondents in a way ordinary life rarely affords them. It is useful in understanding the range of attitudes and motives which might exist within an audience. Face to face interviews are more effective in delivering a greater depth of information and understanding.

There are three types of interviews. The first is structured (standardize interview), which is often used in quantitative research. It is characterized by having the same set of questions in the same order for all participants of the interview. It is believed to be convenient to compare participants' responses.

The second is semi-structured interview (guided interview), characterized by having guiding sets of questions prepared to initiate discussion which will enable the researcher to ask more probing questions based on the interviewee's response to the guiding questions. This instrument is often used in qualitative research. The last one is unstructured interview, which is an interview without predetermined set of questions where the researcher and the interviewee talk freely. It is often used in combination with observation. This interview is believed to be very flexible which demands high experience on the side of the researcher to handle the situation to make sure it is going in line with the purpose of the interview.

Thus, semi structured in-depth interview was used as the data collection method for this study. The researcher used this as it has the advantage of allowing the researcher a potentially much richer and more sensitive type of data on the dynamics of audiences and their relations to media than the survey. Deacon et al (1999) has the following about semi-structured interviews:

The free format of these interviews also extends to the type of responses elicited from interviewees. Rather than recording answers mainly or solely through closed format response, format is open.... In most cases, interviewees' comments are taped and the interviews generate a richer type of data and are better suited to dealing with complex and sensitive subjects...their informality and non-standardized nature can also create difficulties in comparing and aggregating interview data as well as in processing and analyzing the vast amount of qualitative detail that they generate (p. 398).

At the same time, these approaches are comparatively cheap (if time-consuming), and they are not burdened by the resources and lengthy access negotiations often needed for participant observation.

In-depth interview shares a lot with focus group but here the researcher is the one who controls the direction of discussion unlike the focus group, where the participants hold more power, though the moderator would try to guide the circumstance. In-depth interview is easier to arrange than focus group and the interviewer can visit geographically diverse audiences. Moreover, respondents might feel under pressure from others to respond in particular way and resist to answer certain questions.

The central point to in-depth interview is that it provides data that have qualitative depth by allowing interviewees to talk about the subject in terms of their own frames of reference. As the main objective of the study is to examine how the audience interpret *Betoch* drama as media text, focus group does not seem the best method for acquiring information on highly personal or socially sensitive topics. On the other hand, in-depth interview method is believed to yield detail information. Hence, in-depth interview was believed better suited for the topic under consideration.

In this study, the respondents were interviewed in their own environment (place of work/study or home as relevant) to make them feel comfortable in answering the questions. According to Quick (2002, p. 36), one-to-one interview, especially if conducted in person, tend to require significantly longer time scales. Geographically dispersed audiences can mean that only 2 to 3 interviews might be possible per-day. Consequently, a project involving 30 interviewees might take 6 weeks or more to complete. In this study, the data collection process took about two

months. The researcher, for example, had a hard time finding the producer of the drama owing to his busy schedules. After a few unsuccessful visits, the researcher managed to have more than an hour long in-depth interview with him.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The interviews were conducted in Amharic; and afterwards, the interview data was gathered, it was transcribed and translated into English. Once the translation was completed, the data text was carefully read and the most recurring themes across the set of interviews were identified and organized for analysis in light of the research questions posed in chapter one.

CHAPTER 4: DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the data and discusses the major findings of the study. As have been discussed through the chapters, the study focused at regular watchers of *Betoch* drama. The main purpose of this study was to assess how the audiences make sense of the drama. In order to collect the required data for the study, in-depth interview with key informant was used. The interview questions included items related to the nature of audience's decoding of the drama texts, the demographic distribution of the audience, the reasons behind their active watching and questions related to their personal association with the drama.

This section provides a brief description on the features of *Betoch* drama and its major characters as described by the producer of the drama. After that, selected themes and discussions would be presented and analyzed in line with the factors that are important for the reception of the drama.

The analysis and discussion in this chapter is presented in ways that are aligned with the objective of the study. Moreover, the selected quotations from the interviewees are presented in order to corroborate the arguments advanced in the chapter.

Twenty- five subjects (excluding the producer of the drama) were interviewed for this research. It is important to note that an effort was made to take into account factors such as age, gender, occupation and education in the selection of the interviewees. The mean age of interview participants was 33.5 years of age (the range was from 15-69 years). Males were 13 (52%) and females were 12 (48%).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

Code	Age (years)	Sex	Occupation	Level of education
A	29	Male	Lab tech	Degree
B	28	Female	House wife	7 th grade
C	45	Female	Employed	10 th grade
D	16	Male	student	11 th grade
E	25	Male	Shoeshine	Extension 10 th grader
F	15	Female	Student	8 th grade
G	36	Female	Executive secretary	Diploma
H	24	Male	Tender shop	9 th grade/withdraw
I	26	Female	Shoeshine	4 th grade
J	40	Female	Her own business	12 th grade complete
k	28	Male	driver	Diploma
L	30	Male	House guard	Withdraw school
M	22	Female	Housemaid	5 th grade
N	55	Female	Housewife	12 th grade complete
O	60	Female	Government employee	Diploma
P	69	Male	Private business	Certificate
Q	50	Male	High school teacher/ business	B Sc degree
R	25	Male	Daily laborer	Never been to school
S	34	Male	Office job	BA degree
T	18	Female	Housemaid	3 rd grade
U	20	Male	Student	University
V	47	Male	Business	BA Degree
W	49	Male	Private employee	MA
X	23	Female	Student	University
y	32	Female	Filmmaker	Diploma

4.1. Prelude to the Analysis

A media text is planned with a particular audience in mind. A television producer has to explain to the broadcasting institution who is the likely audience for this particular program. Active audiences are individuals who interact with the communication process and use media texts for their own purpose. People behave differently because they are different people from different backgrounds with many different attitudes, values, experiences and ideas.

