POT CULTURE IN POP CULTURE: HOW COLLEGE STUDENTS NEGOTIATE THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF DRUG USE THROUGH *WEEDS*

by

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(Under the Direction of CAROLINA ACOSTA-ALZURU)

ABSTRACT

Through the lens of cultural studies, this study seeks to determine how 12 college students perceive the drug use and dealing portrayed on the television show *Weeds,* how they negotiate these perceptions in terms of their attitudes about illicit drug use, and what role the suburban setting of the show plays in the way they perceive the portrayal of drugs. I conducted long interviews with 12 University of Georgia students, six male and six female, between the ages of 18 and 22. Though the participants interpreted a mix of positive and negative portrayals of marijuana use and dealing on the show, they primarily perceived an overall relaxed and positive portrayal of these themes, with the suburban setting contributing heavily to the latter impression. The participants observed a more positive portrayal of marijuana use than dealing, and their personal opinions on these topics generally mirrored that view.

INDEX WORDS: Marijuana, Drugs, Cultural Studies, Reception Studies, Television, *Weeds*, Stuart Hall, Suburbia

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The insights of the men and women who participated in my research make up the heart of this study, and I thank these people for graciously and enthusiastically allowing me to interview them.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A drug-dealing soccer mom—it is unexpected. It is also the central concept of the hit Showtime series *Weeds*, where after the sudden death of her husband, *Nancy Botwin*, the main character of the series, begins dealing marijuana as a way to support her family and continue living the suburban lifestyle she and her two sons are accustomed to. The first season of *Weeds* aired in 2005, and its eighth and final season wrapped up in September 2012.

While the focus of my research is how the drug issues on the show are perceived by college viewers, *Weeds'* setting of suburbia provides the context in which the drug activity takes place. In *Evolution of the Suburbs*, Joel Schwartz wrote that "the history of suburban America reaches back one hundred and thirty years. For at least that long, urban dwellers have tried to escape the city's grime, immigrants, and disorder and search for outlying retreats with institutional structures to protect their preserves when distance alone did not suffice" (1976, p. 1). Since its incorporation, suburbia has attempted somewhat of a utopian lifestyle. However, its imperfections are nothing new to the 21st century. Even in the 1950s, critics and media were pointing out the sexual excess of suburban living, where wife-swapping parties took place and housewives would form call-girl rings (Marsh & Kaplan, 1976). Suburbanites were also accused of drinking too much and being too bent on gaining status (Marsh & Kaplan, 1976). Still, suburban families on television during the '50s and '60s held up that picture perfect image with

shows like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver* (Douglas, 2003). While portrayals of middle-class families branched out in the late 80s and 90s, there were still plenty of "warm and fuzzy" families (Butsch, 2005). Perhaps that is why shows like *Desperate Housewives* (2004), which aired on the ABC television network from October 2004 to May 2012, caused such a stir. (Media reviews often compare *Weeds* to *Desperate Housewives*). An even closer comparison can be made between *Weeds* and the television show *Breaking Bad*, which premiered in 2008 on the cable channel AMC, right on the heels of *Weeds'* 2005 debut. *Breaking Bad* follows protagonist Walter White, who lives in New Mexico with his wife and teenage son who has cerebral palsy. After being diagnosed with stage III cancer and given two years to live, Walter, a chemistry teacher, begins manufacturing and selling methamphetamine in order to make sure his family is financially secure once he is gone. The show has garnered many awards, and been nominated for four golden globes (AMC, IMDb: Breaking Bad). A Google search of the names of both shows reveals a host of articles that compare the two. Their premises are so similar that in a *Newsweek* article, *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan wrote that if he had known about *Weeds* before he pitched his show to Sony, he probably would not have continued on with it (Gilligan, 2012). On the website "Movie Smackdown," Arthur Tiersky (2012) compared the two shows, ultimately selecting *Breaking Bad* as the "winner" (The Decision section, para. 1). While both shows are based on the premise of a normal suburban parent entering the drug business, Tiersky (2012) called *Weeds* a "half-serious comedy," and *Breaking Bad* a "half-funny drama" (The Smackdown section, para. 1). In comparing the two shows, he wrote, "Both shows give us an inside, matter-of-fact look at the drug trade for what it is:

a manufacture and sale business that flourishes because of its criminalization. They both avoid getting preachy about the downside of drugs but don't shy away from it either. *Breaking Bad* has no shortage of lives ruined by meth addiction; *Weeds* revolves around a far more innocuous, non-addictive drug, so the attitude toward it is far more positive" (Tiersky, 2012, The Scorecard section, para. 1).

Thus, we are finally seeing on television graphic portrayals of the suburban middle-class families that wear the stereotypical image of a suburbanite in public, but behind closed doors scandals abound. When a premium cable channel like Showtime, unbound by broadcast restrictions, grabs the concept of trouble in suburbia—one can expect some shock value. With *Weeds*, the suburban ideal is turned upside down as one of its own assumes the title of "drug dealer." And viewers are given a depiction of what it means to deal in the suburbs, a perspective that gradually transforms from show to show.

When the first episode opens, *Nancy Botwin's* husband *Judah* has recently died of a sudden heart attack. *Nancy* must now figure out how to support herself and her two sons, 10-year-old *Shane* and 15-year-old *Silas*. The family lives in the suburban California town of Agrestic. *Nancy* pays a visit to members of a black family in a nearby neighborhood (head of the operation *Heylia*, her daughter *Vaneeta* and her nephew *Conrad*), who become her marijuana suppliers as she begins her drug business. Viewers are also introduced to members of *Judah's* poker group: *Doug*, a crooked accountant with a childish personality, and *Dean*, a lawyer married to Nancy's conniving friend and neighbor *Celia*. *Andy*, the aimless fun-loving brother of *Nancy's* late husband, comes to visit *Nancy* and says he is staying until he gets his life figured out. *Nancy* soon goes into business with *Conrad*. By the end of the first season, *Nancy's* children have discovered

their mother's career choice, and *Nancy* realizes her date *Peter* is a DEA agent (IMDb: Weeds).

In the second season of the show, *Nancy* expands her marijuana business by purchasing a grow house, and she and *Conrad* begin marketing *Conrad's* new strain of marijuana as "MILF Weed." *Peter* and *Nancy* get married so he can never be forced to testify against her in court. The Armenian mob begins giving *Nancy* trouble because her new grow house is in their territory, and *Peter* arranges a DEA raid on the Armenians (Showtime, 2013). *Peter* and *Nancy's* relationship eventually goes sour, and *Peter* demands *Nancy* and *Conrad* liquidate the business and pay him. In the season two finale, the plan for *Nancy* and *Conrad* to sell their MILF Weed to a drug dealer named *U-Turn*, and then pay *Peter*, goes horribly wrong. The marijuana is gone because *Silas* took it, and the Armenians show up and kill *Peter* (IMDb: Weeds).

At the beginning of the third season, *U-Turn* pays off the Armenians, and thus forces *Nancy* and *Conrad* to work for him, as they are now indebted to him. *Heylia* bails *Conrad* out, but leaves *Nancy* with *U-Turn*. *Nancy* lets *Silas* start selling marijuana for her and later *Conrad* begins teaching him the growing side of the business. Eventually *U-Turn* dies and *Nancy* figures out a way to get out of debt to him. When she unexpectedly receives *Peter's* pension and life insurance money, she can't decide whether or not to give it to *Peter's* ex-wife *Valerie*. Once *Valerie* finds out about the money, she gets angry about *Nancy* not giving it to her, and hires someone to spy on *Nancy*. When *Nancy* gets into trouble with a group of bikers who grow marijuana, she strikes a deal for protection with a Mexican group of drug dealers, led by a man named *Guillermo*. *Guillermo* sets fire to the bikers' marijuana, which then leads to a wild fire that spreads throughout the town.

The police find the grow house, and *Nancy* decides she and her family will leave Agrestic. She secretly sets fire to her own home before they go (IMDb: Weeds).

Season four signals a location change for the show, as *Nancy*, *Silas*, *Shane* and *Andy* settle into *Andy's* grandmother's home in Ren Mar, located in California on the Mexican border. *Guillermo* gives *Nancy* the opportunity to work for him, helping him traffic marijuana from Mexico to California. Meanwhile, DEA Captain *Roy* continues to search for the person responsible for the grow house, and his investigation leads him to *Celia*. *Celia* tries to point the finger at *Nancy*, but is jailed for the crime anyway. *Roy* eventually begins to believe *Celia*, however, and makes a deal with her in which she is released from prison in exchange for agreeing to help him get *Nancy* (IMDb: Weeds). *Nancy* begins working at the maternity store front business for the Mexicans (Showtime, 2013). She then decides she wants to get back into the selling side of the business, and goes to see *Esteban*, the mayor of Tijuana, Mexico and the drug lord *Guillermo* works for (IMDb: Weeds). *Doug* finds the *Botwin* family in Ren Mar and comes to live with them (Showtime, 2013). *Celia* becomes addicted to cocaine, and her family arranges an intervention for her. *Nancy* finds the entrance to a drug tunnel leading to Mexico at the maternity store, and later learns that other things, such as weapons, harder drugs and people, are also being trafficked through the tunnel. *Nancy* decides to tell DEA Captain *Roy* about the drug tunnel. During the bust, the Mexicans capture *Roy's* business and romantic partner, who is tortured into telling them that *Nancy* was responsible for the bust. The Mexicans kill him anyway. The bust leads to *Guillermo's* imprisonment (IMDb: Weeds). *Esteban* is informed of *Nancy's* betrayal and summons her. She shows him a sonogram and reveals that she is pregnant with his son (Showtime, 2013).

In season five, *Esteban* sends some of his employees to keep a close eye on *Nancy* at her Ren Mar home. One of them is murdered by DEA Captain *Roy*, who sought revenge for his partner's death. The DEA captain is then murdered by one of the Mexicans. *Nancy* and her sons move into *Esteban's* home in Mexico, and *Esteban* asks *Nancy* to marry him. A powerful Mexican woman named *Pilar* advises *Esteban* not to marry *Nancy* because marrying a foreigner would be bad for his career, as he is running for governor in Mexico. *Esteban* tells *Nancy* their marriage will have to wait until after the election. When *Esteban* sets up a birthing room in his home *Nancy* contacts *Andy*, who is still living in Ren Mar, and tells him she wants to leave and have her baby in a hospital. She fears she will be killed by *Esteban* after the baby is born and no one would know. *Nancy* goes to the hospital, where labor is induced, and she has baby *Stevie*. She signs *Andy's* name to the birth certificate and moves back in with him. *Pilar* hires someone to kill *Nancy*, but the bullet misses her and hits *Shane* instead, only wounding him. *Esteban* finds out he has been replaced as candidate for governor, and he and *Nancy* get married. *Nancy* visits *Guillermo* in prison, and offers to help get him out if he will kill *Pilar*. *Pilar* gets *Esteban* back in the running for governor, and tells *Nancy* that she knows about her attempt to have her killed, and that *Guillermo* works for her. During the conversation, *Pilar* threatens the lives of *Nancy's* children, at which point *Shane* steps in and hits *Pilar* in the head with a croquet mallet, killing her (IMDb: Weeds).

In season six *Nancy*, *Silas*, *Shane* and *Andy* have fled once again. *Nancy* creates a plan for the family to get fake IDs and move to Canada (IMDb: Weeds). *Nancy*, *Silas* and *Andy* find jobs at a hotel in Seattle, Washington, while *Shane* stays home to take care of baby *Stevie*. *Nancy* begins selling marijuana to hotel guests. The family soon faces

danger of being found out and is forced to leave Seattle. *Doug* is taken hostage back in Ren Mar by some of the Mexicans working for *Esteban*. The Mexicans end up finding the *Botwins* and kidnapping *Stevie*, but *Nancy* gets him back. The family ends up in *Nancy's* hometown, where *Silas* meets a man named *Lars*, who he believes is his biological father, not *Judah*. The family works on getting passports to flee the country (Showtime, 2013). However, *Esteban* and *Guillermo* find them at the airport. *Nancy* decides to send the rest of her family on to Copenhagen, while she and *Stevie* face *Esteban*. She enacts yet another plan by taking the blame for *Shane* and telling police that she killed *Pilar*, and is arrested at the airport (IMDb: Weeds).

When the seventh season opens, *Nancy* is getting out on early parole and sent to a halfway house in New York after having been in prison for three years. She discovers that *Esteban* has been killed in prison. *Silas*, *Shane*, *Andy* and *Doug* have been living in Copenhagen, and *Nancy's* sister has custody of *Stevie*. When *Nancy's* family finds out she has been released, they go to New York to find her. *Nancy* and *Silas* partner up again in the marijuana business, and *Shane* gets an internship with the police department. *Nancy* begins a custody battle with her sister to get *Stevie* back (Showtime, 2013). A plan is hatched to keep the family together and allow *Nancy* custody of *Stevie* by having *Nancy*, her three sons, *Andy*, *Doug* and Nancy's sister live in a house in Connecticut. As they are all having a celebratory lunch together, crosshairs are put on *Nancy's* head and a shot is fired, closing out season seven.

As season eight opens the viewer discovers that *Nancy* has been shot in the head. While recovering in the hospital, she decides she wants to make some changes in her life. *Shane*, who is now enrolled in the police academy, finds out that *Nancy's* shooter was the

son of her late DEA agent husband *Peter*. *Shane* arranges for the shooter's arrest. *Nancy* enrolls *Stevie* in soccer and decides she wants out of the illegal marijuana business. She throws her bag of marijuana into a wood chipper. *Nancy* and *Silas* get a job with a pharmaceutical company that sells synthetic marijuana. *Silas* becomes disillusioned with his job after seeing the marijuana plants he has carefully grown crushed and altered in the lab. *Silas* decides to work as a grower for a tobacco company that wants to switch its focus to marijuana. *Nancy* has an idea to use the money from the tobacco company to open up a business with a friendly atmosphere where products using their own marijuana can be sold legally. *Nancy*, *Silas* and *Andy* then go to Agrestic (now Regrestic) to find *Conrad* and see if he has any MILF Weed seeds. *Nancy* also asks *Conrad* to grow for her. *Nancy* tells him she bought land in Agrestic for him to grow on. *Conrad* tells her that area is controlled by gangs now, and that *Guillermo,* once again out of prison, is in charge. *Nancy* seeks *Guillermo's* permission to grow on his territory, and gets it after offering to get him in on their legal marijuana business. While in Agrestic, *Silas* runs into his former girlfriend *Megan*, and *Andy* decides to stop following *Nancy* around and create his own life. The show then skips ahead several years, and the viewer learns that *Nancy* married the rabbi she had briefly dated earlier in the season, and he adopted *Stevie* as his son. However, the rabbi died in a car wreck and *Nancy* is once again a widow. Marijuana is now legal, and *Nancy* is the wealthy owner of the Good Seed Marijuana Café, which has multiple locations. *Silas* is married to *Megan,* and the two live in California with their new baby. *Shane* is a policeman and an alcoholic, but agrees to rehabilitation after talking with his mother. Family and friends old and new are invited to *Nancy's* Connecticut home for *Stevie's* bar mitzvah. *Stevie* finds out the truth about the lifestyle his biological

father led, and decides he doesn't want to be Jewish. *Nancy* finally agrees to let *Stevie* go to boarding school. Starbucks wants to buy out *Nancy's* business, and she finally agrees to sell. The series ends with *Nancy, Andy, Shane, Silas* and *Doug* sitting on the front porch of the house in Connecticut, passing around a joint (IMDb: Weeds).

