Getting Back to Niceness: A Content Analysis of Tween Television from the 1990s to Today

Hannah S. Peikes, Colleen E. Russo, & Georgene L. Troseth
Department of Psychology & Human Development, Vanderbilt University

INTRODUCTION

- There are negative effects of watching televised **physical aggression** and/or violence on children's actions and acceptance of violence (Drabman & Thomas, 1974, Paik & Comstock, 1994).
  - The fact that this can happen with physical aggression suggests that the same effect can happen when kids view **verbal aggression**
- Verbal aggression is often seen in popular children's television shows, with **insults** being the most prominent form of verbal aggression displayed. (Glastock, 2008)
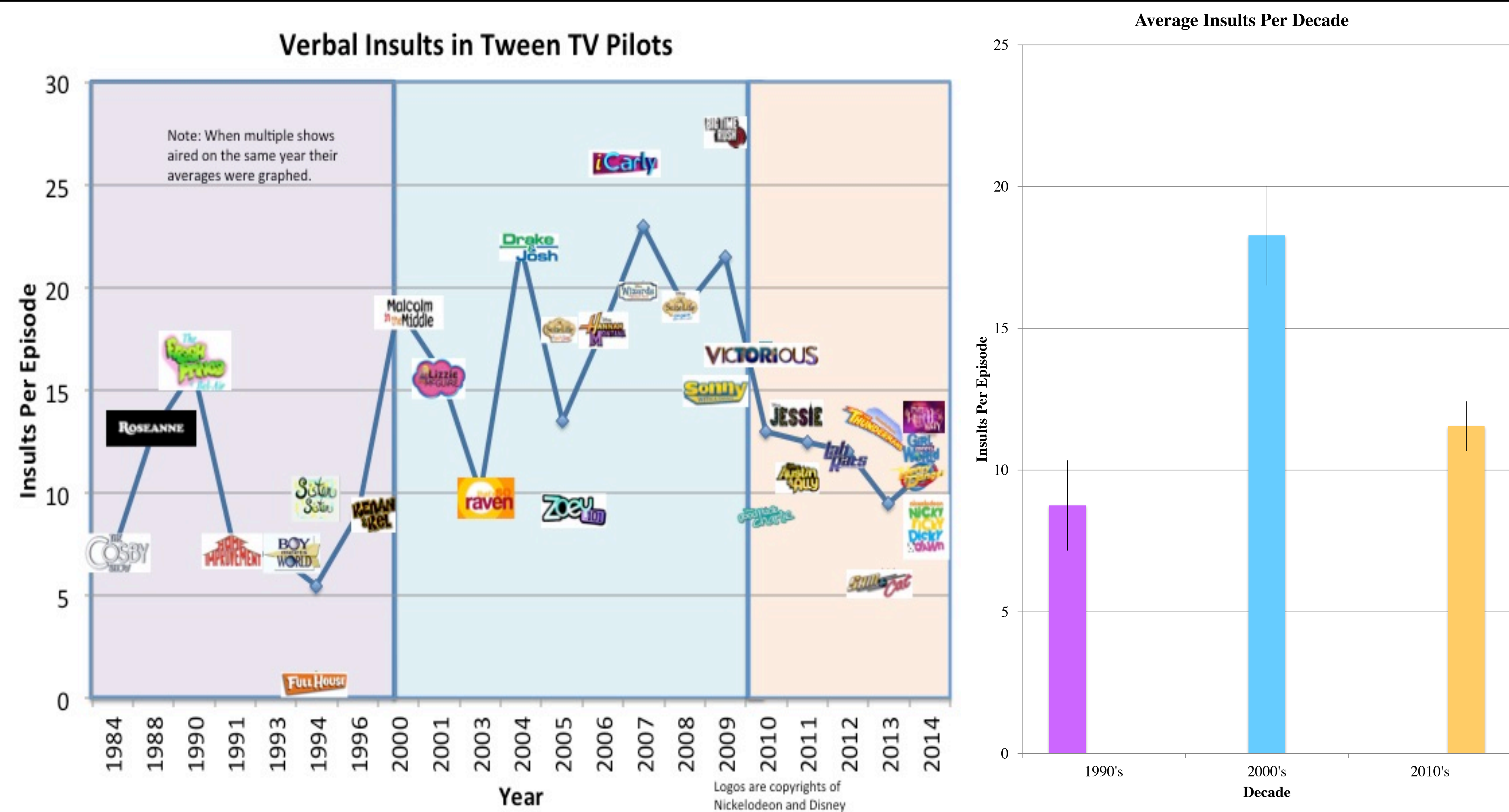- This study looks at changes in the presence of verbal aggression in tween television over time

Study 1 Results: Pilot Episodes

METHODS

- Content analysis of pilot episodes from tween television shows from the 1990s (8 episodes), 2000s (11 episodes), and 2010s (11 episodes), coding all verbal insults
- All the shows were nominees for the *Kids Choice Awards* for Favorite Television Show from 1990 to 2016.
- 25% of shows were double coded, resulting in high intercoder reliability.
- Both coders referred to a premade coding guide to identify verbal insults.