The initial conception to start the show was meant to create an entertainment drama which could suit the whole age group and could bring family together. The producers judged that the audience needs a reprieve from long television drama series, repeated storylines and suspense based films. A comic drama based on a family storyline would be successful to get the admiration of the audience. The sitcom as being the first in its kind and genre in ETV history, has received different reactions. It was also known to have the largest audience follower with continuous feedbacks (ETV, personal communication).

4.1.1. Objectives of *Betoch* drama

In the in-depth interview, the producer explained the following on the objective and presentation of the drama:

Entertaining is the major objective of the drama. It is educational but people learn while being entertained and watching characters they are familiar with. If you want to pass on a message and educate people, it must be in an entertaining way. Moreover, it is necessary to have a media outlet which raises current and fresh topics which is sanitized with fun words and characters. This also creates a new genre which brings all the family together to watch and have fun. The sitcom is

situational and comes with a new topic in each episode where specific objectives and messages are presented and the audiences know in advance how they would respond and behave in each situation. (Personal interview, February, 28, 2014).

Betoch drama makes it possible to deliver strong messages intended to reach children, teens, mature people and the youth evenly. The producer noted:

Audiences of any age prefer to hear messages through entertaining pieces. When a serious issue of national importance is raised, everyone will be sensitive about it. The audience now is aware that the drama is situational which selects a burning issue in each episode. This in return makes the drama not only entertaining but also a comedy which delivers messages so powerfully. I believe all these enable it to be engaging to all age group (Personal interview, February, 28, 2014).

The drama first began with introducing the main characters. It tries to claim that a family should be open for entertaining any kind of discussion in our society. According to the producer, there were messages that they wanted to convey in every episode but they left it sufficiently open in such a way that the audience could make sense of the drama and give their own interpretation.

Recent and burning issues of the citizens are presented in comedy form. The audience gets satisfaction from the depiction of these messages beyond the entertainment value. Moreover, we attempt to pass on messages from the mistakes the characters make in a humorous way. The diversified behavior and actions of the characters have made all this possible. I can say, there is more or less no topic we haven't raised so far. We believe that sitcom is the best way to address these issues whether you say it directly or indirectly (Personal interview, February, 28, 2014).

The producer described the foremost messages they were trying to communicate:

- How to use money and the importance of saving
- Convey the message on how the parents should evaluate and control their children's day to day practice outside of their home.
- The impact of unintended and seemingly minor mistakes made by parents on the behavior of their children.
- Show the misunderstanding in the movie industry in our country.
- The importance of sharing opinions of every member of the family and their role in decision making in the family.
- The importance of saving money by parents for their children.
- Sending a message that it is good to give place for young members of the family, as well so that their opinions and advice be heard by elders regardless of their level of education.
- The importance of compound security and environmental protection.
- The importance of time management and respect for appointment time.
- Reflection on private medical practice, issues of electric power and telecom network services.
- Misunderstanding between different generations in using language.
- Reflection on transportation, corruption and the attitude and practice of youths in relation to football.
- How to shape ones behavior in relation to generosity.
- The limit of things to be/not to be told to children.
- The role of family on educational activity of their children.
- The importance of informing law enforcement bodies rather than negotiating with thieves.

- Replacing greed with saving money.

The producer also noted that the assumed day for the drama is Saturday. For instance, in the episodes, the children are not seen going to school or on their way back. The father owns his own business where the mother has office work but they are usually at home. This is meant to create a weekend environment to the audience and to make it more entertaining.

4.1.2. Characters of *Betoch* drama

The producer described the main characters of the drama as follows:

Zeru Mola, is a character of the sitcom and is capable of fulfilling his role as a father and a husband. He is greedy and does not want to spend money on anything no matter what. He owns his own grocery and a taxi. Humor was built around some of his main shortcomings. The man is typically a person who mostly wants to do things in his own way. His character is made obvious by juxtaposing him against his wife and children. His wife often helps him out of situations. The children are smarter than him, and their successes are contrasted against his failures.

Azalech is the wife of Zeru Molla; she is an educated mother and is an employee in an organization. She is close to her children and tries to make everyone happy. She balances the needs of her family with their income. Despite the argument with her husband, Zeru, she is the one who most of the time negotiates and settles issues to the best of her ability. She treats her maids and the guard well and makes them feel a part of the family.

Yibekal is the elder son to his parents. He is an engineering student at the Addis Ababa University and is known among his family for scoring the best grade and for his innocent behavior, as a result of which he is accorded due respect by his family. He is presented as a student who chews chat, borrows money every time (even from his own family members), and

participates in stealing. The mistakes he usually makes have a direct or indirect impact on the family.

Mafi is the first daughter in the family who has dropped out of school to pursue her dream of becoming a film maker. Since she has not yet started practicing her dreams, her family usually belittles her. She always talks about movies, but the family does not give her due attention.

Bezabih is the 3rd child, who remains in grade 9 for the past couple of years. He is not regarded as a smart kid but is seen as inactive. Most of the family members make fun of him because he is a slow learner and drowsy. He is known for being a copy of his father, Zeru Molla, especially when it comes to issues related to money and budgeting.

Reste is the youngest of all the children. She is smart in nature and surprises her parents with her wise decision making. She is sometimes seen as being the one who offers advice and suggestions to her older brothers and sister.

Tirfe is a middle-aged woman who is a close relative of Zeru Molla. He brought her from the countryside to work for him. She is known for being foodie and does not want to go to school. She has great love and respect for the family. She feels like she is one of the most important members of the family.

Shashe is a maid who loves to talk more than working on the house chores. She sometimes gets jealous of Tirfe because she feels like she is not taken as a member of the family. She is suspected of having love affair with the house guard, Ekke.

Ekke is a house guard who joined the family after 11 episodes. He came to the show for his ability to create more color and fun in the drama. At first, he was employed to watch over Zeru's

uncle. Though his main task is to serve as watchman, he is known for being sleepy. He represents countrymen who are naturally proud and patriotic.