When *Weeds* debuted, media and critics touted the show as one that could possibly pull the Showtime network closer to its biggest pay cable channel competitor, HBO (Goodman, 2006; Pope, 2006; Franklin, 2005). Indeed, it was the network's top-rated show during its first season, the premier attracting 488,000 viewers (Pope, 2006). Subsequent seasons continued to average higher numbers of viewers with each premier – 578,000 for season two; 824,000 for season three and over 1.3 million for season four, a 64 percent increase over the previous season (Zap2it.com, 2008; Adalian, 2007). A 2011 *New York Times* brief, in announcing the return of *Weeds* for an eighth season, reported that despite declining viewership (season seven averaged less than one million viewers per episode), the show was still Showtime's highest-rated "comedy" (Kepler, 2011).

In its eight seasons, *Weeds* has received numerous awards and nominations, including one Golden Globe award and Satellite award each for Mary-Louise Parker and Justin Kirk, who play *Nancy* and *Andy*, respectively. The show has received 20 Emmy nominations, and won two (Sunday Mail, 2011).

Many articles, especially when the show first started, praised *Weeds* for its fine casting and writing (Goodman, 2006; McCollum, 2006). The *San Francisco Chronicle* noted the show was about more than marijuana and a suburban widow who sells it to maintain her lifestyle: "That's merely the jumping-off point," wrote Goodman, "the neat trick that sets up a series with a much bigger, less easily categorized agenda" (2006, para.

6). He went on to say the pot selling is a "backdrop to single motherhood, loss, the coming of age of her young sons, situation ethics, red versus blue state morality, sexuality and yes, the deconstruction of suburban lies (and lives)" (Goodman, 2006, para. 7).

By the beginning of the fourth season, in a 2008 article, a *Los Angeles Times* writer said "not all critics felt the show succeeded completely, but others raved about its offbeat sensibility, a wry, dark tone popularized by shows such as 'Curb Your Enthusiasm' and 'Arrested Development'" (Smith, 2008, Antiheroine's attraction section, para. 3).

Dusty Lavoie (2011) wrote about marijuana and counterhegemony in *Weeds,* and detailed three "interrelated challenges" that have helped keep portrayals of marijuana in white suburbia few on film and television: "1) marijuana's continued status of illegality in the United States (despite some state-by-state easing of laws), 2) marijuana's residual racial patina of Otherness, and 3) the rhetorico-legal grouping of marijuana with dangerous drugs like heroin, LSD, and crack cocaine, not only in U.S. laws (all are Schedule I drugs), but also in the discourse of and beyond Reagan's inherited War on Drugs" (p. 914).

It seems the show's unique premise, situating marijuana in an ironic setting, caught people's attention, while the writing and casting helped carry the show. The irony *Weeds* creators capitalized on eight years ago seems to be lessening today, as Washington State and Colorado became the first two states in the nation to legalize marijuana for recreational use in November 2012. A *New York Times* article stated, "Although elected officials, parents' groups and top law enforcement figures opposed the measures, they

nevertheless won support with voters who saw little harm with regulating marijuana similarly to the way alcohol is. Colorado's marijuana law passed with 54 percent support, and Washington's with 55 percent" (Healy, 2012, para. 8). Washington and Colorado are among 18 states with medical marijuana laws (Healy, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

This study explores the reception of *Weeds* among college students, focusing particularly on the theme of drug use and dealing. One reason I chose college students as participants is because of the prevalence of marijuana use in this population. Results of the 2010 National Survey on Drug Use and Health showed the percentage of "young adults" aged 18 to 25 reporting past month marijuana use in 2010 was 18.5 percent, which was higher than past month use by "youths" between the ages of 12 and 17 (7.4 percent) and "adults" 26 and older (4.8 percent) ("Substance," 2011, p. 17-18). The traditional college student is generally included in this 18 to 25 age range. According to a publication sponsored by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, in 2007, 47.5 percent of college students reported having used marijuana at some point in their lives (Johnston, L. D., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., & Schulenberg, J. E., 2008).

If college-aged people are more likely to be marijuana users than the rest of the population, it seems that a new subversive television show focused on a drug commonly used on college campuses would appeal to this group as well. Apparently the show did appeal to the age demographic that the traditional college student falls under. For example, after the end of the third season, a buddytv.com article stated *Weeds* was Showtime's "most-watched original series among adults 18-34," and boasted a viewership almost equally divided between men and women (buddytv.com, 2007). In a

2008 column for *Creators Syndicate*, L. Brent Bozell blamed *Weeds* and other television shows and movies that glamorize marijuana for being one reason for the increase in marijuana use by young people. He even went so far as to say "drug-dealer chic really began with *Weeds*," (Bozell, 2008, para. 7) at least evidencing the idea that *Weeds* portrayed marijuana culture like no other show before it.

This thesis investigates the opinions of my study's participants concerning marijuana use and dealing on *Weeds* as it is depicted through situations, characters, setting and other aspects of the show. In terms of setting, I explore the role the suburban context plays in viewers' perceptions of the depiction of drugs. I am also interested in seeing how the participants' own opinions of marijuana use and dealing relate to their opinions of the same topic on the show.

When popular culture embraces a show like *Weeds* it allows viewers a new avenue for thinking about marijuana, a largely illegal drug. My study provides further insight into how viewers perceive, and interact with, controversial cultural topics that are being presented to them in a new way through media.

In addition to my academic interest in the topic, it is important to state the reasons behind my personal interest in it. The most obvious is that I, myself, am a "fan" of *Weeds*, which I believe to be smart, interesting and unique. I first learned about the show while a student at a university well-known for its marijuana culture. My own interest in the show sparked an interest in learning how others perceived the various controversial and entertaining elements of it, especially where the subject of marijuana was concerned. I wondered how audiences would react to an illegal drug being a central element of a show that has a mixture of comedic and dark qualities. As a college student, I believe I

became desensitized somewhat to the stigma of marijuana use and more relaxed in my attitude toward the drug because it was so prevalent and used so casually by those around me, a stark contrast to the environment I grew up in. I feel that media portrayals can also be indicative of the normalization (Manning, 2007) of certain behaviors once considered irregular by general society, and that media possibly contributes to normalization as well. I have always viewed drugs as harmful substances to be avoided, yet I found myself enjoying *Weeds*. Hence, I am interested in seeing what kinds of complex relationships other viewers of the show might form with it, and the ways that people think about marijuana in general. This, in turn, will shed light on the reception patterns of controversial mediated topics.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Looking at Texts

Representations of drugs and drug use

Numerous studies have been done on the depiction of alcohol, tobacco and illicit drug use on television, primarily through quantitative research that counted instances of substance use (Hundley, 1995; Long, et. al, 2002; Cruz, et. al, 1986; Blair, et. al, 2005). One study found that contrary to previous research, "substance use is more prevalent in the U.S. population than it is on prime-time television" (Long, 2002). According to Long (2002), main characters on prime-time television shows "were more likely to be addictive substance users than all characters combined" (p. 99). Similarly, Cruz (1986) noted, "Prime time smokers are likely to be cast in lead roles which present strong and enduring characters" (p. 699). Heather Hundley (1995) took a qualitative approach in her article *The Naturalization of Beer in* Cheers. She studied the discourse around beer drinking in the show and argued that "over its eleven seasons, *Cheers* naturalized beer drinking, presenting it as a normal, natural everyday activity" (p. 352). The analysis discussed three strategies used in accomplishing this goal—humor, camaraderie among the male characters and detoxification of beer by showing its harmless effects compared to the strong effects of other alcoholic beverages. Probably more than any of the shows examined in the aforementioned studies, *Weeds* situates a particular substance (marijuana) at the forefront of the action.

Another television show that includes drug dealing as a main theme is the BBC show *Ideal*, which also presents a drug dealer as the protagonist. In his essay "Drug dealers as folk heroes?" Paul Carter (2007) discussed the normalization of drugs in sitcoms and dissects the way that the drug dealing lifestyle is portrayed through *Ideal*'s protagonist, Moz. The show was launched in 2005, following a 2004 decision by the Labour government to downgrade cannabis from a Class B to a Class C drug. Carter (2007) wrote that the decision, "despite claims that it did not equate to a decriminilisation, may well have changed the image of the drug in popular culture and public understanding" (p. 168). Perhaps the downgrade of marijuana had something to do with the creation of this television show, seeing that *Ideal* is the first sit-com on British television to feature a drug dealer as the main protagonist. Carter (2007) looked at how the show attempts "to demonstrate the normalisation of the use of cannabis and maintain an empathy with the target audience while acknowledging the illegality of its subject material and making 'small-time' drug dealing appear as unglamorous as possible" (p. 169). The writer even said that the show is not about drugs: "…It's about the people who have this one thing in common and how their lives interact due to their shared need," (Graham Duff, quoted in Carter, 2007, p. 169).

Like *Nancy* in *Weeds*, Moz is portrayed as a small-time drug dealer. His drug use with his girlfriend at their home is depicted as domestic in nature (Carter, 2007). This is one interesting difference between Moz and *Nancy*, because *Nancy* has no interest in using marijuana herself. She also starts out with certain principles, such as not dealing to kids. Moz too has drawn some boundaries. "He does not give credit, he does not deal in very small amounts and Jenny supplies a long list of drugs in which he does not deal"

(Carter, 2007, p. 170). In order to make drug-dealing appear unglamorous, the squalid nature of Moz's lifestyle is continually reinforced (Carter, 2007).

Both *Weeds* and *Ideal* display corruption of governmental and policing units. Moz's supplier is a police constable who obtains drugs by confiscating them (Carter, 2007). *Nancy* dates a DEA agent who continues to see her after discovering what she does for a living and even marries her so that he cannot be forced to testify against her in court. In the fourth season of the show *Nancy* begins a relationship with the mayor of Tijuana, who is also a drug lord that she is ultimately working for.

Carter (2007) determined that the first episode of *Ideal* first ventures into possibly glamorizing and condoning marijuana use in the scene where Moz and his supplier decide to sample the drugs. The issue is not that straightforward in *Weeds*, where marijuana is shown being used by multiple characters. In his conclusion, Carter (2007) brought up *Weeds* as a comparison, but calls it "very different," saying it has been compared more often to *Desperate Housewives* and *Sex and the City*. He quoted Nancy Franklin's article in *The New Yorker*, which stated that *Weeds* "'can't be called courageous, since the premium-cable networks have little to lose when they venture into controversial territory, but it is nonetheless daring'" (Carter, 2007, p. 174). Carter (2007) said that *Ideal* would first appear to be both courageous and daring, but that "a deeper investigation uncovers a timidity in its treatment and acceptance of the normalisation of recreational drugs" (p. 174).

The sole scholarly work I could find on *Weeds* was a study by Dusty Lavoie (2011) [1] in which the author argued that the show presents a counterhegemonic view of

[1] Lavoie (2011, p. 914) also notes that *Weeds* is absent from "all these scholarly, critical/cultural explorations in academia."

race, class and marijuana by challenging the view of white Suburbia as a morally pure norm and encouraging its audience to "smoke the Other," in other words, accept difference. Lavoie (2011) explained that his term "smoking the Other" is an alteration of bell hooks' concept of whites "'eating the Other'" – meaning that whites appropriate minority culture in a way that "'asserts power and privilege'" (p. 910-914). Lavoie (2011) said "rather than arguing that *Weeds* is an exoticization of difference, as a wholly hooksian analysis would suggest, I argue that the show's rhetorical positioning as a subversive postmodern commentary on the not-so-pure, white, middle-class, suburban lifestyle serves to actually de-exoticize difference…" (p. 917). He confirmed my thoughts about *Weeds*' uniqueness in the television world, noting that there are few significant films on marijuana and even fewer on television. He also claimed that *Weeds* is the "only sustained televisual example" in which the "treatment of the relationship between marijuana and suburbia is central to the plot and/or theme" (p. 913).

Drugs as central to the storyline are more common in film than on television. Susan C. Boyd (2007) explores the themes depicted in drug films through the years. Early films, she said, typically showed upper-class white women being "saved from opium dens and corrupt Chinese men" who supplied people with the "deadly" drug. However, not all early films portrayed drug use as negative; some normalized it. *Reefer Madness* was a 1936 "independent educational film" portraying "people who use marijuana and heroin as morally weak, murderous and antisocial" (p. 270). Fast forward to the 1960s and early '70s, where a new discourse normalizes illegal drug use and portrays police and the criminal justice system as absurd, brutal, racist and the top drug traffickers. Then there was backlash against this normalization in other 1970s films. While drug users are

not generally depicted favorably in drug films, the most hateful depictions, said Boyd, are reserved for drug traffickers.

Weeds is hard to categorize, because the show depicts drug traffickers, dealers and users in a variety of ways. Traffickers on the show are generally depicted as hard and dangerous, but viewers see two sides to *Nancy's* drug lord love interest *Esteban*. On the one hand, he can be cruel in his efforts to earn money by illegal means; on the other, he is (sometimes) seen as loving toward *Nancy*. *Nancy* is an upper middle class white woman, the protagonist, and also a drug dealer, a mix of characteristics that are not put together as much in other fictional film and television portrayals of the drug lifestyle. However, she comes in contact with other dealers who are portrayed in a more negative manner. Users are also given both positive and negative qualities. As Lavoie (2011) noted, the complexity of the characters on *Weeds* also serves to break down racial stereotypes. *Nancy's* entrance into the marijuana dealing business results in her forming relationships with blacks and Hispanics, revealing both differences and commonalities between the cultures.

Normalization can be found in the way marijuana is presented on *Weeds*. It is a part of daily life for the somewhat normal *Nancy* and her suburban friends. Marijuana use and dealing is also a subject of humor on the show, as much as it is sometimes one of fear and danger. Boyd (2007) argued that in the films that began normalizing drug use, "we sympathize with specific drug dealers/producers/and importers because selling is representing (*sic*) as a means to get high and have fun, as a tool to gain economic stability in a racist and class-biased society, as an emergency plan to overset a threat or financial disaster, and as freedom from the constraints of society" (p. 271). These same themes can

be found in *Weeds*, where *Nancy* is dealing to stay financially stable, her friends have fun getting high and the suburban dwellers rebel against the status quo. In addition to alluding to a normalization of marijuana use on the show, the casual portrayal of marijuana on *Weeds* could also be a reflection of the drug's normalization in American culture as well.

Paul Manning (2007) defined the "normalisation thesis" as "the argument that recreational drug use is now so familiar to those aged below 35 years that it should be regarded as 'normal,' rather than an activity confined to minority subcultures" (p. 49). In discussing research on the normalization of drug use by Howard Parker, Judith Aldridge and Fiona Measham, Manning (2007) said the researchers described normalization along both behavioral and attitudinal dimensions. He also noted that in *Illegal Leisure*, Parker, Aldridge and Measham "found the process of 'normalisation' applied more strongly to cannabis than other 'soft' drugs" (p. 51). In another publication these same authors found that "'sensible drug use' was widely tolerated by non-users," seemingly saying that this type of drug use was being accommodated by "contemporary popular cultures" (Manning, 2007, p. 51).

In their study of English adolescents, Howard Parker, Lisa Williams and Judith Aldridge (2007) wrote that they believed there were many signs of "recreational drug use" being accepted as a reality that could be lived with by the larger society. Concerning the portrayal of drug use in the media they said, "The blurring of the licit (e.g. alcohol) with the illicit (e.g. cannabis and cocaine) in 'going out' social worlds and as part of weekend relaxation is now routinely referred to in television dramas and serials (e.g. *This Life*, BBC2). Drug-taking adventures are a key source of inspiration in stand up comedy

(e.g. *Ali G*, Channel 4) and youth movies (e.g. *Human Traffic* 1999). Drugs realities are nowadays discussed in youth magazines in a wholly practical 'how to' way" (Parker, et al, 2007, p. 80). On the other hand, Michael Shiner and Tim Newburn (2007) are among those who have disputed the normalization thesis, arguing that drug use among young people has a long way to go before it becomes normalized.