RESULTS

- One way ANOVA revealed an overall group difference for era in the number of verbal insults -- $F(2,27) = 11.2$, $p < .001$.
- Bonferroni post hoc tests revealed significant differences between the middle decade (2000-2009) and both the previous (1984-1999) and most recent (2010-2014) eras.
- There was no significant difference between the earliest and most recent eras, suggesting a return to televised "niceness".

Verbal Insults in Tween TV Pilots

Note: When multiple shows aired on the same year their averages were graphed.

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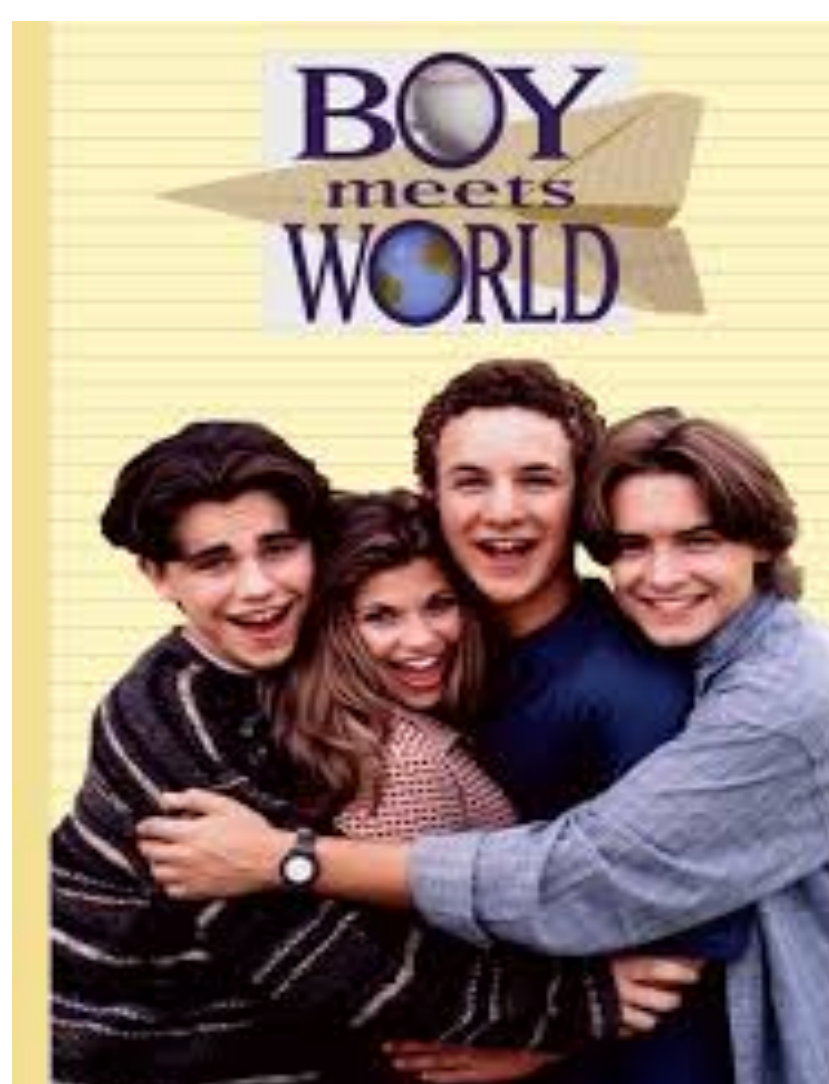

Average Insults Per Decade

Study 2: Boy Meets World vs. Girl Meets World

METHODS

- In-depth content analysis of verbal insults in 1990's-era Disney television show *Boy Meets World* and its 2014 spin-off *Girl Meets World*
- Does *Girl Meets World* truly "get back to niceness" as the pilot episode analysis suggests?