4.2. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.2.1. Purpose of watching

As noted in the previous chapters, this study set out to examine how the audience interpret *Betoch* drama as a media text; how similar or different such interpretations are vis-a-vis the producers' encodings; and what factors might have affected the audience's interpretation of the drama text.

From uses and gratifications perspective, it is well understood that audience are active and they seek out for media content that gratifies their need, i.e., audience's consumption of media products is goal oriented and purposeful. If this is the case, the viewers of *Betoch* drama could be assumed to have purpose for spending time in regularly watching the show. Thus, before going directly into the heart of the research questions, it seems important to provide analytical insights into why the audiences love to watch *Betoch* drama in the first place.

According to the participants of the in-depth interview, *Betoch* drama has an educative value apart from its entertainment value. The episodes are organized in such a way that they address serious social issues from which viewers could learn something. Such serious issues are often presented through humor and in a language the ordinary citizens could easily understand. This as it may, based on the aggregate responses of the interviewees, the main purposes for watching the drama could be summarized as follows.

4.2.1.1. Entertainment

As has been mentioned in the previous chapters, one of the major purposes which mass communication texts fulfill is entertainment. Television is used as a form of escape from our real life situations as well as for relaxation. This is done through media texts that fulfill the purpose of inducing pleasure, offer audiences relief from problems and drudgery of life. According to most of the interviewees, watching *Betoch* drama fulfils entertainment, escape and diversion functions.

It is more of entertainment. I never thought of its educational purpose maybe because it's not serious at all. I usually watch it for entertaining myself as it airs at the time I get back from work (personal interview with interviewee A, March 14, 2014). I watch the drama for the reason of escape. It helps me forget the things I get angry at and enables me to have fun regardless of the situation I am in (personal interview with interviewee I, March 23, 2014).

The reason I watch the show is mere entertainment. There isn't much that makes me smile. The whole, my life is fully occupied with work and the sitcom helps me relax a bit. Moreover, the catchy phrases the characters use entertain me (personal interview with interviewee Q, April 8, 2014). The drama is with no doubt hilarious. The acting, the phrases and words the characters use are so entertaining (personal interview with interviewee K, March 26, 2014). It is Saturday that the show is aired and all family members will be around then. The drama is funny, too. Hence, all these entertain me (personal interview with interviewee C, March 16, 2014).

Audiences do not just watch any program at random. Rather, they are often selective in what they prefer to watch from a media outlet. According to Williams (2003, p. 199), "there are

specific audiences for particular media products.” The interviewees who were young, for example, noted that they usually prefer watching foreign channels and movies produced abroad than watching the Ethiopian Television as the contents the station produces and its way of presentation do not satisfy them. Irrespective of all this, they said that they still found this particular drama more entertaining than other programs, as the show fulfils their entertainment needs.

I like to watch western made sitcoms since they are my favorite. *Betoch* is the only serial I watch from ETV since it is somehow similar with these series. I can say it entertains me (personal interview with interviewee U, April, 16, 2014). To be honest, there is nothing to choose from ETV. I don't think there is another drama which is worth watching from ETV programs. *Betoch* is much better and in fact funny. That's the only reason I watch the drama (personal interview with interviewee D, March 16, 2014).

From the interviewees' responses, it could be argued that after tedious and exhausting daily routines, audience would want something that would make them relax and make them temporarily forget the burden of their daily troubles and thereby help them cope with their stress. The audience seem to have found watching *Betoch* fulfill these needs. The presentation of the drama and the selective nature of the audience could also be taken as other reasons behind the entertainment function of the drama. According to Mc Quail (1997, p. 70), the active audience theory associates media use and preference with the perceived pleasure, purpose or wishes of the potential audience member. Along the same line, Griffin (2012) argues that the main reason people watch television show is that they find the whole experience enjoyable. The experiences of *Betoch* viewers seem to confirm this argument.

4.2.1.2. Social conformity

Not all the interviewees concurred with the notion that entertainment was the main reason why they watched *Betoch* drama. Instead, some interviewees argued that the drama do not have that much entertainment value. They rather noted that they watch the drama just for the sake of accompanying their family members who would love watching it and by doing so demonstrate their conformity. One interviewee, for example, confessed that though he doesn't like the drama, he usually watches it in order to make his family members happy. "I watch the show because my wife does. I always watch with her" (personal interview with interviewee P, April 5, 2014). This is in sync with McQuail's (1987, p.83) argument that integration and social interaction is one reason for watching any media outlet. The audiences are able to see the life and state of affairs of other people and identify with other people and gain 'a sense of belonging'.

On the other hand, a businesswoman with three children affirmed that she watches the drama since it is part of her responsibility to supervise her children. She wanted to make sure that she knows what her children are watching. Lull (1990) calls this role enactment which is reinforced by the parent regulating the watching of television programs as a gate-keeper. By doing so the children and the parent are able to observe "role-determined and rule – governed actions"

My three children love the show to death. Since it is transmitted at my free time, I always watch it with them from day one. But I don't find it funny for myself. On the contrary, I wish they never watch it but don't want to argue with them. So I always sit with them to observe what makes them laugh and what messages they are taking (personal interview with interviewee J, March 24, 2014).

4.2.1.3. Education

In addition to these, a few interviewees noted that they found the drama very educational. For these interviewees, this value is more vital than the entertainment they get from it.

I never missed any episode. To be honest, the reason I watch the show is to get some important information out of it, wondering what would be today's episode be all about. It's entertaining, too, but for me it's not strong as such (personal interview with interviewee E, March, 18, 2014). I can't wait to watch the next episode every week. I keep on wondering how they depict issues in our society (personal interview with interviewee K, March, 26, 2014). The drama entertains me. However, the strong messages they uncover every week interests me more. I believe these topics are in fact educational (personal interview with interviewee W, April, 20, 2014).

What is interesting in these responses is that the interviewees who watched the drama for educational purpose were from different levels of education (See Table 1.). This indicates that the interviewees' educational status did not have much impact on what purpose they thought the drama would achieve for them.