Representations of suburbia

Weeds also shares thematic elements with television shows and films set in the suburbs. Over the decades the concept of suburbia has been represented and analyzed in various ways in popular culture. As the mass move to the suburbs occurred in the 1950s, films and other forms of media critiqued "classic" suburbia, which was characterized by a residential set-up that separated home from the work place, elitism and cultural sameness in the suburbs being a haven for upper middle class whites. Within the last few decades, films have portrayed a new kind of suburbia, in which residential and business areas are combined and diversity is incorporated (Huston, 2009).

Huston (2009) looked at the 1999 film *Office Space* and its representation of the new American suburbia. He argued that while the landscape has changed, the "dramatic themes" of "alienation, ennui, and emptiness of suburban existence" have not (p. 498). He compared *Office Space* to the film *American Beauty*, released the same year and also located in the suburbs. Where the main character in *American Beauty* seeks refuge from the home at work, the main character in *Office Space* seeks refuge from work at home. According to Huston, elements of the new suburban landscape found in the film include the portrayal of households that do not fit the family norm, such as those of young

singles. He said the film also highlights a new ethnic (more than just whites) and class makeup in the suburbs.

Weeds seems to uphold a more classic version of suburbia, with its white middle class residents. However, that world is infiltrated, so to speak, by people of other classes and ethnicities through *Nancy's* interactions with those outside of her suburban community. The show uses *Nancy's* drug dealing, *Celia's* alcoholism, *Andy's* aimlessness and the problems in the lives of other characters as well, to reveal the desperation that lies beneath the idealized front. However, unlike *Office Space*, which focuses on the oppression of the suburban male (Huston, 2009), *Weeds* features a woman as the main character. Huston went on to argue that perhaps women's increased accessibility to the world of work has caused men to feel threatened. Though *Weeds* largely takes the feminine view, there are plenty of in-depth looks at male characters, many of which do seem emasculated by the women in their lives, particularly *Doug*, whose wife is distant and involved in a lesbian affair; and *Dean*, who is often seen being reprimanded and patronized by his wife *Celia*.

Looking at Audiences

During my research, I was unable to locate audience studies pertaining to media representations of drug use/dealing. Hence, this subsection focuses on audience studies in general. Jennifer Stromer-Galley and Edward Schiappa (1998) make a case for audiences studies in terms of how audience research would benefit any textual analysis that makes "audience conjectures," which the authors define as "claims about what texts do to audiences or what audiences do with popular culture texts" (p. 28). They found that many studies make audience conjectures that are not supported by audience research, and

Stromer-Galley and Schiappa argue that audience research is necessary to support audience conjectures because media messages are not received by all people in the exact same way, and popular culture texts can have more than one meaning. The authors wrote, "Whereas it may be that many or most mainstream popular culture texts have preferred readings that function hegemonically to perpetuate the dominant culture, strictly text-centered studies preach mostly to the choir and are unlikely to prove this to be the case to skeptics of hegemony theory. We believe the best way to explore such theories is through audience research, since only through further audience research will the limits of polysemy be confidently and persuasively articulated" (p. 33). Stromer-Galley and Schiappa back up their claims by testing the audience conjectures of G. Thomas Goodnight, who did not conduct audience research for his article on the movies and novels of *Jurassic Park* and *The Firm*. Stromer-Galley and Schiappa mine audience views on these works through focus group interviews. They concluded that the focus group participants "generally did not comprehend or interpret the meanings of *Jurassic Park* and *The Firm* in the manner that Goodnight conjectures" (p. 53). I believe the authors make a good case for audience studies in general by demonstrating the importance of having audience conjectures informed by real audience members. They also pose several theoretical questions that only audience research can answer, such as "Just how influential are popular culture texts in changing or reinforcing beliefs and behaviors?" and "Why are some members of subordinated groups more productive or more resistant viewers than others?" (p.33) Thus, Stromer-Galley and Schiappa exemplify the contributions reception research can make to the field of media studies.

One popular study that takes a qualitative look at viewer perceptions and "readings" is documented in *The* Nationwide *Audience* by David Morley (1992). Morley used multiple focus groups to study the reception of two particular *Nationwide* programs, one broadcast in May 1976 and the other in March 1977. Morley applied Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (1973) to the television audience and classified the viewer positions based on the categories of dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings.

In *Reading the Romance*, Radway (1984) looked at women's involvement with reading romance novels. She found that reading romances served as an escape from reality for women. The act of reading allowed them to get away from having to be focused on others as was the nurturing role prescribed to them through the institution of marriage. Reading also allowed the women to live vicariously through the female characters in the books, as well as experience emotional gratification.

Similarly, Ien Ang (1985) was concerned with the pleasure audiences derive from watching the television program *Dallas*. She analyzed letters people wrote to her about what they liked/disliked about the show to determine "what experiencing pleasure (or otherwise) from *Dallas* implies for these writers – what textual characteristics of *Dallas* organize that experience and in which ideological context it acquires social and cultural meanings" (p. 11).

Representation, consumption and identity formation are explored by Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel (2002) in a study of young girls' consumption and interactions with Pleasant Company's American Girl products. In-depth interviews with girls and their mothers were conducted in order to gain these insights. The authors found that "the girls' conceptualization of what it means to be an American girl seems to be linked, in part, to

Pleasant Company's representations" (Acosta-Alzuru, & Kreshel, 2002, p. 156). Consumption and identity plays a large part in my own study as I seek to learn how the audience views the show and how they view themselves in relation to it.

Deborah Jermyn (2004) studied *Sex and the City* fans. She discussed fandom and acknowledged that she writes not just as an academic but as a fan as well. She decided to research a group that she felt like she was a part of, rather than classifying her subjects as "others." Through the focus groups that she conducted, Jermyn found that the women disagreed with criticism that said the show was focused on men and the desire to marry. Rather, the women in the focus groups enjoyed the show for its focus on female friendships.

Amanda Stewart Hall (2002) conducted a study similar to my own as part of her master's thesis titled *Eat. Sleep. Watch* Dawson's Creek*: Teenagers' Perceptions of Teenage Life on* Dawson's Creek. Hall conducted in-depth interviews with a small group of teenage female viewers of the show *Dawson's Creek*, and explored in her analysis the viewers' perceptions of teenage life on the show and how they incorporate the show into their own lives.

Müller and Hermes (2010) examined audience reactions to a Dutch multicultural reality television show that was "explicitly designed to promote discussions of the role of cultural difference in the Netherlands" (p. 195). The authors asked the question: "When and how does popular culture serve as a resource in the performance of cultural citizenship?" (p. 194). They said their analysis builds on the tradition of audience studies that shows how audiences appropriate media content and incorporate it into their daily lives, but they sought to refute the idea that audience reactions always contain some form

of "'interpretive resistance,'" or "subversion of hegemonic value" (p. 195). Rather, Müller and Hermes focus on "the ways in which the performance of cultural citizenship is related to and emerges from other, more common, audience reactions" (p. 195).

Briggs (2010) focused heavily on the concept of semiosis in his analysis of various existing audience studies. According to Briggs, the view of language that "sees texts as being 'drawn into semiosis' rather than 'decoded'" "points to the ways in which meanings are made in relation to specific contexts, the ways in which meanings flow between texts and audiences, as well as the ways in which they are generated between people in everyday life" (p.26). This view sees the media texts and audience texts as interwoven, and constantly shifting through dialogue. In investigating existing studies of television news audiences, Briggs saw the concept of semiosis in action, in that the studies look at how audiences talk about television in conversation with others, rather than focusing on viewers' understandings as obtained through individual responses to specific questions. He said this method "doesn't look for definitive decodings…but rather the inherently social nature of understanding in which meanings and understanding are generated through talk, in which they shift and change according to the ebb and flow of the conversation, to who is present, and to what they want to achieve, in relation to the cultural, historical and discursive context" (Briggs, 2010, p. 20). In his analysis of these studies, Briggs concluded that television news audiences struggle to make meaning because of lack of context. In his examination of soap opera audiences, Briggs looked at how play factors in to audience viewing experiences. He noted that the studies he examines show ways "audiences respond to the invitation of the text to pass judgement [sic] on its characters," as well as how they relate the characters to their own lives (p. 92-

93). He wrote that "the subversive pleasures of play, laughter and gossip are central to this semiosis. In their small infractions they turn politeness, sobriety, rationalism and realism on their heads" (p. 93). Briggs also looked at television and domestic space, concluding that "Meanings do not only function in the modalities of ideation, of emotion, of identity work, of memory and desire, of fantasy and reverie. They also function in several experiential dimensions: they articulate with our sense of time and space, with feeling secure in routines, of knowing that our favourite television programme will be available" (p.120).

While other studies have separately explored audience perceptions of media, drug use on film and television, and the portrayal of suburbia in the media, my study incorporates all of these themes, through an audience analysis of the Showtime series *Weeds*. It will add to the scant amount of academic research that has been conducted on the show. Lavoie (2011) believed the lack of research on *Weeds* was likely due to the "ostracizing nature" of marijuana, which is at the center of the plot. Whether or not this is actually the case, I believe *Weeds*' controversial theme combined with its introduction to mainstream television makes the case for researching the show's audience all the more compelling.

Research Questions

1. What are college students' perceptions of *Weeds'* representation of the topics of drug use and dealing?
2. How do college student fans of the show *Weeds* negotiate their perceptions of the show in terms of their attitudes concerning illicit drug use?

3. What role does *Weeds'* suburban setting play in the way college students perceive the portrayal of drugs on the show?

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

"To a rationalized, clamorous and spectacular production corresponds another production, called 'consumption.' The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through ways of using the products imposed by a dominant order" (de Certeau, 1984: xii-xiii).

Cultural Studies

A media text is an encoded meaning potential, which may put some constraints on the readers' meaning production, but remains to be actualized by readers in everyday life (Schrøder, K., Drotner, K., Kline, S., & Murray, C., 2003). As Schrøder, et. al explained, reception research recognizes that there is meaning encoded into a text at production, but other interpretations are drawn from that same text by the individual reader, based on his/her own frame of reference, created by his/her knowledge and life experiences. In this thesis, the exploration of meaning as it is produced by readers will be carried out through the lens of cultural studies.

In this sense, the word "culture" is not narrowly defined as objects of aesthetic value or "a process of aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual development," but rather encompasses the "texts and practices of everyday life" (Storey, 1996). Cultural studies also includes the study of popular culture, as does my research in this thesis. Storey (1996) went on to say that cultural studies sees culture as political in that it is a site where production and reproduction of the social relations of daily life take place. As such, it can be an area of conflict and contestation. My study examines the interactions *Weeds*

viewers have with the show, and their views as they pertain to the various cultural messages they perceive in the show. Much of the subject matter itself is controversial, making the way viewers interpret it, and produce meaning from it, certainly political and relevant to the cultural questions and controversies of today.

Cultural studies is also informed by Marxism, primarily in that culture does not simply reflect history, it also plays a part in shaping it, and because it encompasses the struggles of subordinate groups to define meaning in a way that resists the ideas of the dominant groups that they feel are imposed on them (Storey, 1996). In turn, this concept makes culture ideological in the sense that, as Stuart Hall (1985, in Storey 1996) described it, meaning is "articulated" by people rather than fixed at production. The particulars of how meaning is articulated are dependent on the individual and context (Storey, 1996). According to Storey, "Hall's use of 'articulation' plays on the term's double meaning: to express and to join together" (Storey, 1996, p. 4). The theory is further explained thusly: "The process is called 'articulation' because meaning has to be expressed, but it is always expressed in a specific context, a specific historical moment, with a specific discourse. Thus expression is always connected to and conditioned by context" (Storey, 1996, p. 4). By studying consumption as a process that is unique to each individual, I found that *Weeds* and the viewing of it took on different qualities, depending on who I was talking to. I was able to gain insight into their thoughts concerning the show.

In Marx's understanding, capitalism produced a consumer society in which workers produce goods not for themselves, but for money, causing a separation between identity and work (Storey, 1996). Thus, in Storey's (1996, p. 114) paraphrasing of Marx's

ideas, "men and women are denied identity in (uncreative) production, and are therefore forced to seek identity in (creative) consumption…Moreover, the process is encouraged by the so-called ideology of consumerism – the suggestion that the meaning of our lives is to be found in what we consume, rather than in what we produce." Paul du Gay (1996) said that some sociologists hold to a "Marxist emphasis on labour as the only 'real' site of human self-constitution," and therefore tend to view consumption as a trivial way for the unfulfilled worker to make up for his lack of "self-actualization" in work. This type of critique, articulated by theorists such as Marcuse (1964), is called the "mass culture critique," and regards consumers as "fully determined by capital" (du Gay, 1996, p. 81).

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) got away from Marx's assertion that identity relies on capital by studying the relationship between cultural consumption and the social features of the consumer, such as class and education. Bourdieu described how a person is able to make meaning of a product by (1984) saying a work of art will only have meaning to someone who possesses the cultural code with which to decode it. The capacity to read the work of art requires knowledge of the words or concepts with which to name or describe visible things. And, rather than assuming an object possesses traits that would be perceived the same by all subjects, through the action of decoding, "the consumer helps to produce the product he consumes" (p.100). The aim, Bourdieu said, is to "move beyond the abstract relationship between consumers with interchangeable tastes and products with uniformly perceived and appreciated properties to the relationship between tastes which vary in a necessary way according to their social and economic conditions of production, and the products on which they confer their different social identities" (p. 100-101). While attributing more autonomy to the consumer, du Gay (1996) said

Bourdieu only ends up "perpetuating a form of the mass culture critique" (p. 85). One reason for this conclusion is the "highly structured questionnaire" Bourdieu used to conduct his research, which produced a "static" view of participant opinions and practices. His conclusions also indicated that people in the same social groupings tend toward the same tastes, thus social factors determine taste. Despite their limitations, Bourdieu's conclusions encompass a critical aspect of my study, that objects in themselves do not hold specific meaning, but the meaning of the objects are determined by the "tastes" of the consumer.

According to De Certeau (in du Gay, 1996, p. 85), "Bourdieu still assumes that consumption 'necessarily means "becoming similar to" what one absorbs, and not "making something similar" to what one is, making it one's own, appropriating, or reappropriating it.'" De Certeau (in du Gay, 1996, p. 86), however, suggested that the dominant meanings inscribed into goods and texts are not automatically absorbed by the consumer. De Certeau (1984) also talked about consumption as another form of production, though a less visible one, in which the production is manifested not through its own products, but through its ways of "using the products imposed by a dominant economic order." He explained that meaning is "produced by consumers in the use they make of those goods and texts in the practice of their everyday lives (in du Gay, 1996, p. 86). De Certeau (1984) used the Spanish colonizers and Native Indians as an example of reappropriation of dominant ideas. The colonizers tried to impose their own culture onto the Indians but the Indians subverted this by making something different of the rituals, representations and laws imposed on them. They could not leave the new culture but they escaped it by working within it to make something uniquely their own. That dynamic is

carried on today in the ways people make use of the culture that is imposed on them by the people producing it. The respondents in my study are free, through their consumption of *Weeds*, to frame the show however they choose, as De Certeau suggested. And as Bourdieu explained, they do so according to the cultural context they are situated in. Their life experiences, beliefs, and many other factors determine how they process the messages on the show, and many of these factors are revealed in my study.