Procedure:
- 40 episodes (20 from each series) were coded.
- 25% of episodes were double coded which resulted in high intercoder reliability
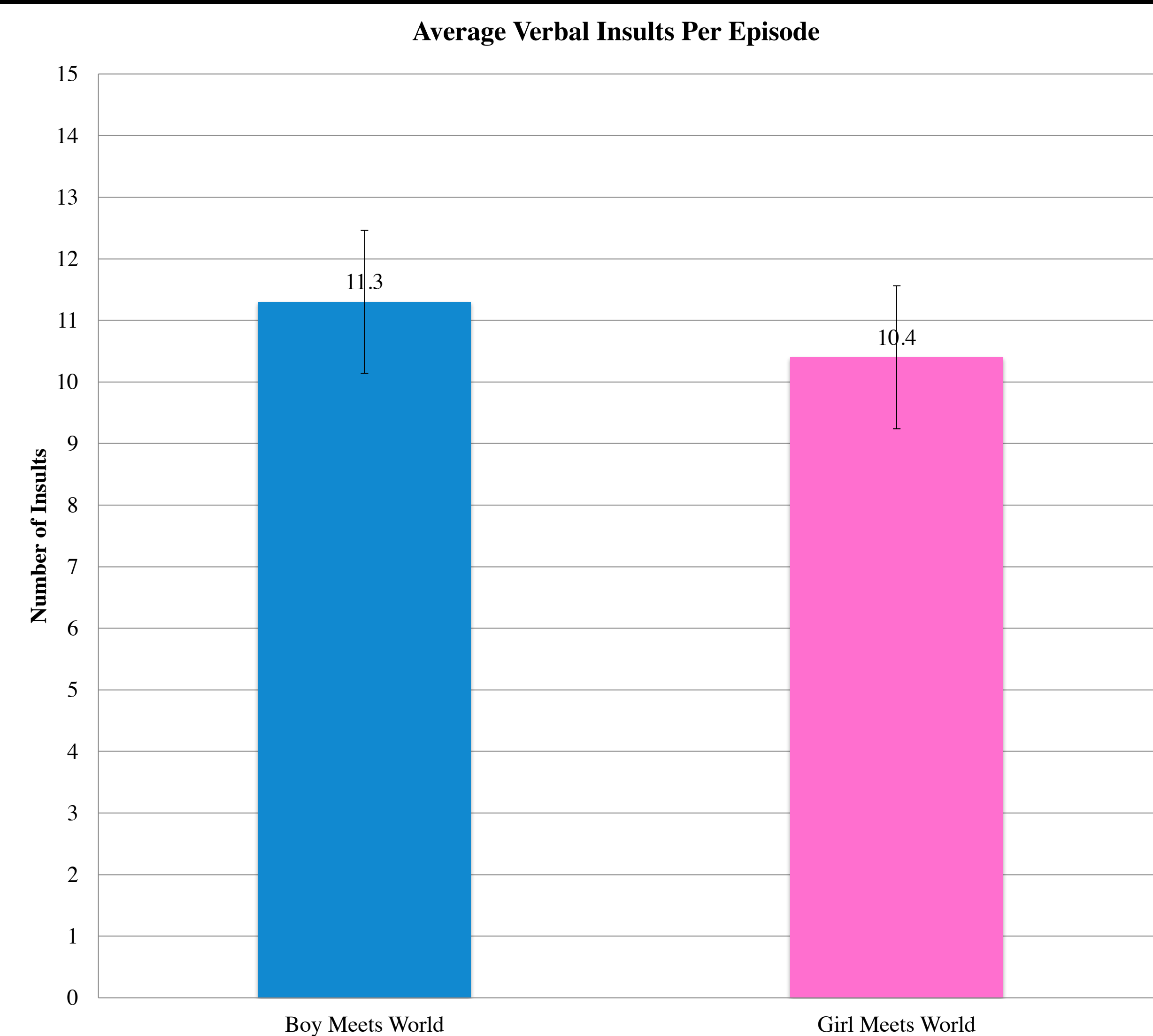- The same coding guide from Study 1 was used in Study 2.

RESULTS

These results mirror the findings of Study 1 with a more in-depth analysis of a show from the 90s and from today, with **no significant difference** in the number of insults on *Girl Meets World* ($M = 10.4$; $SD = 5.16$) compared to *Boy Meets World* ($M = 11.3$; $SD = 5.20$), $t(38) = 0.55$; $p = 0.59$, n.s.

Our results support the show creator's vision:
"Girl Meets World is a new show for a new generation that will be rooted in the same kind of honest, comedic storytelling about coming of age and the importance of family and friendship that made Boy Meets World so popular." --Michael Jacobs (creator of *Boy Meets World & Girl Meets World,* Huffingtonpost.com, 2013)

Average Verbal Insults Per Episode

Discussion

The instances of insults peaked during the years in which tween television was growing as a genre. Since then there has been a decrease in insults.

This downward trend of verbal aggression in tween television shows may be due to two factors:
- Producers are responding to the increasing prevalence of bullying and the research on children imitating negative behaviors on television.

AND/OR
- Tween television viewers are not finding verbal insults to be enjoyable to watch or funny and television producers are responding to that.

The results suggest that tween television shows do not require the amount of superfluous insults witnessed from 2000-2009 to be popular and successful shows with their intended audience. (e.g. *Girl Meets World* is now in its 3rd season)

Future Directions

- Investigate the types of relationships between characters in which verbal insults are the most common.
  - It appears that verbal insults are **more common between friends** than enemies
- Analyze the prevalence of the laugh track after verbal insults

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