Another interviewee said that she watches the drama in order to get an insight into other people's lives and also compare it with her own.

The drama clearly, truthfully shows the fact about the society I live in. I enjoy every episode since it cheers me up, it sometimes help me to solve problems, aiding decision making and I even compare myself with the characters. For example, Azalech, the mother, is a role model

for me. I compare myself with her and see whether I would be able to cope up with bringing up four very different children of my own (personal interview with interviewee O, March 31, 2014).

Two other respondents asserted that the drama is being used as 'behavioral regulator' in their families. As Lull (1990) suggests, television program is used as a punctuator.

Every Saturday night, we all try to finish our activities, say it is house chores or dinner, before the airing of *Betoch* (personal interview with interviewee X, April 21, 2014). Unlike the other days, we all hurry up to get done with everything on Saturday night. The drama has made our family to sit and watch together (personal interview interviewee, April 16, 2014).

There were also interviewees who said that they watch the drama for both entertainment and educational purposes, not for either/or.

The drama for me is both entertaining and educational. The catchy phrases the characters use makes me laugh. Moreover, this drama shows me different perspectives about saving, how to handle family controversies and the love between them interests me. Through this, I get the lesson as to how to take care of my family (personal interview with interviewee G, March 20, 2014).

Among the interviewees who thought that the drama is mainly for entertainment, teen and youth participants constituted the largest number. A few interviewees who said that they watch the drama for educational purpose were of middle-age and some belonged to the youth. Thus, in this case, age seems to have some bearing on the interviewees' understanding of the purpose of watching the drama.

4.2.2. Laughter and the message

As pointed out earlier in Bergson's theory, laughter needs an echo, as it provides the illusion of a wider audience. It also acts as a signal as to when the viewer is supposed to laugh. *Betoch* drama uses a recorded laughter as a background. The producer stressed that this laughter is with no doubt one element of a sitcom. It enables and urges the audience to laugh and enjoy humors.

We know this could be a new trend for our audiences but think that they will get used to it, and confirmed they are. Let alone the laughter track, the sitcom by itself is a new experience for the audience (personal interview with the producer, February, 28, 2014).

According to Lieberman et al. (2009, p. 498, as cited in Martin, 2007), "in humor responses and the laughter of others, context is critical for the reception of humorous stimuli. The theoretical mechanism operating is one in which the laughter of others serve as a cueing function, alerting the audience member to the humorous potential of the stimulus, thus, increasing the likelihood of a humor response."

Here, it is important to note that humor is dependent on external processes and audience recognition; and although it takes a particular form, it need not always result in actual laughter.

As a result, what makes one laugh may not make the other (Williamson, 2008, p. 45).

Though I know, it s one element of a sitcom, I sometimes see a misuse of the laughter. I think this makes the audience very attentive and not miss any comic part (personal interview with interviewee S, April 12, 2014). I think it is unnecessary. It distracts me from taking important part out of it. It sometimes goes beyond the limit (personal interview with interview A, March 14, 2014). It makes me to laugh out of my control. When I hear them laugh, I do too (personal interview with interview T, April 12, 2014).

According to Swanson (1987), the positive or negative effect of the laughter track on comic and narrative enjoyment of sitcom is predicated not on absolute values, but on individual qualities of the program at the episodic level.

In my opinion, they just take the recorded laughter as we usually see from Hollywood sitcoms. Actually, it creates a laughing moment while watching with the whole family. At times when I do not find it funny, the very fact that they laugh makes me smile at least (personal interview with interviewee U, April 16, 2014).

The characters' speech style and word usage in the drama is quite different from other series which the audience is familiar with. The producer here mentioned that they purposely created such words to attract and easily capture the attention of the audience. In relation to this, there were some interviewees who find it hilarious, whereas some think that the words make the characters childish and pointless.

I watch the drama for the catchy phrases like 'adega alew', 'zeru kelete.' They simply make me laugh and are appealing to me. I think the drama wouldn't be the same without these expressions (personal interview with interviewee Q, April 8, 2014). Though I like the show, I think some words are inappropriate and unnecessary. I think they are added just for the sake of creating color or something. I believe these phrases might somehow affect how the audiences perceive the messages (personal interview interviewee P, April 5, 2014).

As has been discussed earlier, the sitcom genre is a new phenomenon in Ethiopia. Hence, the structure and presentation is still not well acquainted to the audience so does the laughter track. This might be the reason why the interviewees have different perspectives on the effect of the

laughter track. Although to a lesser extent, this has had an influence in the way they receive the message.

4.2.3. Identification with characters

As mentioned in the literature review part of this thesis, it is useful to consider briefly how audience members' affective dispositions toward the central characters in media entertainment relate to the broader interpretive frames for understanding messages (Swanson, 1987, p. 251).

Research has shown that audiences have cognitive and affective responses to media characters. The findings from this study also seem to corroborate this fact by demonstrating that audiences are more interested to watch specific characters that appeal to them. In addition to the fun that characters create, it seems that the viewers connect the characters with their own lives. In order to understand the participants' awareness about what messages they obtain from the drama watching experience, the producer was asked what message they encoded in the drama (if any) as a take-away for the audience beyond its entertainment value. The producer noted that they have tried to represent all personalities in any family and make the number of the main characters as many as nine. The drama constitutes characters with different temperaments to make it more appealing to diverse group of viewers. Interviewee B used to work as a housemaid in the Middle East and she said that she likes watching Tirfe.

Tirfe, the foodie, is more appealing to me. The way she eats and laughs is so enjoyable. I was working in Beirut, Lebanon as a housemaid. It reminds me of the relation I had with my employers. They were too harsh and abusive. If I had the chance to work for families like the one in the drama, I would never leave my country (personal interview with interviewee B, March 15, 2014).