Because consumption performs these dual functions of consuming and producing, as du Gay (1996, p. 89) explained, consumption and production are not completely distinct processes. Practices of consumption do not have a place of their own, but rather "operate within a space delineated by, but not equivalent to, systems of production." In this way, du Gay said, the relationship between production and consumption is dislocated. Du Gay (1996) cited an explanation of the term "dislocation" through his discussion of Laclau's theories on identity. Laclau (in du Gay, 1996, p. 2) maintained that any social identity is "dislocated" because it "depends upon an outside which both denies that identity and provides its condition of possibility at one and the same time." Du Gay (1996, p. 48) said every identity is "contingent" on something outside of itself; it only exists in relation to "that which it is not." This makes that which is outside of a person's identity part of the "conditions of existence" of that identity. Laclau (1990, p. 32) also related identity to power in saying that identity can only be formed by exercising power over that which seeks to threaten it. He maintained that "a contingent identity is a threatened identity." I think an understanding of identity is important in audience research because how a person defines himself or herself will undoubtedly play a role in how he or she reads and makes meaning of texts. Conversely, identity is also created in

consumption, as the consumer interprets the texts in ways that may influence his or her beliefs, behaviors or perspectives. In my interviews with *Weeds* viewers, statements about identity arise in the responses and thus in the analysis of them as well, even though my research does not expressly seek to understand the relationship between the viewers' identities and their perceptions of the show.

By looking at how viewers "consume" *Weeds* I examine what they make of the messages that are presented to them through the show. As Simon During (2007) wrote in his introduction to *The Cultural Studies Reader*, "For cultural studies, knowledge based on statistical techniques belongs to the processes which 'normalize' society and stand in opposition to cultural studies' respect for the marginal subject" (During, 2007, p. 19). The purpose of my analysis is to use qualitative interviews to closely examine the individual, and make the views of the "marginal subject" known.

Stuart Hall (2007) described the role of consumption in the process of communication in his work *Encoding, decoding*. Communication, he said, is made up of the "linked but distinctive moments" of production, circulation, distribution, consumption and reproduction. Before the encoded message can have an effect it must "be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect,' influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences" (Hall, 2007, p. 479). This study focuses on the decoding process, which is constituted by the consumption and reproduction phases. The consumption phase takes place when meaning is created from the message, and reproduction involves the created meaning being translated into "social practices" (p. 478). This study looks at how the audience

consumes the messages presented them in *Weeds*, and subsequently reproduces the messages with their own interpretations.

Hall also discussed the usefulness for analysis of distinguishing between denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (associative meaning). The denotative level of the "televisual sign" is fixed by certain codes, but the connotative level, while also restricted in some ways, is more open to interpretation and has polysemic values. However, connotative codes are not all equal and are organized into dominant or preferred meanings. But because there is not necessarily a correspondence between the encoding and decoding, those involved in the encoding can attempt to create preferred meanings (and some limits will be constructed here) but cannot guarantee that these exact meanings will be produced in the decoding process. Hall also broke down the decoding of televisual discourse into three categories: dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings. In the dominant-hegemonic position, the reader takes the connoted meaning from a program and decodes it in terms of the references used in the encoding process. The negotiated position takes on both adaptive and oppositional elements, wherein the reader recognizes that the hegemonic position is legitimate on a large-scale or abstract level, but creates a different set of ideas at a situational level. Finally, someone using the oppositional code will look at (and fully understand) the preferred code, and then reconstruct it within an alternative frame of reference (Hall, 2007). Through my research, I observed all three of Hall's categories for the decoding of televisual discourse represented in my respondents' comments.

Cultural studies theory informs my research in its recognition of the audience member's role in producing the meaning of a text through his or her unique experience of

consumption. Because the show holds the potential to have a range of meanings created from it, I feel my research is important in that I strive to determine audience perceptions.

Method

For this thesis I engage in reception research. As the role of media in our society continues to change and grow, it is important to study the impact that it has on our lives (Stokes, 2003).

> Audience research puts human experience at the centre of our enquiry. Researching audiences for media and culture allows us to investigate the social uses of the media. By looking at how texts are *received*, we are able to understand the impacts, influences and effects of the media. Audience research also allows us to examine what people get out of the media, what people like (and don't like) and why (Stokes, 2003, p. 130-131).

I will note that while Stokes (2003) mentioned media effects as something to be understood through audience research, she later said that the relationship between media exposure and behavior is very complex and no direct effects of media have been proven. "Many experienced scholars have attempted to study media effects and found very little hard evidence," wrote Stokes (2003). "The relationship between media exposure and behavior is highly complex and many other factors intervene. It has been impossible to prove that the media have direct 'effects,' and yet in popular discourse the myth persists to the contrary" (p. 132).

Though effects may be impossible to ascertain, the purpose of qualitative audience research in particular is not to hypothesize and determine cause and effect relationships, but to reveal the attributes of an experience, in this case, an experience related to the interpretation and viewing of a television show (Minichiello, et al., 1990, p. 7). Therefore, my study seeks not to ascertain effects, but to examine the way *Weeds* viewers interpret and perceive the show.

Four defining characteristics of reception research are:

1. *Reception research explores the encounter of active audiences with media meanings.*
2. *Reception research regards meaning as a joint product of text and reader.*
3. *The situational and social contexts of reading affect the meanings actualized by audiences.*
4. *The preferred methodological approach of reception research is the qualitative interview.* (Schrøder, et al., 2003, p. 124-125).

The two main types of qualitative interview are listed as the individual depth-interview and the focus-group interview. I conducted individual interviews. Through this process I was able to explore personal attitudes and perceptions as they relate to the subjects' viewing experience of *Weeds*. The individual is the primary concern of interpretive explanation. After gaining an understanding of the individual in terms of how the person sees himself or herself, that person can be classified with people who share similar insights and opinions. As qualitative methods in general are concerned with human interpretations, the in-depth interview is an appropriate way to determine those (Minichiello, et al., 1990). McCracken (1988) argued that while every social scientific study is improved by a qualitative understanding, achieved by exploring the beliefs and experiences of the people the study focuses on, sometimes qualitative methods and the "long interview" are almost "obligatory." I believe the latter point is the case with my study. For instance, I could not gain much of an understanding of viewer perceptions with strictly numerical data. And to make the case for the in-depth interview specifically,

versus other methods such as participant observation and focus groups, the interview method gives me direct access to the respondents' thoughts. I could not achieve this by simply observing them watching the show. I may obtain a deeper understanding if I were able to observe the natural conversations the respondent had with others about the show, but placing myself in these settings would be nearly impossible to do, and would also require a lot of time on my part (McCracken, 1988, p.11). Focus-group interviews would be an easily observable way to create these interactions, but the depth of insight would still suffer. The long interview's depth stems from the fact it allows the subject to say much more than he or she would be able to in a group situation. Even though the interview is outside of the group context, the social production of meaning is still being revealed because the subject has been influenced by their social discourses. This interaction with others will be a part of how their thoughts, attitudes and experiences with *Weeds* are incorporated into their daily lives. A survey might also prove an insufficient method of gathering information, as I would not have the opportunity to ask the participant to elaborate on or clarify any of his or her responses. By conducting individual interviews I hoped to achieve an honesty of response and depth of reflection on personal behaviors, perceptions and opinions that may not be attained through any other method (Schrøder, et al., 2003).

The interviews I conducted were structured. I developed an extensive interview guide and adhered closely to it, deviating at times primarily to ask for clarification or elaboration. The way I developed my questions (the majority were open-ended) invited thoughtful response. Therefore, I believe that even though my interviews were structured, I was still able to achieve a depth sufficient to answer my research questions. My primary

reason for structuring my interviews this way was to allow me to be able to compare responses across participants as closely and with as little influence from me, the researcher, as possible.

For my study I interviewed 12 college students (six men and six women) at the University of Georgia.[2] I was looking for depth of insight rather than to produce statistical generalization. My participants ranged in age from 18 to 22, and all identified themselves as white or Caucasian. Pseudonyms are used in this thesis to protect the privacy of the participants.[3]

I organized my interview guide (see Appendix C) in a way that would allow me to mine the participants' thoughts on the show from every angle, including characters, settings, subject matter and how the participants may personally relate to various aspects of the show. Since the purpose of my research is ultimately focused on viewer perceptions of the drug use and dealing on *Weeds*, I tried to keep my questions as closely related to those topics as possible. While some of the questions, such as, "Do you have a favorite character? Who and why?" elicited some non-drug related responses, they nonetheless led to a better examination of the participants' perspectives, and could also indirectly help explain their views on drug use and dealing on the show. My interview guide begins with questions covering the basics of when and why the participants began watching *Weeds*, and their viewing habits as they pertain to the show. I move on to questions regarding participants' social interactions around the show, then their opinions on the characters. Next, I include a series of questions that seek to determine how the

[2] "In current interview studies, the number of interviews tends to be around 15±10. This number may be due to a combination of the time and resources available for the investigation and a law of diminishing returns (beyond a certain point, adding more respondents will yield less and less new knowledge)" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, p. 113).
[3] Participant names are capitalized throughout this paper, in order to distinguish them from character names, which have been italicized.

participants view the portrayal of marijuana use and dealing on *Weeds*. Toward the end of the guide, I look at the ways in which the participants make connections between the show and their own lives, as well as their ideas on the show's realism, themes and values. Finally, I seek some insight into the viewers' personal opinions on marijuana use and dealing in the real world. I also ask them their thoughts on the show's capability to influence others' decisions on whether or not to use drugs. I ended my interviews with some basic demographic questions that include inquiries into participants' television viewing habits.

I recruited subjects by posting my request for participants on various listservs connected with the University of Georgia, where I am currently a student. More information about each participant is included in Appendix A. Because I relocated out of state before beginning the interview portion of my research, I had to conduct my interviews by phone, rather than face-to-face. The interviews took place between August 2009 and December 2010, and were recorded on a digital recording device.

After the interviews were collected I transcribed them. As I reviewed each transcript, I developed codes that helped me organize my material into themes. I then looked at the "meaning units" as they related to the purpose of my study. Finally, I tied together the major themes that showed up in the interviews to put together my findings and conclusions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008).

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

The participants in the study certainly exemplify the cultural studies paradigm of the "active audience," creating meaning from the show based on their own prior cultural experiences (Barker, 2000, p. 269). In some instances, participants revealed the influences that shaped their opinions on everything from character behavior to marijuana use on the show. It should be noted that the respondents in my study varied in the number of seasons of the show they had seen. All of them had seen at least one season (not necessarily the first), and a lot of them had seen all of the seasons that had aired, up to whatever season was showing at the time of the interview. Because the show goes through a lot of changes as the seasons progress, including some location changes, which seasons the respondents had seen, and how many, very likely affected their thoughts on the show. By the date of my last interview (December, 2010), season six had wrapped up and season seven had not yet begun. Thus, none of the participants in my study had seen seasons seven or eight when I interviewed them.

A Different Kind of Show

One way television shows can draw viewers in is by presenting a fresh perspective and bringing something new to the pool of other competing options on screen. I found that amongst the *Weeds* viewers I interviewed, some of them became interested in the show partly because of the unique way the characters' interactions with

marijuana were presented. In fact, most of the respondents found it difficult to name other shows they had seen that were similar to *Weeds*.

PAUL, for instance, took an interest in the plot of *Weeds*, more specifically, the revealing of the "dark underside" of an affluent neighborhood, where one would not expect to find drug dealers and users. Later in my interview with him, he uses this term "dark underside" again to describe how the show's suburban setting influences the portrayal of drugs. He explained his usage of the term by saying that rather than portraying marijuana use and dealing as a "dirty secret" kept by isolated individuals (as people tend to think of as occurring in "real life"), *Weeds* portrays it as something "more prevalent" (as a dark underside). By PAUL'S usage of the term, I would conclude that this "dark underside" refers to the illegal or immoral activities that are taking place in an area otherwise characterized as wholesome. Some of the respondents liked the idea of non-traditional portrayals of marijuana reaching mainstream media. VANCE was familiar with marijuana use through his association with high school friends that used it, and said he thought it was "cool" that a humorous portrayal of pot smoking was making it into mainstream media. He said he saw it as an "experimental comedy" focusing on "weed culture." The respondents see a remaking of marijuana's image in the media through *Weeds*. It is a show that breaks away from the usual portrayal of marijuana as completely negative and only as part of a television show's side plot. Rather, *Weeds* explores many aspects of characters' interactions with the drug. According to LISA, "…the subject is kind of funny, and it's not something that a lot of other shows deal with, like, you know, weed beyond reckless teenage activity that someone does, then get in trouble and then, 'Oh, I promise I'll never do it again.'" In terms of what she does not like about *Weeds*,

LISA feels like the situations characters face on the show can be "ridiculous" or "out of control." She said although she does not know if that is what drug dealing is really like, sometimes she thinks things on the show are "either over or underplayed." *Weeds'* unique storyline also drew GAVIN in, yet he said he did not think the show was "very good anymore." At the time of the interview, GAVIN had seen parts of the then-current season, season six, and had seen every season leading up to that one. He felt the show had gotten "boring," and that it was going around in circles, with nothing happening. As indicated, some of the respondents lost some interest in the show in later seasons. VANCE felt it had gotten too "dark," with aspects like underground drug tunnels and, in general, "the less happy side of the pot culture" being portrayed. Thus, whether it had gotten too dark, boring or crazy, the viewers seemed to like the happy medium struck in the early seasons.

While some thought the concept of the show was novel, BAILEY did not think the concept in and of itself made for a good show. She thought the "concept of a mom dealing pot" had the potential to come across as cliché, but that the writers did a good job of making the show interesting and unpredictable.

MEG was one of the few respondents to directly address the age demographics of the characters on the show. What she liked most about the show was the "cross-generational" look at pot in society, and she found the inclusion of older characters interesting. She said that in contrast to *That 70s Show*, which shows only marijuana users in their teens and 20s, *Weeds* primarily looks at the marijuana use of an "older generation." MEG was 21 years old at the time of the interview, and many of the show's main characters are in their 40s.

The biggest commonality between most of the responses to questions of why the participants began watching *Weeds*, or what they liked most about the show, was an affinity for the humorous quality of the show. Respondents also enjoyed the ironic and irreverent aspects of the show, and appreciated the freedom the Showtime billing gave the writers to express themselves in an unrestricted manner. *Weeds* makes drug use funny, where many shows and movies do not, which appears to have drawn the viewers in.