On the other hand, interviewee C and G were both mothers who felt related to the parents or the kids. Basil (as cited on Swanson, 1987) argues that identification is an important factor for mediating message effects. Audiences feel happy when their favorite characters are happy and feel upset when unfortunate events happen to those media characters because they feel related to them.

I can say that I like all the characters but Zeru is the best for me. His fatherly behavior and his approach to his children are like my husband. The youngest girl, Riste, is similar to my own daughter. She is wiser for her age (personal interview with interviewee C, March 16, 2014). I wonder what the family would be like without the wife (Azalech). She always mediates and cools down every argument. The way she handles some disagreements with her husband amazes me more. I wish I could be like her and be able to do the same (personal interview with interviewee G, March 20, 2014).

In the message interpretation process model proposed by Austin et al (1999) cited on Swanson (1987), perceived realism of media content influences identification with media portrayals which along with other factors form decision making process. According to Swanson (1987), despite their use of a common interpretive frame, viewers might affectively relate to the characters in the program in different ways. One viewer might find in the central character positive qualities that lead him/her enjoy, while the other viewer might see negative qualities that produce dislike for the character. In this regard, interviewees in this study have different attitudes for the same characters.

For example, two interviewees who were a big fan of Ekke stated different reasons as to why they liked/not liked him. One focused on the negative quality while the other on the positive one.

Ekke is the finest for me. He makes me laugh and I enjoy his accent very much. But I sometimes find the character depicting only people who find it hard to fit well with the urbanites. The laughter is coming from his frequent mistakes. I think it is portraying country men as silly, which in my opinion is wrong (personal interview with interviewee L, March 27, 2014).

An interviewee who was a house guard and who came from the countryside stressed that he was a complete stranger when he came to Addis Ababa. But gradually he started to get familiar with the life style and the environment. For him, the character was too much exaggerated.

To be honest, I don't sit to watch the show without the presence of Ekke in each episode. He is funny. And he shows the contrast between the countrymen and the urbanities. His name, especially, amazes me. He can recite names in his lineage up to 14th generation. It makes me wonder how many of us even know our great grandparents' name (personal interview with interviewee S, April 22, 2014).

Another interviewee, who was trying to enter the movie industry and who took part in a couple of movies, was more attracted to and well related to Mafi. She said that she felt how hard it would be to make her own movie and be famous.

I like Mafi because of her looks and style. She is the funniest of all for me and I wonder what would be her destiny in relation to the movie she always talks about (personal interview interviewee Y, April 23, 2014).

What all these responses tell us is that there hardly exists a unitary meaning in a mediated text. Instead, different people can interpret the same message differently by relating the messages to their own conditions. Thus, one's own life experience and context is a significant factor in the meaning making process.

Riste is characterized as a wise girl for her age and I expect the next generation to be like her, who is more intelligent than we are. My daughter is like that (personal interview interviewee V, April 18, 2014).

There were very few interviewees who found their lives to match the lives of the characters in the drama. According to Seiter et al. (1989, p. 236), “media texts enable them [the audience] to evaluate their own experiences as well as norms and values they live by”

I wish my father was like this. He always argues with my mother. Azalech, the mother, is the one who always settles every misunderstanding in the drama. I can say I see my life in the drama since my mother does the same. I question about marriage life when I always watch the drama (H, personal interview interviewee H, March 20, 2014).

This shows that the experience of watching the media text helps the audience relate the problem they are facing and how they deal with to that of the characters. This aids the viewers in having important items in their toolbox addressing their own problems.

What is more, children of some of the interviewees often use the drama as a means of joining the adult environment by pretending to talk or act like their favorite characters. As Hoffner (1996) notes, “the process through which an individual wishes to become and imitates a media character is termed as “wishful identification.” There were some interviewees who claimed that the drama has had an impact on their children. As a result, the children started imitating their favorite characters.

I hear my children calling after the characters name. They even started to act and talk like them. But I don't know whether this has a good or bad consequence in their lives (personal interview with interviewee J, March 24, 2014). I can say the drama has a great deal of impact on my son's speech ability. Amazingly, my two year old son started trying to

talk after watching the drama (personal interview with interview K, March 26, 2014).

Audience can feel sorry for the character, admire the character or feel well related to a particular character. However, this does not mean that all audiences always have identification with the character. Accordingly, there were interviewees who could not identify themselves with any of the characters in the drama. They watch the drama just because they find the performance of the characters enjoyable.

4.2.4. Making Sense of the Drama Text

In order to understand the participants' awareness of the messages they obtain, they were asked what message they decode from the drama (if any) beyond entertainment value. Though the interviewees did not always use the same words in describing the drama, they did constantly raise similar categories. The wide-ranging understanding about the drama was that 'it focuses on our social, economic and moral stands and their implications'. As argued by Croteau and Hoynes (1997), television brings a common thinking by decreasing traditional differences amongst different social groups. Most of the interviewees claimed that the messages the producer wanted to convey could easily be recognized. They were related more to family issues that often surfaced in interactions. However, variations were also observed between the producer's encoding and the viewers' encoding. These were discussed in subsequent sub-sections.

4.2.5. Decoding the text

As has been discussed, Hall's encoding/decoding model distinguishes between the dominant, negotiated and preferred readings. Audiences could have different readings for a media text: one could be the dominant/preferred meaning; the other could be a negotiated meaning where they

create their own interpretation by modifying the decoded meaning and the oppositional meaning where they totally reject it (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003, pp.273-74). The preferred meaning which the producer wanted to convey is subject to be read in these three different positions. Majority of the interviewees seem to have subscribed to the preferred /dominant readings. These dominant readings included the intended messages the producer listed down in the interview as presented at the beginning of the analysis. This being the case, however, there were also some negotiated readings as well as a few oppositional readings the interviewees took in their decoding of the drama text.

4.2.5.1. Dominant/Preferred reading

The drama, as have been discussed, has at least a message in every episode. According to most of the interviewees, the main message the producer wanted to communicate had something to do with saving, parenting and the various features of our social values, beliefs and ethics. However, the message of saving had a great deal of concurrence among most of the interviewees. Zeru is a very greedy person who does not want to spend a penny on anything, and he calls this saving. He always argues with his wife and kids. This character has created a conversation within and/or among viewers as to the proper meaning of saving.

I don't think Zeru really understands about saving. He is always seen being so sensitive and annoyed when the issue of money is raised. And he is not programmed, too. He doesn't want to spend anything on even basic necessities. I do not know what I would do if my husband was like that (personal interview with interviewee N, March, 31, 2014). In my opinion the main message the drama wants to convey is about saving. Zeru, for me, is economical. All the basic needs of his children and the family are secured. What he needs is not to spend extra money.

For example, he always complains about their daily consumption, etc., so, how can I say this man is greedy? (personal interview with interviewee P, April, 5, 2014).

In addition to identification with characters, Swanson (1987; 251) has the following to say with respect to differences in interpretation: "Though their common interpretive practice allows each viewer to experience entertainment and information gratifications, the specific interpretive practices by which the viewers affectively relate to the message are quite dissimilar and could lead to different understandings of the "information" that might be learned from the message." This means audiences can still feel entertained though they have different message interpretations. "I watch the drama for entertainment. It makes me laugh with the kind of life I live. It also shows my own life, my friends and others as well" (personal interview with interviewee O, March, 31, 2014).

One of the interviewees, who also owns a business like Zeru, shared a similar perspective about saving and fatherhood.

I admire Zeru; I can relate to him and I think I understand what he is been through with his wife, kids and other people, too. I understand when he is greedy. The man values money, I do too. Unfortunately, people don't understand how one works to earn a living and takes care of his family. He is just a wise man trying to provide his family with whatever they need (personal interview with interviewee P, April, 5, 2014).

Similar identifications occur when an audience member shares a media characters' perspective. And this man owns and manages his own business and he thinks the man is just like him, misunderstood and misrepresented at times just because he values money. He enjoys how the drama portrays the husband. "It gives me an insight into youngsters' life. I take a lesson on how

the children cheat their parents and the methods they follow to resolve problems” (personal interview with interviewee N, March, 29, 2014).

In addition to the positive dominant readings they concurred with, the interviewees explained some controversial topics in the drama. For example, Yibekal, the oldest son who is a university student, is known to have a good score. But he has bad habits like chewing chat, partying at night and stealing money. Parents felt the inclusion of such a character as counterproductive and were afraid that the behavior shown would be a negative role model for fellow children of their own. They believed that such characterization would make students think that they could have better grades no matter what the terrible habits they would develop. Moreover, they added that the parents of the character did not seriously advice and correct him, resulting in the child’s making more mistakes, and which they thought was not acceptable.

4.2.5.2. Negotiated reading

Negotiated reading involves audience’s understanding of the preferred meaning but opposing its application to specific areas. There were some instances where the interviewees concurred with some element of the preferred reading but modified it to suit their own personal experience and backgrounds. The topics of how to handle house maids and parenting were the ones where the interviewees were found to have a negotiated reading.

Though I watch it for entertainment purpose, the social issues they raise interest me more. But they only talk about the problems we have at hand. I think they should also sometimes give directions which might enable the responsible organ to take measures and act accordingly (personal interview with interviewee W, April, 20, 2014). I sometimes think that the relationship between the house maids and the family goes

too far. There should be some boundaries between them. I don't think it works on complex cultures like ours (personal interview with interviewee F, March, 19, 2014).

I like how the head of the household approaches his employees but it often goes too far. In our culture, it is assumed that there should exist some gap and hierarchical relation with every member of a certain family. So, this drama is not in line with the society we have (personal interview with interviewee A, March, 14, 2014). The positive thing I take from the show is one related to the servants and the guard's interaction with the employers. I wish I could be like that with my own workers (personal interview with interviewee J, March, 24, 2014). Though I like the relationship they have, I at times observe outrageous behavior which is inappropriate and is out of our culture (personal interview with interviewee G, March, 20, 2014).

These quotes illustrate that as a matter of fact, the audience agreed with the intended reading, but they shaped it in a way that reflects their unique circumstances. As Fiske (1986, as cited in Williams, 2001, p. 201), a leading scholar in cultural studies, contends "the preferred reading cannot completely contain all the bits and pieces that compose the text. People can put their bits and pieces together in different ways to produce different version of the text." Most of the interviewees focused on the cultural representation of the drama. They believed that although there are some cultural practices we need to modify, this should not be done in a way that questions our identity and uniqueness.

4.2.5.3. Oppositional reading

There were interviewees who totally rejected the preferred meaning and decoded the text according to their own values and attitudes. This is because readings preferred by message

creators are not necessarily the same as audiences' reading of the messages. Only the decoded meanings of the messages have an impact on the audience (Hall, 1973).

Scholars in the study of media and audience argue that producers of 'media texts' may think that they are producing messages with clarity and simplicity but these messages won't be simply dumped into the minds of passive audiences. As has been discussed in chapter two, what the audience does according to these scholars is infer from the media texts various meanings (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p. 267).

The participants noted that the drama sometimes gets out of line by being over exaggerated. They said that the interaction of the family members and all the fun they enjoy is not seen in their families and their daily lives. They argue that it is rare to find such kind of family in the Ethiopian context.

I don't think there is a family who is too frank and discusses on every issue they face. There are ten family members in our home. But we deal with our own issues separately in our own way (personal interview with interviewee D, March, 16, 2014). I was raised in a family where we were afraid of our parents, especially our father. But this drama gives me a lesson on how to be free and still be respectful to each other (personal interview with interviewee J, March, 24, 2014).

Here it is necessary to recognize that any audience may have specific expectations or needs from the drama, which might be related to the way in which he/she has been brought up, e.g., social class, etc.