Marijuana in the Suburbs

Weeds introduces its concept of marijuana culture to mainstream media via a suburban backdrop, a community construct the writers of the show probably assumed most of its target demographic would be familiar with. Such seemed to be the case with my study's respondents. The setting also offers a new "lens" through which to view drugs in society. The study's respondents were interested in the combining of two worlds (the suburban and marijuana cultures) that might be commonly thought of as being mutually exclusive. JOHN, for example, said he started watching *Weeds* because the show made drug dealing relatable. "I liked the idea of uh, like um, someone like my mom, or anyone's mom, in the suburbs kind of um, you know, dealing. It's funny," he said. As opposed to the typical representation of a marijuana dealer, JOHN said *Weeds* "puts a face on it that's kind of hard to hate." It appears that from JOHN'S point of view, the representation of marijuana user/seller is, for the viewer, made more acceptable and easier to empathize with because it is combined with images that are accepted norms, such as suburbia and the "soccer mom." He said outright that he thought Showtime's typical viewer (or "at least certain college students") was "white upper middle class

suburban." According to JOHN, the show is more "personable" and "relatable" to these viewers. Because he and some of the other participants felt the setting made drug dealing more relatable, they must be able to identify in some way with the white middle class group portrayed on the show. JOHN goes on to say that in watching the show, "you're not judging poor people selling drugs, you're judging the people…you'd know and sympathize with in any given situation." In JOHN'S view, the show's setting keeps the audience from possibly feeling guilty about making assessments about people who would be considered "others." It makes it much more comfortable for the viewer because the characters they are either making judgments about or sympathizing with are like them. Marijuana was more easily perceived by participants as safe, harmless and humorous in suburbia than if it were portrayed in a poorer inner city neighborhood. TRINA said the show would not be as comical if it was set in a poor or violent neighborhood, but in the context of upper middle class suburbia, the concept of drugs infiltrating the "American Dream" is funny. She noted the irony of the characters selling marijuana in nursing homes and to church groups. VANCE also holds a view that is more accepting of the familiar. He said it is more natural for him to empathize with and see as "good" the show's suburban characters ("*Nancy* and basically her gang from Agrestic") because he grew up around these types of people. On the other hand, he has not come into contact with any "hardcore drug dealers." His familiarity and identification with the characteristics of the suburban characters makes it easier for VANCE to see them overall as good people.

For many of the viewers I interviewed, it seems *Weeds* allowed them to picture an illicit drug as a part of their world, while simultaneously helping them to view it as less

threatening and more normal than it is typically portrayed or imagined. SONYA sees marijuana as "readily available" on the show, with the suburban setting suggesting that marijuana could be anywhere, not just in "urban settings." MEG sees the suburban perspective of marijuana use and dealing as mirroring reality as she knows it, and a contrast to portrayals in other forms of media. Therefore, she thinks this choice of setting makes the portrayal of marijuana more "real," "believeable," and "understandable," and "something people can relate to more," because the location is not a place she feels one would stereotype as "somewhere everybody's sittin' there doin' pot." MEG said other shows portray drugs as an underbelly dangerous activity, whereas *Weeds* makes it "part of life." MEG feels that *Weeds*' portrayal of marijuana usage is more realistic than any other she has seen. She mentioned a nonfiction show she watched on television about a suburban county in California where it was legal to grow marijuana. She noted that on that show "you see, um, essentially exactly what you're looking at on *Weeds*. It's just your everyday average suburban folk: mom, dad, teacher, uh, banker, whoever. It's them that are involved." This show served to reaffirm or help establish MEG'S opinion that a depiction of marijuana being used by suburban people is more accurate than one where marijuana use is shown in the context of being a dangerous activity restricted to criminals and addicts. One can also safely assume that MEG'S opinion is formed in part by her own familiarity with drugs in the suburban environment. She did not grow up in suburbia, but said of her current place of residence at the time of the interview, "…Now I'm the suburban kid that has seen the prevalence of marijuana and it's usage, and um, how it's, I hate to say this, but maybe not such a bad thing, and that it's no worse than someone going downtown and, you know, getting completely wasted at night."

JOHN'S examination of the suburban setting and overall portrayal of marijuana on *Weeds* makes an even deeper connection between the show and the real world. He imagines that the setting could challenge traditional notions of the harmfulness of marijuana and class/race categories. He said, "It's everywhere, kind of, you know. It kind of gives the idea that it's everywhere, and maybe we should be rethinking our perspectives on it, maybe, I don't know." Though he seems unsure about this assessment, JOHN'S statement makes the point that not only are the ideas on *Weeds* a nice alternative in entertainment, but maybe they are speaking a truth that society needs to listen to; perhaps *Weeds* is portraying a lighter side of marijuana use that provides a model that could work in our society. It is clear that JOHN is thinking about the show beyond its entertainment value, and sees this fictional work as having real-world applications.

Like JOHN and MEG, a few other respondents saw the dynamic between suburbia and marijuana portrayed on the show as more than a fictional construct of the show's writers. They also viewed it as a commentary on, or representation of, a real-world state of affairs. DEREK said he felt the suburban setting "directly relates to the fact that marijuana is typically viewed as a suburban drug now," and not "outcasted (*sic*) or banned" like cocaine and other hard-scale drugs. He added that the show reflects that "there's a lot more middle class white people that are selling marijuana nowadays." Thus, the show is seen as reflecting a reality of drugs in suburbia, rather than creating a fictional association. VANCE shared a similar sentiment, saying that the show was a "good representation" of how pot has "infiltrated" suburbia, a situation that he feels most forms of media have tried to mask. He sees *Weeds'* exposing of the issue in a funny way as a good thing that might make people "less abrasive against it." GAVIN expressed his

thoughts in saying that the show is the "perfect" commentary on the falsehood of the pre-conceived notions suburban dwellers have of their neighborhoods.

The Reception of the Characters and Their Drug Involvement

Character development is essential to any television show and I wanted to explore the respondents' perceptions of the characters and their interaction with drugs on *Weeds*, and how study participants' opinions of the characters affected the way they viewed the marijuana use/dealing on the show. For the most part, the respondents' views of the characters and their drug interactions fit their overall perception of the show's portraying a relaxed treatment of drugs. SONYA, PAUL, TRINA and ALLIE all indicated that the characters did not see drug use as dangerous or problematic. PAUL felt the characters' interactions with drugs were "nonchalant," as if they were accustomed to it. TRINA saw the drug use on the show as "recreational," stating that "no one is doing it all the time." ALLIE said the drug use on the show is not made into much of a "serious" issue, and that the nature of the characters' interactions with drugs makes drug use seem like something "everybody does." It is interesting to note that SONYA takes her observations one step further, revealing that she sees the traditional perception of marijuana as a harmful substance to be avoided minimized on the show to the point that it is almost nonexistent. She said, "Like, I think the, um, the adults just kind of see it as, um, not really a drug. It's just like a pastime kinda."

Even though the drug use on the show is generally perceived as relaxed, some respondents indicated that drug use by some characters was more acceptable than others. LISA, for example, thought accountant *Doug's* use of marijuana seemed "harmless." The same goes for *Andy, Nancy's* irresponsible, but kind-hearted brother-in-law. LISA

explained, “When I see *Doug* or *Andy*, I, you know, it’s just, to me it’s part of their character, it’s who they are and I don’t think of it as being so bad, but you know, when it’s children, I am less comfortable with it I guess.” She mentions marijuana use by *Nancy’s* youngest son *Shane* as an example of the negative, more serious portrayal of drug use. She also groups into this category *Nancy’s* snobby friend *Celia*, who in season four becomes addicted to cocaine. This is one of the few instances where a character on *Weeds* is depicted using a drug other than marijuana, and its treatment on the show is more serious. An “intervention” is staged for *Celia*, whereas those who use pot are not portrayed as needing rescuing from it. LISA’S comment about marijuana use being part of *Andy’s* and *Doug’s* characters (and therefore acceptable) is notable because it shows how the presentation of the characters affects the way their illegal activity is perceived. *Doug* and *Andy* are a big part of the show’s comic relief. They are both irresponsible and lighthearted, and perhaps more typical representations of “stoners.” Because they are presented this way from the show’s beginning, they are less likely to be expected to act any other way. This seems to be what LISA means when she distinguishes the marijuana use of these two characters from drug use by other characters on the show. BAILEY’S views follow along those lines as well, with her perceptions built on certain expectations of the characters’ personalities and lifestyles. “I obviously like when *Andy* uses pot. It’s like, whatever, that’s what *Andy* does,” she said. She could not remember whether *Nancy* was ever shown smoking pot, but said if that were to happen she would not approve of *Nancy* using drugs as much as just selling them.” (*Nancy* would not be considered a marijuana user on *Weeds*, as she is only shown smoking weed once in an earlier season. In later seasons, however, this is a more frequent occurrence.) BAILEY said she felt like

Doug and *Andy's* drug use was "harmless" but could see how some might be offended by it, and how the portrayal of adults "spending all day getting high" is not very positive. She rationalizes by implying that the portrayal is not so bad as long as one recognizes it is fiction. DEREK said, too, that *Andy* and *Doug's* interactions with marijuana were "specifically" humorous, also putting *Celia's* husband *Dean* (a lawyer who is at one point part of *Nancy's* drug business and who *Celia* later divorces) in that same category. In contrast, there is *Nancy*, whose interactions "tend to be more serious just because of the people she's dealing with," said DEREK. ALLIE also finds *Doug* and *Andy's* use/dealing of marijuana comical, but not *Nancy* and *Celia's*. "When people like *Nancy* and *Celia* are sneaking around and getting involved with the wrong people, then, kinda like, well that's ridiculous. Um, and you know, why would they do that? Because they're just putting themselves in so much trouble." With ALLIE and DEREK, the more dangerous situations involving drugs on the show cause them to examine whether or not the characters involved are making good choices. They are more at ease with the characters who can interact with drugs and generally stay out of trouble.

Reading *Nancy*

The feelings the respondents had toward the main character, *Nancy*, were varied and complex. Several seemed to respect *Nancy* for her cunning and wit. SONYA said she "in some way" admires *Nancy* for "doing what she had to do" after her husband's death to maintain the lifestyle her family was accustomed to. While not a fan of *Nancy* in general, TRINA admitted that she likes how *Nancy* just "goes with it" when she has a problem, even though she may "freak out" at first. VANCE said *Nancy* is easy to like from an entertainment perspective. He further describes *Nancy* as having a good head on

her shoulders, and being someone who loves kids and has a good heart. However, he said he would not approve of, or respect, her choices in real life. Similarly, BAILEY said she would not want her mother acting like *Nancy*, but clarified that she did not "really" have any negative feelings toward her, and actually chose *Nancy* as one of her favorite characters (*Doug* was the other). She said she would defend *Nancy* because *Nancy* keeps the show going. Obviously, VANCE and BAILEY are looking at *Nancy* from at least two different angles – one considering the dramatic possibilities of *Nancy*, the other looking at her as a representation of a possible reality. In the context of the show, her behavior makes for an interesting plot, and she is easy to sympathize with. But, according to VANCE and BAILEY, such behavior and activities are not truly acceptable. ALLIE'S views were also negotiated by her detachment from the show's relation to reality. She did not have "too strong of an opinion towards" *Nancy's* behavior because the character is "fictional." She did say she thought, in the more recent seasons she had seen, *Nancy's* behavior had gotten more "risqué," especially where her "sexual ventures" were concerned, and ALLIE found the direction her character was going "kind of annoying." It seems that because *Nancy* is not a real person, ALLIE had not thought much about approval or disapproval of *Nancy*, but her feelings leaned toward the negative. Her favorite characters are *Silas* and *Andy* because they are comical, so perhaps her thoughts do not focus as much on *Nancy*.

Most of the respondents who said positive things about *Nancy* seemed cautious about assigning her positive attributes, all indicating disapproval of her on some level. However, there were other respondents who were more unabashedly "pro-*Nancy*." MEG stated that she "loves" *Nancy's* behavior, with her dry humor and curtness. She accepts

and enjoys *Nancy's* character. CHARLES named *Nancy* his favorite character because she is independent, strong and respectable. He also thinks it is "pretty cool" that she "kind of learns as she goes along, and adapts really well." He did say, however, that he was not sympathetic toward her, because she "kind of deserves" everything that happens to her. This comment, and others provided by some of the respondents, indicates that they all recognize negative qualities in *Nancy*. Some can still enjoy her character despite and, in some cases, because of these qualities. Others generally dislike her because of them. For example, LISA dislikes that "the mother is reckless and she's really a horrible parent." She also believes *Nancy* is irresponsible, and could have chosen another route besides marijuana dealing. LISA admitted to sometimes feeling sympathy for *Nancy*, reasoning that *Nancy* probably did not imagine things would turn out like they did, but then she said she feels *Nancy* could have "walked away earlier" and, therefore, she was not really sympathetic toward *Nancy*. Others had similar things to say about *Nancy*. TRINA said she was a stressful character who was impulsive, on edge and prone to making mistakes. DEREK is tired of *Nancy* doing stupid things and getting away with it. He called her behavior "erratic" and "foolish" and said he thought she "kind of lives her life like she's a 24-year-old pot dealer instead of a 44-year-old pot dealer." GAVIN said he would not want *Nancy* for a mother because she is irresponsible, lazy and uses sex to escape consequences. For those who dislike *Nancy*, the words irresponsible, impulsive and foolish seem to characterize her behavior. Though it is *Nancy's* escapades and near misses that drive the show, about half of the respondents find her character to be a drawback.

Still, for many of the respondents, their opinion of *Nancy's* behavior is softened by the initial circumstances surrounding her husband *Judah's* sudden death, which placed her in a tough financial situation that she solved by selling drugs. Some of the respondents consider that difficult situation a legitimate excuse to begin selling marijuana. JOHN said he is "largely" sympathetic toward *Nancy* and is able to justify her actions, adding that "they kind of give us that with, uh, you know, her being a widow." He said he does not blame *Nancy* for "making the decision she did," and that "her husband passing had a little to do with it." CHARLES said he does not feel the need to justify *Nancy's* behavior because she does what she needs to do to provide for her family. ALLIE also gives *Nancy* the benefit of the doubt in her decision to sell marijuana, saying that after *Judah's* death, "she just really didn't know what else to do."

Some of the most surprising comments I got about *Nancy* were in response to the question, "Do you think *Nancy's* job as a drug dealer makes her a bad mother?" Several of the respondents made a distinction between the business side of drug dealing and whatever personal choices *Nancy* made within that business. They attributed *Nancy's* mistakes as a mother to the poor business choices she made, and her mixing her business and personal lives. It was interesting that these respondents did not think drug dealing itself was *Nancy's* main problem. PAUL, for instance, did not think drug dealing made *Nancy* a bad mother or friend, rather her mistake was in allowing her work life to influence her home and personal life. He elaborated by saying, "Just like, uh, someone else in a different business, that wouldn't necessarily make them a better friend or a better mother. I mean, business and personal can be separate." Similarly, LISA stated, "I don't think her job as a drug dealer makes her a bad mother. I think the way she handles it, and

just her general behavior, I could see her having another kind of high-stressed or demanding career and being just as absent, but I do think the way it endangers her children makes it much worse." One might expect drug dealing to be vilified across the board, but because *Weeds* takes viewers beyond a glossed-over stereotype and gives them a more intimate look at people who deal drugs, the viewers are able to see them as complex characters who have many labels. And therefore, wearing the drug dealer label does not automatically make them bad people, or unfit mothers.

Perceptions of the Portrayal of Marijuana Use and Dealing

Several participants observed an overall lax portrayal of marijuana use and dealing on *Weeds*. As PAUL and SONYA noted, the characters have a casual and relaxed relationship with marijuana. In contrast with societal opinion, MEG felt the show had a looser and more accepting view of the drug. In other words, the respondents have noticed a tone entirely different than that usually associated with drug use. VANCE pointed out that the "lighthearted manner" in which marijuana is portrayed on the show is most evident in the first couple of seasons of the show, where the negative aspects of involvement with it are not often portrayed. He said the portrayal of marijuana use and dealing is not exactly realistic, and that the life of a drug dealer is also portrayed mostly as fantasy. "Um, it's portrayed as stressful, but not really life endangering," VANCE said. "Um, just because [*Nancy*] sort of gets out of any situation that might endanger her life…" Likewise, ALLIE points out the casual and unrealistic portrayal of marijuana use, as well as a lack of negative consequences associated with it. She does say, however, that when *Nancy* gets involved with the drug cartel in Mexico, the drug dealing aspect looks "way more dangerous than people would normally think." Still, when asked how the life

of a drug dealer is portrayed on the show, she says that it is "pretty glamorous," as *Nancy* is "living the high life" with a nice house and nice clothes. ALLIE said she would not have pictured a drug dealer having this kind of lifestyle.

Based on the respondents' thoughts, *Weeds* is able to maintain, for the most part, a relaxed attitude toward marijuana, not only through the obviously casual depictions (ie., it is used often as recreation and the characters are at ease with using it), but through the way the negatives are presented as well. Because the negative consequences are never too heavy or inescapable for the main characters, the line between being involved with marijuana and other normal activities is blurred. The characters show that you can be involved with the drug and still maintain a lifestyle that bears some semblance of normalcy.

The lack of negative consequences is also one of the ways that some of the respondents thought the show made marijuana seem appealing. BAILEY noted that the viewer does not see any of the characters on a "really serious…downward decline" and the drug use on the show is pretty much limited to marijuana. She also referenced the appealing images on the cover of the DVD jackets, such as one in which *Nancy* is intertwined with marijuana leaves, "looking all hot." GAVIN simply says that the show appears appealing because "nothing bad ever happens."

The respondents also indicated that the show makes marijuana seem appealing through the presence of positive reinforcement of the drug. Much of the positive here revolves around the money dealing marijuana brings in. The comfortable upper-middle class lifestyle that *Nancy* maintains is perceived as glamorous and desirable. TRINA points out that the characters "seem to have fun getting high," and that *Nancy* seems to

make a lot of money. SONYA does make the distinction between different ways drug dealing is portrayed on the show. She says it is glamorous "at the top," and dangerous and not lucrative "at the bottom." CHARLES thought the show made marijuana appear appealing because of the way the characters always pull through in the end. He said he thought the writers of the show tried to put "a positive spin on marijuana." Some of the respondents also found appeal in the comedic way the drug is presented on *Weeds*. DEREK said marijuana on the show is made appealing because "98 percent of the time that marijuana is used on the show, it's used in a comical context." He said it is only shown in a negative context when there are large quantities of the drug involved in a mass deal, promoting "some sort of drama" or strife between dealers. ALLIE said of the layer of comedy throughout the show, "It makes it look more appealing than I would otherwise think." The mix of drugs and comedy is probably the most novel feature of the show, as most often, media portrayals of drugs are not humorous. Any negative associations are minimized because the show consistently invites viewers to lighten up and laugh.

Though most of the respondents did not recognize a serious condemnation of marijuana usage or dealing on *Weeds*, many did point out some non-glamorous portrayals of the drug, namely in response to the question, "How is the life of a drug dealer portrayed on the show?" LISA thought the life of a drug dealer was portrayed in some different ways on the show, but did not think it was glamorized at all. She used distributor *Guillermo*, who was jailed for his illegal drug activities, as an example of someone whose dealings with the drug took a bad turn, and said even *Nancy's* life was not portrayed as "super great." LISA added, "[*Nancy*] still has tons of problems and she

never seems to have money…" Unlike those whose comments lean toward positive views of the show's activities, LISA focuses on the problems the characters go through. Perhaps because the comedic aspect of the show is so strong, the weight of the negatives was not as prominent to most of the participants. It seemed that for most, the lighter tone came through clearest. In contrast, LISA'S response to the question of how the life of a drug dealer is portrayed on the show focuses on the characters' struggles, which are found in the more dramatic elements of the show. TRINA, too, recognizes a darker side to *Weeds*. She feels the show does a "pretty good job" of showing that there is a dangerous side to marijuana use/dealing, and does not feel like the show "makes light of it at any point." Thinking of *Nancy*, TRINA said the show only shows her smoking pot once, so *Weeds* is not presenting the light and funny side of marijuana associated with the typical "stoner." TRINA was probably not factoring in characters like *Doug* and *Andy*, who many respondents do characterize as funny stoner types. Like LISA, she is focusing on the more serious effects of marijuana involvement shown. JOHN describes the portrayal of a drug dealer's life on the show as hectic and full of "speed bumps." He also mentioned the hassle of a fluctuating hierarchy. "…you're always having to sell out to someone with more money and power," JOHN said. He added that because the drug dealer is always working for someone, it becomes like the "real job" he or she was trying to avoid in the first place. In his discussion of drug dealing, JOHN talks about it from a work perspective, not simply an illegal activity. In comparing it to normal (legal) jobs, he notes that the struggles could be very similar. However, indicating some positive portrayals on the show, he does say that marijuana use and dealing is portrayed as "far more lucrative and safe than it probably is." CHARLES said the life of a drug dealer is made to seem

"cool to start off with," but goes downhill after that. He added, "And I think it makes it out to be really cool, but then it also shows you why you really shouldn't do it." CHARLES sees the show as presenting two sides to the lifestyle, ultimately sending a message that it is better not to choose it.

The biggest distinction between right and wrong that I observed in the interviews involved whether a child or adult was using drugs. Sometimes that distinction was made by the respondents themselves. Other times the respondents simply recognized such a distinction being made on the show. This is worth noting because in almost every other aspect of their interviews, the respondents worked in the "gray areas," but in this respect, attitudes were more black and white.

PAUL points out that *Nancy* is "very against kids smoking [marijuana]," and anytime she sees someone selling it to kids she gets offended, but she will sell it to adults. PAUL did not express his own personal views on the matter, but noted that a moral stand was taken on the show. LISA, on the other hand, said she was "less comfortable" with drug use by a child than with the drug use portrayed through *Doug* or *Andy*. JOHN gets more specific in his feelings toward drug use by children on the show, and said he was "bummed" to see *Shane* eventually try marijuana. Conversely, he admitted that it could have a positive side because *Shane* tries it, but decides he does not like it. JOHN sees *Silas'* trying the drug as something realistic for a high school student to do. He stated, "…realistically, that's when teens try, you know, stupid adult things, and that includes, um, marijuana in many cases, as far as I can recollect from high school." JOHN'S conclusion on the matter of *Weeds'* treatment of drug use is that it treats it as "appropriately as it can," but also realistically. JOHN struggles with the fact that children

and teenagers are trying marijuana on the show, but finds some redeeming aspects of this being portrayed, such as teaching a moral lesson and maintaining realism. When discussing whether he thinks the show makes marijuana appear appealing or unappealing, JOHN mentions that the show promotes a certain amount of morality and responsibility when it comes to marijuana use, such as not dealing to kids. He uses the scene where *Nancy* chastises a teenager for dealing to kids as an example. GAVIN said he did not think *Nancy's* drug dealing was bad at first, because her children did not know what she was doing, and she was "just trying to provide for her family." He believes it put "everyone in a tough situation" when *Shane* and *Silas* got involved.

Overall, the respondents seem a lot more open with the morality of characters' various lifestyles and behaviors when the characters in question were adults. Those who mentioned it took a much firmer moral stand when the ethics of drug use by kids was in question. Through their wide range of responses regarding the portrayal of marijuana use and dealing on *Weeds*, the respondents generally show a recognition of the show's mix of positive and negative messages. Some get an overall positive feel from it, while others focus more on the negative side.

Participants' Personal Opinions on Marijuana Use and Dealing

Participants' personal opinions on marijuana use and dealing closely mirrored their opinions of the substance's use and distribution on the show. Many held primarily negative views of marijuana dealing, but positive opinions of marijuana use. PAUL, for instance, did not quite want to label marijuana use as either harmful or beneficial. He maintained a more neutral stance: "I'd say like, it's just kind of something people do. It's kind of like people go out to drink." He then said it could be viewed as both harmful and

beneficial. However, when it came to his opinion of marijuana dealing, PAUL used words like “sketchy” and “it just seems weird.” Obviously to PAUL, selling and buying the same drug are two very different things. LISA holds a negotiated view of marijuana use but it is fairly positive. She does not see possessing small amounts of the drug in one’s home as a “huge detriment to society.” She rationalizes that there are many other drugs more harmful than marijuana, and that while marijuana can “become a habit and it can be bad,” people can “mess themselves up just as much drinking.” LISA said she thinks marijuana use can be harmful if abused, but otherwise it is a “generally benign” activity. The dealing aspect, she said, should be regulated, because she does not like the idea of “children and young teenagers” smoking marijuana. She said she still sees marijuana dealing as “drug dealing” but in a less negative way than she would a “harder” drug like cocaine, or “club drugs” like ecstasy.

Most respondents generally shared insights similar to PAUL’S and LISA’S. They did not take a strong stance on the moral, ethical or health implications of smoking marijuana. It was generally spoken of as a normal activity that could be harmful if the drug were used in excess. Marijuana was cited in some instances as less or no more harmful than even legal drugs like alcohol. Marijuana dealing, however, was described more concretely as “bad” or “sketchy.” Dealing is held with more suspicion than marijuana use, most likely because users are not, generally, thought to be entangled with the dangers and methods of handling/selling mass quantities of drugs. There is clearly a different set of associations attached to the two activities. VANCE said he recognized anyone who smokes marijuana cannot be “extremely against the dealing of it.” Nevertheless, he said he could not “really respect” marijuana dealing. He reasoned that

everyone he has known that has gotten "seriously into it" has ended up in jail, compromised their moral values or become "darker, shadier characters because of it." As was the pattern, his view of marijuana use was decidedly less harsh. He basically made the claim that it could be harmful as an everyday activity, but okay if one only uses it on occasion and is "responsible" with it. He also says that it is something he is not really opposed to, but cannot wholeheartedly embrace either. This reveals that his attitude about opening people up to marijuana would probably be a cautious one. JOHN had a more positive view of marijuana dealing, saying he did not "have a problem with it" for the most part, and that it was "kind of a shame" that the black market for it was created. However, he did give some insight into what could make dealing marijuana "bad," even though he thinks its use is largely acceptable. JOHN said that dealing marijuana is "sometimes more indicative of that type of person who just wants to do something illegal. Um, so I guess what I'm trying to say is, sometimes pot dealers are really, uh, just pot dealers, but sometimes they're criminals. And I think that, uh, there's a difference." According to him, marijuana dealing, as an illegal activity, often attracts sordid people, which creates the negative connotation. He views people who simply deal pot, and do not engage in other illegal activities, in a more positive manner. Similarly, DEREK said he does not have a problem with marijuana dealing except when it is done in "mass quantity," because it is then usually associated with the selling of other kinds of drugs.

Though marijuana use may still be an illegal drug in most places, most of the respondents marked it as less negative than other drugs. More than one respondent thought it should be legalized (JOHN, DEREK, CHARLES and TRINA). CHARLES did not approve of full legalization, but said he thought it should be legalized for "medicinal

purposes." Almost all of the respondents thought marijuana had the potential to be both harmful and beneficial, which often qualified as a fairly neutral stance. The most negative response about marijuana use came from ALLIE, who when asked if she thought smoking marijuana is a harmful or beneficial activity, replied simply, "I think it's harmful." Prior to that, she did say she did not think it was as "big a deal" as most people think and as she used to think, but that she would not want to do it and thinks it is "clearly damaging to human health."

Influencing Perceptions of Marijuana

Media effects are a hot topic of study. Many researchers want to determine if the media people consume actually changes the way they think or behave. Kari Lancaster, et al. (2011), for example, sought to determine in their study the role of the news media and its effects on audiences and policy concerning illicit drugs. Though it is not the purpose of my study to ascertain media effects, I did ask the participants if *Weeds* had changed or influenced their opinions on marijuana use or dealing. I had several respondents who did admit that the show had, at least somewhat, made marijuana more acceptable to them (MEG, JOHN, ALLIE, BAILEY). Of that group, some attributed part of that acceptance to a culture they had either grown up in, or been exposed to at some point. This was the case for MEG, who said she was raised to believe marijuana was unacceptable, life-threatening, and something that should be feared. When she was later exposed to it, she still had "anxious feelings" about it, but said through further exposure and watching *Weeds*, she had the realization that "this is kinda how it really is." She further explained that she began to realize marijuana was not "taboo" for some people, but rather a part of everyday life. MEG concluded, "…I think the combination of it bringing me to that

realization and being involved in a society where, in a culture where, you can see that firsthand, the two have tied together to really, um, I guess, differ (*sic*) my comfort level with it." For MEG, her viewing of *Weeds* was part of an already occurring process of becoming more accepting of marijuana use. Unlike the other respondents, MEG talks about going from one end of the spectrum to the other. The show's portrayal of the drug as just one more "no big deal" aspect of everyday life, along with her new surroundings, helped ease the initial negative preconceived perceptions she had of marijuana. JOHN assigned the show a lesser role in the influencing of his personal beliefs about marijuana. He said the show had moved his opinion "a little toward the positive," but that he had probably held his beliefs about the drug before he ever saw *Weeds*. Likewise, BAILEY said the show may have contributed to her having a more "lax viewpoint on the whole subject of marijuana," but that contribution was "probably minimal, at most." The show makes marijuana "kind of funny," BAILEY said, but she knows that it is "very unrealistic." She believes the culture she grew up in contributed to her relaxed attitude more than the television show did. ALLIE said the show made her more "casual" toward the idea of marijuana use and dealing. She said she used to be more judgmental of using especially, but it does not bother her "nearly as much" now.

These insights reveal that for these respondents, the fictional show *Weeds* carried enough positive messages about marijuana to increase the positivity of their real-world perceptions of the drug. This positive perception is due to the show's use of humor, lack of negative consequences to drug dealing and use, casual and relaxed depictions of marijuana use and sympathetic characters, among other points already presented in this thesis.

Respondents who said the show did not change their opinion of marijuana use or dealing were PAUL, SONYA, LISA, VANCE, DEREK, CHARLES and GAVIN.

I also asked the respondents whether or not they thought the show could possibly affect someone else's decision on whether or not to use drugs. Eight of the 12 respondents stated that they believed this could be possible. CHARLES mentioned that the show could influence someone not to use drugs. He said because of "all the crazy stuff that happens," some viewers could be "kind of turned off by it." Most of the other participants specifically noted that the show could possibly influence someone to want to use drugs, or in LISA'S case, saw it possibly going either way, depending on the person. "Um, a lot of people are really susceptible to what they see," LISA said, "so if they get some sort of image from it that it's something a lot of people do, and it's fine, then maybe they might be more likely to, um, try it or condone it, and you know, on the other side, someone could watch it and say, 'Wow, these people's lives really aren't that great. I don't want to do that.'" LISA was also one of the respondents who did not think the show had influenced her own opinion on marijuana use or dealing. For VANCE, when it came to the show's influence on his opinion of marijuana use or dealing, he said it reinforced for him that marijuana is not "the worst drug out there," and strengthened his opinion that if one is able to make fun of something openly in popular culture and not get "blasted off the air," then it is not that bad. Could others be influenced in their decision whether or not to use drugs? VANCE said he could see how liking a certain character could make someone want to try marijuana. He felt like that would be a "dumb" reason to try it though, and said he could not imagine himself or anyone he knows following that line of thought. He then said *Weeds* could also make someone more attracted to marijuana

through its lighthearted approach and portrayal of marijuana as less dangerous than it could be. VANCE does not see the show having a strong influence on his opinions, and while admitting that it could possibly influence someone else's decisions about marijuana, does not seem to think the show would have a strong pull on others either. JOHN did not think the show influenced his opinions on marijuana use or dealing "too much," and said he hoped it would not influence another person's opinion on whether or not to use the drug. While he seemed to be conflicted as to his thoughts on the matter, he asserted that "people are pretty impressionable on the whole," and concluded that the show could influence someone's decision. It seems the respondents thought the familiarity and humor associated with marijuana on the show were the traits more likely to cause people to want to try the drug, as these were traits also mentioned by DEREK (humor) and GAVIN (familiarity). They saw the show's potential to turn people away from marijuana as coming from the struggles the characters deal with or the outlandish situations.

MEG was one of the four who did not think the show could influence someone's personal decision about drug use, though she did think it influenced her perceptions. She explained that if someone is already thinking about using drugs, they are going to do it, and if someone is terrified of them, watching the show is not going to change that. ALLIE also admitted the show had influenced her perception of marijuana, but said she did not think it would alter someone's decision about drug use. TRINA said watching *Weeds* had gotten her interested in learning more about marijuana, and caused a documentary about the drug to catch her attention. When it came to the show's potential to influence someone's decision, TRINA said she felt people's opinions are probably

already formed before they start watching the show. She also felt that most people who watch the show either use marijuana, or are okay with the idea of using it. This is an interesting statement in that it assumes that in order for someone to enjoy *Weeds*, he or she must personally accept marijuana use. This does not leave room for those who may disagree with marijuana use, but who appreciate the show for its entertainment value or opportunity for voyeurism or escape. Indeed, all the respondents indicated some level of personal acceptance of marijuana, which surprised me because I myself enjoy the show but do not smoke marijuana, or agree with its use. I do, however, find it more acceptable than most other illegal drugs. BAILEY made an observation that seems to fit more with what I have read concerning the views of the show's creators. "I don't really feel like the show itself is about using drugs," she said, but is more about what *Nancy* is having to deal with. Therefore, she did not think the show had much persuasive power in terms of influencing a drug consumption decision. She also said she thought someone would have to be "an incredibly uniformed person" to have their decisions about drug use influenced by the show. While seemingly contradicting herself when she said the show may have contributed to her having a more "lax viewpoint" on marijuana, BAILEY feels the influence was probably "minimal at most." She said, "I think kind of the culture that I've sort of grown up in and kind of been around has more to do with the fact that I don't really care than the show. The show makes it kind of funny but I know that it's very unrealistic." BAILEY is pointing out that the show's messages may have been able to influence her opinions of marijuana slightly, but would most likely not be strong enough to influence someone's decision about actually using drugs.

There is a difference between perceptions and behaviors. All of the respondents found the show to have the power to influence its viewers on some level, but most of the respondents did not see the show as having too much potential to affect behavior. As indicated by these last four respondents in particular, the show has the potential to influence in a lesser way, not necessarily affecting behavior.

Making Connections

Most of the participants could make connections between *Weeds* and their own lives. There were a variety of responses. Participants related to aspects such as characters, situations on the show, the "culture" depicted, the suburban setting and the overall topic of marijuana. When viewers can make these types of connections with a television show it draws them to it and may help them form attachments. Thus, they are more likely to continue watching it season after season. JOHN, for instance, was one of those who identified with the characters, and followed the show each season. He said *Nancy's* sons are about the same distance apart in age as he and his own brother, and interact in a way similar to the way he and his brother do. He mentioned the several years the show's seasons have covered and said in a "weird way," it was kind of like he had "grown up with the show." TRINA said she could not relate to the characters much, but said she could relate to *Silas* and *Shane* in that she also had a middle class suburban upbringing. This indicates she can relate not only to aspects of the characters, but to at least part of the culture being portrayed on the show.

Silas and *Andy* emerged as the most relatable characters for the respondents. VANCE feels *Andy* is a complex character he can empathize with, and said he has known people like him. GAVIN also identifies with *Andy* and his sense of humor. CHARLES

does not fully relate to any one character, but sees in himself a little bit of *Silas*, in *Silas's* curiosity toward marijuana, and how *Silas* reacts when he first discovers his mother is dealing it. He relates to *Andy* concerning *Andy's* attitude toward marijuana. DEREK feels like he and *Silas* have similar personalities, but said he does not relate to the other male characters because they are older. VANCE also mentioned the age difference between him and most of the characters on the show, indicating that it kept him from relating to them, and he said he could not really relate to the younger characters either because their experiences are foreign to him. Though he indicated earlier in the interview a connection with *Andy's* character, VANCE said he did not feel like he could relate to any of the characters. It is more natural that the male participants would better connect with *Silas* because of the gender and age similarities, however, as noted above, 40-something *Andy* was also mentioned. Though *Andy* is older, he is often child-like in his personality and sense of humor, perhaps making him more relatable to a college-aged group of viewers.

Besides relating to the characters, other respondents related to the setting or situations on the show. MEG said she could relate to certain situations the characters were involved in. She also said her interest in the show reflected the marijuana usage she has seen in her current location and her newfound perception of marijuana as "maybe not such a bad thing." When explaining why he started watching *Weeds*, VANCE mentioned that he knew a lot kids in high school who smoked pot. He also said his interest in the show reflected his identity because he could identify with dealing with dark situations in a humorous way. BAILEY said her interest in the show may reflect her comfort with the marijuana culture she grew up surrounded by. "Maybe that's kind of what attracted to me, attracted me to the show in the first place," BAILEY said. "It's like, you know, I

wonder how someone else is going to portray like a world of, of marijuana. I'm from [a town in] North Carolina, which is like, people always identify that area with like, 'ohh, pot.' So, I kind of, I like to contrast that to, like, how I see things back home. Um, but mostly I just watch it for entertainment. I don't really, like, feel that much connection to it." Interestingly, though GAVIN relates to marijuana culture, his experience with it is different than that of the show's characters because he is from an area where it is legal to purchase marijuana. He related this in response to the question, "How is the life of a drug dealer portrayed on the show?" He also said, "So, it doesn't really bug me, but for other people, I could see how it would."

There were other responses indicating that participants connected the show with various aspects of their personal lives. DEREK said he had smoked marijuana before, so he was familiar with the comic aspect of the show, and could relate to the show in general. CHARLES said he was initially interested in the situations on the show, but became more "personally attracted" to it and the characters as he continued to watch. These comments reveal that no matter how they make the connection, the respondents do not see the fictional television show *Weeds* as something entirely separate from the rest of their lives. They integrate it, to different degrees depending on the person, with their own experiences, attitudes and ideas about things that exist outside of the show.

In conclusion, the participants in this study were largely drawn to *Weeds* because it offered them something different from their usual television viewing experiences. The combination of marijuana and suburban life served as a basis for the show's novel scenarios, and created depictions that were more relatable for the participants than the shows they had seen that portrayed marijuana use as a negative inner city activity. In

turn, the participants were generally more attracted to the light-hearted comical characters than those that were portrayed as having more serious or dangerous interactions with marijuana. The main character, NANCY, garnered both admiration and criticism from the respondents. Some adored her character and many were sympathetic with her situation to some extent, but a majority also used strong words to describe their annoyance with her behavior patterns and ability to escape the consequences of her poor choices. The respondents observed a primarily appealing portrayal of marijuana on the show, with the characters exhibiting a usage of the drug that is fun, recreational and free of negative consequences. Most of the observations by the respondents that described a negative portrayal of marijuana on *Weeds* related to the dealing of the drug. These observations mirrored their personal opinions that using marijuana is not terrible, but dealing it is frowned upon. In terms of how the show influenced their opinions on marijuana use or dealing, half of the respondents admitted to the show having some level of influence. Several said that *Weeds* made marijuana more acceptable to them. Many of the respondents felt the show could possibly affect someone's decision on whether or not to use drugs, though they did not think the show would have a strong influence in this area. Finally, the study participants were able to make connections between *Weeds* and their own lives in a variety of different ways.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Representing Drug Use and Dealing

My first research question sought to examine how the college students I interviewed perceived *Weeds'* representation of drug use and dealing. For the respondents in my study, Showtime's *Weeds* explores the drug marijuana in a manner and depth different from other television shows. Its depiction of marijuana as something other than a dangerous substance was novel for the participants. Their interest was sparked by *Weeds'* creation of a humorous world where the use and dealing of marijuana was prevalent, a place where smoking a little pot was, for many of the show's characters, a normal, harmless pastime.

The respondents' perceptions of the portrayals of marijuana use and dealing on *Weeds*, and the characters who engage in these activities, reveal that in general, the respondents favored humorous portrayals of marijuana over dangerous/negative ones. They enjoyed the funny laid-back characters who had humorous experiences while smoking marijuana recreationally. They tended to be more critical of more serious characters who were heavily involved in the dealing of the drug. They often associated these characters with danger and irresponsibility. Some of the respondents also indicated that they liked the earlier seasons of the show, the first three of which were set in a suburban neighborhood, better than the later seasons. Participants liked the lighter, less

complicated tone reflected in these first seasons, and felt as the show went on, moving the characters out of the suburbs, it became more grim, violent and outrageous.

Personal Attitudes on Drug Use

My second research question asked how the participants negotiated their perceptions of *Weeds* in light of their own attitudes about illicit drug use. As participants personally viewed marijuana use more positively than dealing, their opinions of the show's portrayal of the two activities followed a similar pattern. They tended to see marijuana use in and of itself as neither a good nor bad activity. Conversely, marijuana dealing was viewed with more caution and suspicion than marijuana use, though the respondents recognized that the two activities go hand-in-hand. Four of the respondents also thought marijuana should be legalized.

Of the 12 people I interviewed for my study, all had generally positive and casual outlooks on marijuana, their perspectives mostly formed by factors outside of the show, and before ever viewing *Weeds*. The respondents indicated that they did not see *Weeds* as having much power to influence someone's decision to use drugs (or not).

Looking at Drugs in Suburbia

My final research question sought to determine the role *Weeds'* suburban setting played in the way the respondents perceived the portrayal of drugs on the show. The setting of *Weeds* being a suburban neighborhood ended up being a huge factor in how the show was perceived by the respondents in my study. Most of the study participants seemed to relate to suburban life, and they felt the show taking place in suburbia was novel for television. Most of the other television shows they had seen depicted drug users as underprivileged and living in inner city neighborhoods. For the respondents, the

suburban setting placed drug use in a "normal" context. It facilitated the portrayal of marijuana as comedic and acceptable, and the users and dealers on the show as easy to empathize with. Overall, the familiar upbeat setting of the show helped ease some of the traditional negative connotations associated with marijuana and those who are involved with it. Not only did the concept of drugs in suburbia seem realistic to the respondents, some of them felt it simultaneously reflected reality as they knew it and challenged pre-conceived notions about the harmfulness of marijuana. They knew suburban drug users; some of them revealed that they had used the drug themselves. Some felt hopeful that *Weeds* could help change society's negative opinion of marijuana.

The *Weeds* Audience in Reception Research

As an audience analysis, this study examined how *Weeds* viewers articulated the show's meaning. Using Hall's (1985, in Storey, 1996) definition of "articulation," it was interesting to look at the show's portrayals of marijuana through the eyes of the study participants, as well as to see how a combination of factors were brought together in these creations of meaning. For example, the participants identifying as white college students living in a nation where marijuana use was largely illegal affected the way the participants perceived the show, and thus influenced the meanings that were created by the viewers. My study does not examine the full cycle of the communication process, but rather focuses on the consumption and reproduction phases of Stuart Hall's (2007) model of it. In order for meaning to be created by the participants, they had to draw upon the "encoded meaning potential" of the show (Hall, 2007). In other words, they gathered the images and information presented them, and formed their own ideas – such as whether or not they liked a certain character, or whether or not marijuana use seemed fun on the

show. Bourdieu (1984) described the decoding process as the method in which the consumer helps to produce what he or she consumes. It was through this method that participants "made" *Weeds* themselves. Rather than being presented to them with set characteristics, the show was molded by each viewer.

Not only did the respondents' identities reflect on their interpretations of the show, but I believe identity was created through viewing the show. Perhaps watching *Weeds*, with all of its countercultural messages, allowed the respondents to feel that they were in some way participating in a subversive activity, since they perceived the show as relaying an attitude about marijuana that was in opposition to that of general society. In their meaning production, the participants are working within their contingent identities, which, as du Gay (1996, p. 48) noted, means their identities are dependent on those things that are outside of them. For example, as many of them believed marijuana should be legalized, this part of their identity depended on the people and laws making marijuana illegal. Because the major draw of the show for the respondents was the fact that it portrayed marijuana differently than mainstream society and other shows, their even viewing it depended, at least partly, on a society that had not embraced these ideas, and a media that had not already put forth such portrayals.

Through their opinions about *Weeds*, the participants also exhibit the three types of readings found in Hall's (2007) decoding process: the dominant-hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional positions. The participants took a dominant-hegemonic position when it came to recognizing the humorous and lighthearted aspects of the show, and reading an overall casual portrayal of marijuana. Those who sympathized with *Nancy* because of her husband's death also took the dominant position. The negotiated position

is exemplified in LISA's thoughts about *Nancy*. She said she sometimes felt sympathy for her, but also said *Nancy's* behavior was one of the things she disliked about the show. Her readings of *Nancy's* character are negotiated between accepting her character as an enjoyable part of the show, and feeling no empathy with her. VANCE also takes a negotiated stance when it comes to *Nancy*, by voicing an opinion neither completely accepting of her, nor completely disapproving. He said she was easy to like from an entertainment perspective, but said he would not approve of her choices in real life. BAILEY takes a negotiated view when she says she considers the drug use by *Doug* and *Andy* "harmless," though she saw how the portrayal of adults spending a lot of time using the drug was not very positive. Her perspective is negotiated between the acceptability and unacceptability of those two characters' behavior. An oppositional reading can be found in GAVIN'S opinion that the show had gotten boring in later seasons, which contrasts with the efforts of the show's creators to keep *Weeds* entertaining and appealing to viewers. In opposition to the comedic aspect of the show, TRINA said she does not think *Weeds* makes light of drug use and dealing. The participants primarily demonstrated a dominant reading of the show. This made sense to me in that all of the participants seemed to enjoy at least some of the show's seasons, and therefore could be expected to read and enjoy the text as intended. Like Müller and Hermes (2010) maintained, some audience readings do not include resistance to the dominant position, but are still useful for study.

In her study of portrayals of drugs on film, Boyd (2007) discussed the treatment of people based on their level of involvement with drugs. In one observation she noted that drug traffickers were treated more harshly than drug users. Even though the

participants in my study felt the show generally lightened the topic of drug use and dealing, I saw a similar pattern to the one Boyd observed when it came to the way marijuana was portrayed, based on what level of involvement was being discussed. Dealing, and those more heavily involved with the dealing side of the drug, were viewed more suspiciously than users, indicating that even among those who are not very judgmental of marijuana, a dichotomy exists within the larger context of drug involvement. This dichotomy seems to stem from the dangerous or immoral behaviors associated with the illegal nature of the drug, which are more often linked with marijuana dealers than users, suggesting that legalization might level the playing field between user and seller.

Despite the fact that the respondents disapproved of some of the actions by the characters in the show, they talk about the show being relatable, because of such elements as the characters, setting and situations. The respondents' ability to relate to the show is important because their familiarity with the show's context gives them a framework for understanding and creating meaning from the show. As theorist Bourdieu (1984) pointed out, a person must possess the cultural knowledge necessary to make meaning of a particular text. This familiarity also served to help the viewers make sense of the controversial topic of marijuana being presented. Lavoie (2011, p. 912) argued that *Weeds* is a site of "counterhegemonic resistance," inviting the audience to "formulate and reformulate their personal opinions about marijuana as it exists in American suburbia." Lavoie discussed *Weeds* bringing marijuana out of its usual "othering" environment into an upper-middle class white world. I think viewers are best able to follow that journey if they are able to identify in some way with the characters or suburban context of the show.

In his evaluation of the British television show *Ideal*, Carter (2007) noted that the show strives to "maintain an empathy with the target audience." I feel that to venture too far from the familiar would lose the audience.

Participant responses in my study do indicate a naturalization of marijuana use on *Weeds*, and dealing as well, to some extent. Respondents consistently indicate that *Weeds* predominantly displays the use of the drug as something harmless and normal for its characters. Research done by Hundley (1995) on the television show *Cheers* led her to conclude that similar portrayals of beer on that show indicated naturalization. The participants in my study found marijuana use to have less negative connotations associated with it than dealing, but I think naturalization of both was recognized. Many participant responses indicated that characters who used the drug had fun and did not experience many negative consequences, and dealing of the drug was portrayed as lucrative and glamorous. It also seemed that marijuana use had been naturalized in the lives of the respondents, with *Weeds* playing a role in that for some. They generally exhibited a personal acceptance of responsible marijuana use. Most of this naturalization occurred outside of the show, but some felt that *Weeds* also had influenced them to think more positively about the drug. The high level of acceptance of marijuana use among the participants in this study can probably be contributed to their age. Not only is marijuana use common among their age group ("Substance," 2011), but studies indicate that drug use is more accepted in youth culture (Manning, 2007; Parker, Williams and Aldridge, 2007). Therefore, the challenges Lavoie (2011) felt have kept portrayals of marijuana in white suburbia out of popular media representations (illegality, association with non-

whites, and its grouping with dangerous drugs) did not seem to be as problematic for my participants in terms of their personal acceptance of marijuana.

Furthermore, the naturalization of marijuana in *Weeds* can be seen in the ways the participants rationalize characters' behaviors on the show. The fact that the participants were able to identify with the ethnic and socioeconomic traits of the characters provided a solid base from which empathy could grow. Some participants were able to sympathize with *Nancy* becoming a drug dealer because they saw her put in a difficult situation when she lost her husband and was faced with providing for her family. The participants did not object to drug use by characters such as *Doug* and *Andy* because these characters were portrayed comically. Boyd (2007) noted that in films that began to normalize drug use, selling is represented in ways that include situations similar to the aforementioned examples. Other participants in this study did not think of the characters' behaviors in terms of acceptableness or not, because the show is fictional. Some also said they recognized that the characters' questionable behaviors contributed to the show's entertainment value. These respondents did not feel that evaluation of the show based on personal or societal ethics was fitting.

The picture this study's participants painted of marijuana users and dealers is different than that which they felt was conventionally found in popular societal opinion or media portrayals. Many of them found the idea of a white suburbanite using or dealing drugs to be realistic. They felt using marijuana could be a normal activity similar to the use of legal drugs such as alcohol. They seemed to be comfortable with this depiction of marijuana users and dealers. On the other hand, they were less comfortable with the traditional description of the drug user as a poor city dweller doing something dangerous

and harmful. Thus, they would probably not view drug use in that context as favorable. Even when the dealer was a white middle class mother, the marijuana dealing that led to dangerous situations or "wrong" actions was frowned upon. Therefore, most of the participants found acceptable only a certain level of interaction with marijuana that stayed within the boundaries of a safe middle-class white activity.

My study contributes to mass communication research by examining audience interpretations of a show that has not been the subject of much scholarly study. As both a controversial and groundbreaking show, *Weeds* also represents a cultural shift. Its creators used a fictional television show to present in a new light a topic not yet widely embraced by society.

According to the participants in this study, as a fictional television show, *Weeds* has the ability to reflect current and possible realities, as well as influence the perspectives of viewers. By interpreting a mostly positive portrayal of marijuana on the show, the respondents felt it could help relax societal views of marijuana. They also observed elements of the show that seemed far-fetched, thus remaining disconnected from the way they perceived reality. In light of the show's fictional nature, the respondents were not always interested in making moral judgments about characters and situations portrayed. Rather, they were sometimes content to evaluate certain elements simply based on entertainment value.

This study confirms that audiences play a vital role in the meaning making process, and incorporate media representations into their worldviews. Joined with the encoded meanings of a television show, audience consumption and meaning production allows even a fictional show to influence viewer perceptions of the world around them.

The *Weeds* viewers I interviewed also found the show to validate some of their opinions and experiences. By accepting or rejecting certain messages on the show, and choosing how much weight these messages should carry, the participants appropriate the messages in various ways, from leaving them in the realm of entertainment, to considering their benefit in affecting social change. Television shows and other media texts are sites where, as the Marxist view would have it, the struggle of a group of people to define meaning in a way that may resist dominant ideas can take place (Storey, 1996). Media research, such as this study on *Weeds* viewers, serves the important purpose of mining and documenting these ever-changing cultural landscapes.

Limitations of the Study and Suggested Research

My study was limited by the homogeneity of the participants. All identified as Caucasian/white, and were students at The University of Georgia at the time of the interviews. Future research could achieve a greater variety of responses by gathering participants from other parts of the country and of different ethnicities, and a wider age range. The participants in this study consisted of *Weeds* viewers who responded to my request for participants. Therefore, my study is more likely to consist of those who had a strong interest in the television show, and may not include people who had seen at least one season, but would not necessarily consider themselves "fans."

Because I used a structured interview style, I believe consistency among responses was a strength of my method. However, the structure of my interviews also limited the depth of insight and variety of information I was able to obtain. Oftentimes, the participant responses led in a direction different from that of the initial question. There were also instances where their responses could have been made richer and deeper

with greater elaboration. Had I deviated from my interview guide by asking the participants further questions based on their responses, or encouraged them to elaborate at certain points during the interviews, I believe I would have gotten a fuller sense of participants' ideas and perceptions as they relate to my research questions. Furthermore, if my questions had focused more heavily on other elements of the show that influenced its portrayal of marijuana use and dealing, I might have uncovered different participant perspectives on marijuana, as these perspectives are likely influenced by the context questions about the drug are placed in. For example, questions surrounding the idea of being a fugitive or the show's treatment of race might result in additional conclusions about marijuana not found in this study. Conducting my interviews by telephone could have been a possible hindrance to the amount and quality of information I was able to gather as well. The respondents may have felt more comfortable talking to me in person. A face-to-face interview may also have provided a better atmosphere for giving more detailed responses.

All of the participants in my study viewed marijuana at least somewhat favorably. I think it would be interesting to interview *Weeds* viewers who do not personally find marijuana use acceptable, as well as those who do, to achieve a wider perspective on the show. Further research on *Weeds* could also include a study of the encoding process by interviewing those involved in the production aspect of the show. A textual analysis could be conducted to examine the ways in which the show's messages are relayed to viewers. Additionally, now that the show has aired its final season, a more well-rounded research project could look at the show in its entirety. An examination of how the show evolved from season to season could be included there. Additional viewer perspectives

could be obtained in light of the recent laws passed in two states legalizing marijuana. A more specific perspective could be mined by including interviews with viewers living in those two states, and comparing their responses to those of viewers that do not live in places where marijuana use is legal.

With new legalization laws being passed, "pot culture" may slowly be coming out of the shadows in the United States, but surely a new perspective on it was introduced to "pop culture" with the advent of the television show *Weeds*. Where drug use was once only occasionally portrayed on television shows, and even then as something shameful, *Weeds* came at the topic with a different philosophy. A drug, marijuana, was brought to the forefront of the subject matter, taken out of the inner city and dropped in suburbia, and made something that could be laughed at. The group of college students I interviewed enjoyed these characteristics of the show. The sense of normalcy *Weeds* brought to the use of marijuana seemed to be in line with the way participants' saw the world they were living in. The messages they took from the show, as well as their own views, were not always pro-marijuana, but the level of acceptance of the drug in both areas was decidedly higher than that found in general societal opinion. The participants in my study found *Weeds* to be groundbreaking entertainment, and its message was one they as viewers were able to play a part in creating.

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANTS

VANCE is an 18-year-old Caucasian male. He is a freshman at The University of Georgia. On average, he watches an average of three hours per week. Most of his television viewing occurs between 11 p.m. and 2 a.m. He regularly follows about four television shows, both through television and online.

DEREK is a 22-year-old white male. He is in his last year of school at The University of Georgia. He watches an average of three hours of television a day, and an average of 25 hours per week. Most of his television viewing occurs between the hours of 5 p.m. and 11 p.m. He regularly follows four television shows.

TRINA is a 22-year-old white female. She is completing her final year at The University of Georgia. She watches one show a day, on average. In a week, she watches an average of 3.5 to four hours of television. Most of her viewing occurs between 8 p.m. and 11 p.m. Currently, she regularly follows three television shows.

PAUL is a 22-year-old Caucasian male. He has completed four years of college at The University of Georgia. He watches between two to three hours of television in a day, and around 20 hours a week. He regularly follows six or seven television shows at a time.

JOHN is a 22-year-old Scotch Irish (white) male. He is a senior at The University of Georgia. He watches two to four hours of television a day, and an average of four hours of television a week. Most of his television viewing occurs at night. He regularly follows 15 television shows.

LISA is a 21-year-old white/Caucasian female. She is a senior at The University of Georgia. She watches two to three hours of television on a week day, and more on the weekends. On a given weekday she watches a little bit of television before school and then a show or two at night. She watches 15 to 20 hours of television in a week. The time of day she watches television varies depending on her schedule, but Lisa is usually watching something at night during primetime. She currently regularly follows 10 to 15 television shows.

ALLIE is a 20-year-old Caucasian female. She is currently in her third year of college at The University of Georgia. She watches an average of an hour of television a day, and seven to eight hours per week. Most of her television viewing occurs at night. She currently follows about five television shows.

BAILEY is a 21-year-old white female. She is a senior at The University of Georgia. She watches an average of an hour of television a day, and five hours or less per week. Most of her television viewing occurs in the afternoon when she is home, or on her lunch break, when she may turn on the television for 30 minutes. She does not regularly follow any television shows, but said she often views Top Chef.

SONYA is a 22-year-old Caucasian female. She is a fifth-year college student at The University of Georgia. She watches an average of three to four hours of television a day, and 30 hours per week. Most of her television viewing occurs at night, starting at about 8 p.m. She regularly follows about four shows.

GAVIN is a 20-year-old Caucasian/white male. He is a third-year student at The University of Georgia. He watches six to eight hours of television in a day, and about 65 to 70 in a week. Most of his television viewing occurs in the evening. He regularly follows three to four television shows.

CHARLES is a 21-year-old Caucasian male. He is a third-year college student at The University of Georgia. He watches two hours of television a day, and 10 to 15 hours per week. Most of his television viewing occurs as soon as he gets up in the morning and around dinner time. He regularly follows three television shows.

MEG is a 21-year-old Caucasian female. She is a fourth-year college student at The University of Georgia. She watches an average of three to four hours of television a day, and 20 hours per week. Most of her television viewing occurs morning and night. She tends to watch the news split with sitcoms in the morning, and content she records at night. She regularly follows about five television shows.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

I agree to take part in a research study titled *Pot Culture in Pop Culture: How college students negotiate their perceptions of drug use through Weeds*, which is being conducted by Grey Pentecost at the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication (336-583-8833) under the direction of Dr. Carolina Acosta-Alzuru at the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication (706-542-5680). My participation is voluntary; I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have information related to me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The purpose of the study is to explore college students' perceptions of Weeds, focusing particularly on the theme of drug use/dealing. Seven men and seven women will participate in the study. On the hit Showtime series Weeds after the sudden death of her husband, Nancy Botwin, the main character of the series, begins dealing marijuana as a way to support her family and continue living the suburban lifestyle they are accustomed to.

The benefits that I may expect from it are:

- To better understand my television viewing habits and why I watch a particular show.
- An opportunity to exercise critical thinking skills.

If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:

- I will be interviewed one time either by phone or in person. The interview will last approximately an hour to an hour and half. I may be requested through e-mail or phone call to provide further clarification of my statements if needed.
- I will be asked to answer a set of questions, many about illegal drug use, and my responses will be audio-taped.

The discomforts or stresses that may be faced during this research are:

- Stress or discomfort with talking about the topic of marijuana use (rare).

Participation entails the following risks:

- Stress or discomfort with the topic of marijuana use (rare).

I may refuse to answer any question that makes me uncomfortable. My identity throughout the process will be kept confidential and substituted with a pseudonym. The only people who will know that I am a research subject are members of the research team. No individually-identifiable information about me, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others without my written permission, unless required by law. My interview will be audio-taped with a digital recorder. The recording device, flash drive with saved files, and list matching my identity with the pseudonym will be kept in a secure, locked location in the researcher's home. The flash drive and list will be destroyed after the thesis is finished. Internet communications are insecure and there is a

limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. However once the materials are received by the researcher, standard confidentiality procedures will be employed. In the event that internet communications are utilized, the information will be printed out on paper and kept in a secure locked location in the researcher's home. Once the information has been obtained the e-mail will be deleted.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be reached by telephone at: 336-583-8833.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	**Signature**	**Date**
Telephone: _____		
Email: _____		
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	**Signature**	**Date**

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. When did you first start watching *Weeds*?
2. How many seasons have you seen?
3. Do you consider *Weeds* a show that you regularly follow?
4. Do you watch the show on DVD or television?
5. Why did you decide to start watching it?
6. Do you use or view other *Weeds* products, such as the Web site or related media/products?
7. Do you usually watch alone or with others?
8. Do you talk about *Weeds* with other people? If yes, do you mostly talk about specific characters? Episodes? Situations?
9. How often does the show come up in your everyday conversation?
10. When you talk about Weeds is it usually a brief mention or more of a discussion?
11. What do you like most about Weeds?
12. What do you dislike?
13. Do you have a favorite character? Who and why?
14. What is your opinion of Nancy and her behavior?
15. Are you sympathetic towards Nancy? If yes, do you feel the need to justify her actions in some way?
16. Do you think Nancy's job as a drug dealer makes her a bad mother? A bad friend?
17. Do you think any of the characters on *Weeds* are stereotypical?
18. How do you think *Weeds* portrays marijuana use/dealing?
    a. How is the life of a drug dealer portrayed on the show?
    b. What do you think about the characters' interactions with drugs on the show?
    c. Do your ideas about the drug use on the show vary depending on the character involved?
    d. Are there certain characters that you see as "good" or "bad," or is it a less clear distinction?
    e. How do you view the drug use/dealing on *Weeds* in comparison to real life?
    f. Do you think the show makes marijuana appear appealing or unappealing in any way?
    g. How does the show's suburban setting influence the portrayal of drugs?
    h. How does the way *Weeds* portrays drug use compare to other TV shows you've seen?
19. Do you feel like *Weeds* is realistic?
20. Do you feel like you can relate to any of the characters in *Weeds*?
21. What are some of the show's themes, in your opinion?

22. What sense of values, if any, do you find on the show?
23. Do you think your interest in this show reflects anything of your own personal identity?
24. What is your opinion on marijuana use?
25. Do you think smoking marijuana is a harmful or beneficial activity?
26. What is your opinion on marijuana dealing?
27. Has the show changed/influenced your opinion on marijuana use or dealing?
28. Do you think *Weeds* is capable of influencing someone's decision on whether or not to use drugs?
29. What is your gender?
30. What is your age?
31. What is your ethnicity?
32. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
33. On average how much television do you watch a day? A week?
34. At what time of day does most of your television viewing occur?
35. Currently, how many shows do you regularly follow?