In my opinion, the messages are not strong as such. I can say all the messages are already in the minds of the people. I don't know whether it is relevant to depict that or not. Moreover, I observe disrespect

between parents and the children, which is contrary to the family I was raised in. I don't want my children to capture this image in their minds and do the same with us. The positive thing I take from the show is about the servants and the guard's interaction with their employers. I wish I could be like that with my own workers (personal interview with interviewee J, March, 24, 2014).

In addition to personal background, individual personality seems to be a relevant factor for different interpretations of a text.

I never liked the story or the characters. It is not funny at all. I don't think there is a clear message the producers want to demonstrate. For me, it just magnifies unhelpful things. I sometimes compare it with other drama like 'sew le sew' which is more interesting. *Betoch* lacks suspense, seriousness and concrete plot. Tilahun Gugsa (the producer) is an expert in theatre; he could have done better than this. *Betoch* drama is quite similar to *Menteko*, which is also produced by the same person (personal interview with interviewee Q, April, 8, 2014).

The above interviewee related the meaning the drama should have portrayed with the producer's ability. Before they appreciate the message of the text, audiences often tend to see the presentation satisfactory.

The message should try to address those people living in rural areas which account for the majority of the general population (personal interview with interviewee O, March, 31, 2014). I like the words Yibekal uses. They are exactly the same as mine and my friends. So I enjoy that the most. But I hear my parents getting confused, maybe that is because we are in different generation (personal interview with interviewee A, March, 14, 2014).

It is noteworthy that social background and experience do not necessarily determine people's understanding of the content of a media text. Social class alone is not an adequate explanation for different audience responses. Respondents who shared a similar class background sometimes produce different responses (Morley (1986) cited in Williams, 2000).

There were different perspectives among the interviewees' message interpretation in relation to handling housemaids and guards in our culture. They forwarded their opinions regarding their own experience and expectations.

Traditionally, it is difficult to find families that handle their maids and guards as shown in the drama. I wish I could be like them (personal interview with interviewee B, March, 15, 2014). House maids have no voice in many households. I think the drama is a breakthrough to many families in this regard (personal interview with interviewee L, March, 27, 2014). I don't believe there is a family who treats their housemaids in such a way. My employers don't give me freedom to express my feelings. But at least I watch the drama with them and I hope they will also consider starting to practice appropriate handling of housemaids in their own family (personal interview with interviewee M, March, 27, 2014).

This study also reveals that, though it was to a lesser extent, the audience adopted oppositional reading, especially in relation to how to handle house maids. A few interviewees claimed that this is hard to practice in our culture and they added that the parents shouldn't let their children or employees behave as they did in the drama. For example, the housemaids spoke equally and interfered with the owners, which they felt was totally unacceptable to them and they would not let this to happen in their own lives.

Audience can interpret media messages in different ways for different reasons. Social position and background is one factor. Along this line, Croteau and Hoynes (2003) argue that our social position provides the frame through which we view the world and shape the tools we have available for interpreting media images.

I was raised in a family where we were afraid of our parents, especially our father. We would even respect elder people like our parents. But this drama gives me a lesson on how to be free and still be respectful to each other (personal interview with interviewee J, March, 24, 2014). It gives me an insight into youngsters' life. I take a lesson on how the children cheat their parents and the methods they use to resolve it. This shows me how this generation is interacting with their families and society, too (personal interview with interviewee N, March, 29, 2014).

The analysis reveals that friends and family life and interactions were one of the key factors for audience's different interpretations of the drama text. As Croteau and Hoynes (2003) contend, in addition to our own understandings, our discussions with friends and family about the meaning of media messages provide strong evidence that audiences indeed interpret media in diverse ways.

Betoch is a family drama which has tried to include all members of the family and people around them. Most of the interviewees watch the drama with their family. According to a few of them, this made them have a diverse perspective on the topic of the drama.

I usually used to watch it for fun. The rest of my family pay attention to the topic the drama is raising each week. So I participate in their discussion and somehow that has changed my attitude about the drama. I now think there are some serious issues it depicts beyond the

entertainment (personal interview with interviewee D, March, 16, 2014).

Following this line of argument, it can be argued that social viewing is expected to be a more diffused behavior in multi-person households than in single person households (Bjur, 2009).

I desperately wait for the new subject matter every week. My family members laugh at every conversation, and I used to wonder what made them behave the way they did. But after a while, I also started to give attention for the comic dialogues (personal interview with interviewee F, March, 19, 2014).

Thus, social viewing and discussion after watching the drama were found to be important factors for different interpretations of the drama text.

4.3. Summary

As indicated in the analysis, the audience derived various gratifications from consuming *Betoch* drama text. What is more, the analysis reveals that the most observed reading in this study was the dominant/preferred reading. Most of the interviewees agreed that the drama is certainly entertaining and raises current social issues through humor. They established a common ground with reference to understanding specific messages in each episode.

In relation to particular messages, it was also found out that there was a reinterpretation of the intended message of the drama. For example, the intended meaning in relation to parenting was that it is important to have a family that freely discusses every issue and that gives due attention to everyone's voice in any decisions that the family make. The producer of the drama noted that family is the base for any society and it should be free but still be respectful of each other. However, the findings indicate that some interviewees did not buy into such decoding. Some of

them believed that though they took the message positively, they said it should be adapted to the family context and condition. They argued that is somehow difficult to practice as it is. This means that a negotiated reading was also observed in the analysis.

The study also reveals that some interviewees were uncomfortable with the way the house guard was represented in the drama. The guard was portrayed as a country man who knew nothing about urban life and difficulty communicating with members of the family and the community, too. They contend that such representation belittles and stereotypes countrymen.

The findings from this study also show that age and gender differences were not that much important variables in affecting the audience's interpretation of the media text. Viewers from different gender were found decoding the media text in quite a similar way. This might be because of the presentation of the characters in the drama text or as Bjur (2009, p. 186) argues, "the correlation between demographic factors and television viewing is strongest for age while gender gradually has lost its significance". In relation to age, the study shows that all age groups who liked the drama found it entertaining but they varied in the level of interpretation of meaning.

As understood from parent interviewees, their children habitually watch the drama mainly for the humorous component of the drama. Another explanation for a near absence of a significant difference among many of the interviewees with respect to variation in the interpretation of the drama text could be attributable to the nature of the encoding/decoding model. According to Hyde- Clarke and Walton (2013, as cited in Michelle, 2007 and Seiter, 1999), Hall's encoding/decoding model remains fundamentally useful; however, categories have been overgeneralized in both concept and application. They suggest that it works better for news and non-

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fiction programming than it does for entertainment programming. As *Betoch* is an entertainment genre, the content may not be as complexity and controversial as news and current affairs to generate that much divergence in terms of its decoding by the audience.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. CONCLUSION

As already stated in chapter one, the major objective of this study was to examine what gratifications the audience derive from and how the audience interpret and make sense of *Betoch* drama, and account for the factors that might have played a role in such reception. To this end, the study was situated within a general theoretical approach of cultural studies. Within this general theoretical paradigm, however, Stuart Hall's notion of active audience as explicated in his encoding/decoding model as well the uses and gratifications theory were used as specific theoretical frameworks to inform the study.

In order to address the research questions, a qualitative research design was employed. Once the composition of the audience with respect to age, gender, occupation and education was determined as per the literature on the subject, convenience sampling was used to identify twenty-five regular audience of *Betoch* drama to use as a data source. Accordingly, an in-depth interview was conducted with these selected audience members. What is more, an in-depth interview was also conducted with the producer of the drama so as to have some sense with respect to the encoder's preferred/dominant reading on offer for the audience of the drama. The interviews were conducted over a two-month period.

Taking into account the research questions the study set out to answer, the data was organized and analyzed thematically as the themes emerged in the interview data. The analysis of the data shows that the audience derived various gratifications from consuming the media text in question. Besides, most of the audience members interviewed (regardless of difference in gender,

age, education and occupation) seem to, more or less, share similar interpretations of the drama texts, which were largely in line with the dominant readings on offer. There were a limited instances where the audience were seen taking a negotiated meaning. The analysis also reveals that there were instances whereby the audience rejected the preferred/dominant meaning and constructed oppositional readings to the text. It seems that such oppositional readings in the context of this study were attributable to factors, such as family background, personal association and preferences.

It is true that the phenomenon commonly known as the cultural turn to media studies shifted the attention of media research from its preoccupation with media effect tradition to a focus on audience reception study. This shift of focus was precipitated by the recognition that, unlike the earlier effect tradition which considered the audience as more or less passive objects which the all-powerful media invariably acted upon, the audience were considered active beings who have agency; that they were not passive and helpless victims at the mercy of the media; that they interpret media texts based on various factors, such as their own lived experiences and diverse backgrounds.

Such understanding was further bolstered by the ascendance of interpretive paradigm which, among other things, gave credence to the notion of the polysemic and multivocal nature of texts and the intersubjective production of meaning. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model was the outcome of this current of change in media study that we referred to above. However, an important question that one would ask is if or whether all media texts and genres are equally amenable to such theoretical conceptualization, or if the strength of the applicability of the model could vary from genre to genre.

In the context of this study, notwithstanding the fact that it is premature to make a strong claim, it appears that there was limited polysemy in the audience decoding of *Betoch* drama. As Seiter (1999) argues, this might be because the encoding/decoding model (used in this study) works better for news and current affairs programs rather than for entertainment programs. Whereas news and current affairs program deals with serious, complex and often controversial issues, entertainment program usually focuses on entertaining the audience by serving as a momentary escape from the drudgery of life. As *Betoch* drama is a sitcom that quite fits in the entertainment category, the audience might have focused more on the entertainment value of the genre than the need for polysemic interpretation of the content of the text during their consumption. It should, however, be cautioned that the finding of this study should be taken not as conclusive but as tentative until more research in the area reveals a similar pattern.

5.2. Recommendations

As noted earlier, situation comedy or sitcom genre is a new phenomenon in the Ethiopian entertainment industry. There obviously is paucity of research in the area that has systematically analyzed the interaction between the producers, the audience and the drama texts. This study would perhaps be the first attempt at systematically examining such an interaction between the producers, the text and the consumers of the drama.

In this regard, academically, the findings of this study could be seen as a positive step for further study in the area since the current findings have raised more questions than they have provided definitive and conclusive answers. In light of this, it is recommended that more research be carried out in the area that aims at testing Hall's encoding/decoding model with this genre. In doing so, consideration should perhaps be given to using methodological triangulation rather

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than using one method as was the case in this study. Such triangulation might help capture the subject from different angles and thereby enrich our understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, relevant institutions should consider providing some form of sensitization training to producers of entertainment programs to sharpen their theoretical understanding of the interaction between themselves, the media texts they produce and the audience. Such orientation would help them create entertainment texts that would cater for the diverse group of audience and enable them to become producers of catchall programs which appeal to a mass audience and thereby increase the bottom-line.

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Appendix

Interview guide for the producer of *Betoch* drama

1. When did the drama start?
2. What is the objective of the drama?
3. How do you describe the characters?
4. What are the messages you want to convey?
5. Who are the target audiences?
6. How do you expect the targeted audience to understand the messages?

Appendix II

Interview guide for respondents

1. How do you like the drama?
2. Why do you watch the drama regularly?
3. Who is the most appealing character to you? Why?
4. Who do you watch the drama with?
5. Do you discuss with others after you watch the drama? If yes, does this affect how you interpret the message?
6. Do you think the issues raised are related to you or do you know someone with such story?
7. Does the laughter track affect the way you see the drama?
8. Do you think there are messages the drama portrays in every episode? If so, how do you see them? What are the most important messages you take out of it?

Declaration

I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis is my original work and all sources of materials used for this study have been appropriately acknowledged.

Name: Meseret Tajebe

Signature: 

Date of submission: June, 2014

Place of submission: Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia