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Article:	**Cultivation in the New Media Environment: Theoretical Implications for Future Studies in Pakistan**
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Abstract

George Gerbner's cultivation theory, originated in 1960s as part of cultural indicators project, has generated a plethora of literature about the effects of fictional entertainment programming on audience members' conceptions of social reality. While cultivation research framework continues to attract enthusiasm and draw interest from scholars about widespread cultural effects of exposure to mass-produced messages of entertainment media, a review of the existing literature on cultivation theory shows that the theory may be facing new challenges in the changing media environment. This paper explores the history of cultivation research, discusses its theoretical assumptions and implications, and identifies various opportunities for testing and replicating cultivation hypothesis in the country in the context of the ever-changing media environment.

Keywords: Cultivation theory, cultivation analysis, cultural indicators project, media effects, television effects, new media.

Introduction

The mass-produced stories that we consume as audiences have an impact on our perceptions, attitudes and behaviors toward different aspects of life and the larger social system in which we live our lives (Bryant & Oliver, 2009; Perse & Lambe, 2016). The study of mass media effects on culture and social reality perceptions of people has been the focus of cultivation researchers for several decades and there is still a craving zeal and curiosity among media scholars to investigate, understand and explain the effects of long-term exposure to commercial media-produced cultural messages (Morgan, Shanahan & Signorielli, 2015). Cultivation researchers departed from the early persuasion and propaganda research paradigm of analyzing media effects in terms of some short-term change in viewers' behaviors to long-lasting and ubiquitous effects of long-term exposure to the profit-driven symbolic cultural environment of fictional media on a societal level (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

The inescapable and ritualistic consumption of the commercially-driven stories not only shape our public opinion and social reality perceptions, but also subtly cultivate a worldview that reflects the most common, recurrent and pervasive patterns of the fictional world of dramatized entertainment (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Over the years, many researchers have demonstrated the cultivation effect in a variety of areas, with the earliest studies exploring how exposure to television programs contributed to audience members' conceptions of violence and the recent studies expanding to investigate topics such as religious and political orientations, sex and gender roles, occupational and minority-role stereotypes, environmental attitudes, perceptions about science, the family, occupations, and numerous others, (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010).

While there is still a curiosity among researchers in understanding the widespread cultural effects of long-term exposure to mass media and there continues to be a considerable amount of new studies grounded in the assumptions of cultivation theory, the critical question

now is whether the traditional cultivation analysis paradigm still has relevancy in today's new media environment, which may be posing a challenge to cultivation's assumptions, premises and procedures. In particular, the current and future paradigmatic status of cultivation theory and its macro-level perspective may appear to be less relevant due to the rise of fragmented audiences (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012) and interpersonal communication in an era of convergence among different technologies and cultural forms (Morgan et al., 2015).

In the following pages, we will briefly discuss the cultural indicators (CI) project, outline its core theoretical assumptions, and point out research opportunities in cultivation tradition in context of the new media environment and Pakistani society.

Holistic Overview of Cultivation Effects Theory

Cultivation analysis is one component of the decades-long research program called "cultural indicators," or CI program, which was developed by George Gerbner and his colleagues in 1960s (Romer, Jamieson, Bleakley & Jamieson, 2014) as a complement to the more common idea of an economic or social indicator, a kind of barometer of important cultural issues (Gerbner, 1969, 1970). The CI program of research is based on a three-pronged research framework: (1) the institutional process analysis prong, which looks into organizational structures of media institutions, policy formation, decisions-making considerations and processes that produce cultural messages; (2) the message system analysis prong, which inquires into broad structures and consistent patterns in mass-produced messages in the aggregate, as opposed to in any particular program or genre; and (3) the cultivation analysis prong, which examines the cultural effects of fictional entertainment programming on viewers (Gerbner, 1970; Morgan, Shanahan & Signorielli, 2016; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

Cultivation assumes that television, as a medium, is different from other mass media given its penetration and reach in the society and its power to pervade the cultural

environment of the home and subtly shape how people conceive social reality over time (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1980). This assumption stems from Gerbner and his colleagues' view that television has become the cultural arm of modern societies, which receive most of the stories most of the time from this new message delivery system, (Gerbner et al., 1980).

The synthetic environment so created by the fictional world of the dramatized entertainment on television, including plays, series, reality shows, game shows, movies, cartoons, comedies and commercials, constructs and cultivates social reality perceptions, values, beliefs and attitudes of audience members. As such, television functions as an agent of the established social order that constructs, maintains and propagates the dominant cultural ideology and values through its recurring and ritualized messages and symbols, (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1977).

The main proposition of the theory states that the more time audience members spend living in the dramatic world of television, the more likely their social reality beliefs will be compatible with fictional realities of television. In other words, cultivation theory suggests that the time people spend in the fictional world of dramatized entertainment and the experiences they gain from mass-produced fictional stories would influence their real-life experiences and develop and maintain their social perceptions and beliefs (Shrum & Bischak, 2001).

Since its inception in the 1960s, cultivation theory produced a plethora of literature and earned a spot in one of three most-cited theories in the mass communication research from 1956 to 2000 (Bryant & Miron, 2004), which shows health, strength and applicability of cultivation analysis. Since 2000, over 125 studies relevant to cultivation have been published, which have added value to the existing body of mass media knowledge while indicating a promising future (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010).

Cultivation and New Media Environment

The emergence of new media technologies, the abundance of television channels and the apparent diversity of television programs has again revived the debate about the relevance of cultivation theory as a viable research approach to studying television and its impact on audience members' social reality perceptions, worldviews and beliefs. The theory has been criticized since 1980s when the emergence of cable channels and VCRs challenged the central position of television as the biggest storyteller in the society.

For example, Secunda (1990) saw the emergence and adoption of VCRs as a threat to the dominance of big networks in America and suggested that VCRs have ended the era of "watching TV by the clock," while some critics opined that cultivation research may no longer be applicable in its original theoretical assumptions, particularly the notion of ritualistic television viewing, as the spread of cable and VCRs was viewed as bringing more content producers and choices.

Gerbner's assumptions, however, remained valid as subsequent studies found more evidence for cultivation (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). For instance, Morgan and Rothschild (1983) found even stronger relationships between amount of television exposure and sex-role stereotypes among those who had cable in their homes. Likewise, Morgan et al. (1990) found that VCRs actually amplified the cultivation effects by allowing heavy viewers to watch and consume "more of the same" content. Dobrow (1990) found that heavy television viewers used the VCR technology to extend their viewing habits, and lighter viewers, on the other hand, became even more selective their consumption of programming. Similarly, some scholars found a strong association between heavy viewers of videotaped movies and interpersonal mistrust as compared to those who watched less (Perse, Ferguson & McLeod, 1994).

In short, cable and the VCR technologies offered heavy viewers with higher doses of formulaic fictional entertainment programming, which actually intensified versions of traditional network fare. This led Gerbner and his associates to argue that new technologies should mainly be considered as new "delivery vehicles" for "more of the same" content, especially for heavy viewers (Morgan et al., 2015).

Having survived the challenges and threats posed by cable and VCR technologies, the theory now faces challenges from digital media technologies, which are not only challenging Gerbner and his colleagues' assumptions of television, but also questioning the underpinnings, premises and procedures of the theory and its applicability in this ever-changing and ever-evolving media environment. The big question is whether the theory is still relevant in an era that brings more interactive and selective viewing devices and provides more channels and programming choices to more fragmented audiences (Napoli, 2010).

While new media platforms and the availability of more and more television channels appear to offer greater diversity in content and flexibility in consuming dramatized entertainment, the underlying themes, patterns, common messages and lessons have not changed and there is even more television than ever before and even more violence, occupational prevalence and distortion of social realities. Because cultivation is more concerned about aggregate messages, it may be even more critical to analyze the impact of such messages in a time of more fragmentation and less collective consciousness (Dilliplane, Goldman & Mutz, 2013; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Morgan, Shanahan & Signorielli, 2014; Morgan et al., 2015).

More Television than Ever Before

Although new media technologies and viewing platforms such as Netflix, YouTube, Hulu and TiVo etc. have changed the way mass-produced stories are received and consumed by audience members, Morgan et al. (2015, p. 18) argue that important aspects of fictional

entertainment programming remain largely unchanged and that there appears to be "more TV than ever before." The mass media-produced stories continue to be formulaic, commercial and homogeneous in many aspects, regardless of the fact whether they are consumed in an interactive, selective, or virtual environment.

It is also important to note Gerbner's original conception of television. Gerbner and his team viewed television as a system in which the overall themes, patterns and images were of more interest from the cultivation research tradition than individual programs and/or programming decisions by some big networks (Gerbner, 1998). Gerbner conceptualized television as the dominant cultural force that produces a limited range of stories for diverse audiences and that shapes their social reality perceptions and worldviews, as opposed to focusing on analyzing immediate effects of television exposure on audiences (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1986). Putting this into context, television continues to hold its central position as the dominant storyteller in today's societies and audience members continue to spend on average 7 to 10 hours a week watching television dramatic programming, in spite of all of the technological changes in the media environment.

However, the changing media landscape may be posing more challenges to theoretical assumptions of cultivation, especially the idea of mainstreaming, as new media platforms appear to be offering more diversity of channels and content, which may be giving rise to fragmentation of audiences. As such, cultivation scholars emphasized the need for revising existing theoretical models to "consider the ways in which our new social media environments (and the shifting communities they give rise to) may intersect with and either bolster or short-circuit the cultivation process," (Morgan et al., 2015, p. 19).

Some 15 years ago, Shanahan and Morgan predicted that "New media . . . do present measurement challenges for cultivation research" (1999, p. 218). At present, there are multiple platforms and devices that allow viewers to watch television. Viewers can now

stream content on their Internet-connected Smart TV or on their television set through a streaming media device, view content with both live and time-shifted options such as DVRs, as well as access content on demand from cable, Telco, and other free streaming services such as YouTube and Hulu and subscription video on demand service such as Netflix and Hulu Plus, using their smartphones, televisions, and computers (Prince, 2018a).

This abundance of television viewing devices and platforms does not mean that the new technologies are replacing traditional television. Instead, these new ways of consuming television content are supplementing traditional television and offering more and more viewing options to consumers. Research shows that the traditional way of consuming television content is still the most popular form of viewing and that consumers still devote their most of their free time to watching entertainment programming. For example, an adult in the United States spends an average of nearly a week out of every month (more than 149 hours per month) watching traditional live television, and another 15 hours on average watching time-shifted content (Nielsen, 2016). The fact that viewing dramatized entertainment still consumes so much of our time underlines the significance of understanding the continuing cultural dominance of television (Prince, 2018a).

Cultivation Research in Pakistan

Mass media in Pakistan are often blamed for having an impact on Islamic values and norms due to their presumed incompatible and incongruent content (Khan, Siraj & Soomro, 1999). However, not too many media scholars have formally attempted to document the effects of mass-produced content of foreign and local entertainment channels on audience members' social reality perceptions, attitudes and beliefs under a social scientific paradigm, i.e., the cultivation research tradition. In the absence of scientifically-documented evidence, it is still not clear what type of cultural values and ideological identity entertainment media are cultivating in the Pakistani society and to what extent those mass media-produced cultural

and ideological values are congruent or incongruent with the objectives of Islamic ideology. Without theoretically-grounded knowledge, any effort to develop and prescribe a response strategy (Khan, Iqbal, Gazzaz & Ahrari, 2012) to immune and safeguard the indigenous culture against the hegemonic cultural messages of entertainment media would be a shot in the dark.

Elsewhere in the world, mass media scholars applied various research perspectives, including Cultural Indicators and cultivation effects theory, to examine the impact of fictional entertainment programming on cultural norms and values of the society (Morgan & Shanahan, 1997). Despite its ubiquity, robust generalization, theoretical and operational significance, and considerable volumes of findings, cultivation has not yet been fully applied and tested by media scholars in Pakistan – a predominantly Muslim country (Alavi, 1988), which came into existence on the basis of Islamic ideology and which draws its cultural references from the same ideology (Ahmed, 1989). A presumptive profile of domestic and foreign media entertainment programming shows that there is an apparent absence of references to the broad Islamic ideology and spiritual matters, which may be having wide-ranging implications on standard cultural practices, outlooks and values of the society, as well as on audience members' general assumptions about social reality and their specific values and beliefs and ideologies (Khan et al., 2012).

A review of most studies labeled as "cultivation" by Pakistani scholars indicates a poor grasp of theoretical assumptions and research procedures of cultivation analysis. As such, they fail to make any contribution to the body of knowledge on media effects and more precisely on cultivation effects (Khan, Zafar & Abbasi, 1998). It is important to note that Pakistan has seen a rapid growth of media channels and mass media institutions in the past two decades (Rasul & McDowell, 2012; Rasul & Proffitt, 2013). However, there has not been a single message systems analysis study that applied the cultivation research tradition to

document the aggregate patterns, themes and images of dramatic content produced by media channels. Also missing is scientific evidence for cultivation effects in the country, as most studies under the rubric of cultivation indicate misrepresentation and misunderstanding of cultivation analysis on part of the researchers on the following theoretical underpinnings:

- Contrary to what Pakistani scholars believe, cultivation is not about examining the effects of exposure to any specific genre and/or program type. Instead, cultivation is about examining the effects of overall message system on audience members' conceptions of social reality (Morgan et al., 2016).

- Cultivation is not about studying short-term and direct effects of mass-produced messages on small groups of audience members. Instead, cultivation investigates long-term effects of exposure to television messages on broad belief structures of large groups of viewers (Gerbner et al., 1986).

- Cultivation research does not focus on the effects of some political ad campaign or newscast on voters' perceptions and assumptions about a political figure. Nor does cultivation study the impact of commercials on consumers' buying behaviors.

- The theory is not about examining the relationship between children's exposure to violent programming and their aggressive behaviors. Nor does it study the relationships between exposure to foreign dramas and marriage ceremonies, food habits, language and dressing etc.

- Cultivation is not about asking audience members at the start of the questionnaire to indicate how many shows they watch regularly or what type of programs or channels they like to watch. Instead, Cultivation's research tradition has its own method of measuring exposure to dramatic content by asking audience members to indicate the average number of hours in a day they spend watching dramatic programming (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

The review also suggest weaknesses and shortcomings in terms of conceptual, operational, theoretical and methodological footings, as local mass media researchers do not pay much attention to applying standard research procedures and methods to formulate and identify broad research problems that have real social significance (Khan et al., 1998). As a result, those studies fall short of the established standard to make any independent contributions to the existing body of knowledge on media effects.

In sum, quantitative research inquiries labeled as cultivation in Pakistan suffer from numerous problems ranging from theoretical misunderstandings and misrepresentations to conceptual, operational, methodological and other technical issues. Barring a few exceptions, most media effects studies in Pakistan have not generated any scientific body of knowledge in the field.

Theoretical Implications for Future Studies

In context of the forgoing review and discussion, the cultivation research tradition offers countless opportunities on all three prongs of cultivation theory to mass communication researchers in Pakistan. Foremost, it is important to test and replicate cultivation theory's propositions in an absolutely different socio-cultural landscape and media setup like Pakistan. On the theoretical front, research opportunities exist for testing some of theoretical assumptions in the new media environment. In this regard, new independent variables may be introduced to measure television exposure in the changing media environment in which audience members spend time watching dramatic programming on different devices and platforms (Prince, 2018b), as opposed to traditional television sets; and as well as to measure social media exposure to incorporate moderating role of virtual interactions in cultivation analysis. There may also be a need to introduce new dependent variables to add new dimensions to cultivation analysis in context of apparent diversity in media content, as well as to find more evidence for second-order cultivation effects.

The major research areas of interest on the institutional analysis prong may be those investigating the commercial and institutional structure of the media industry in Pakistan and how their corporate objectives, commercial interests, institutional needs and market factors influence the production and distribution of content which, in turn, defines worldviews of audience members and shapes their cultural norms, values, beliefs and ideological identity. On a broad level, it is important to investigate ownership structure of different media organizations in the country, as well as to explore whether the multiplication of channels in the local media industry brings diversity of content for audience members. If not, what are the factors that result to the production of more of the same content, which may be polluting the indigenous cultural environment and ripping apart the ideological identity of audience members.

On the message system analysis prong, there is an urgent need to conduct studies that systematically analyze the content of the mass-produced stories to document the recurring and pervasive aggregate patterns of messages, topics, lessons, themes and images that populate the world of television (Gerbner, 1969, 1985); to find out the characters who dominate television screens; to investigate the representation or misrepresentation of ethnic, religious and minority groups or occupational roles (DeFleur, 1964; Mastro & Robinson, 2000; Matabane, 1988); and to investigate the portrayal of women and gender roles in dramatic programming (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014; Lauzen, Dozier & Horan, 2008; Sink & Mastro, 2017).

Finally, some of the broad research questions that may guide cultivation effects studies include what role do commercial media systems play in creating, promoting, mending and/or maintaining cultural identity of audience members in Pakistani society? What cultural and ideological values do mass media cultivate and to what extent are those cultural and ideological values congruent or incongruent to the underpinnings of the Islamic ideology? Do

local media systems and foreign media systems infuse different cultural identities in Pakistani society? And to what extent are mass media systems responsible for challenges faced by Pakistani society, including corruption, moral crisis/dilemmas, rising divorce rate, decline of social capital, relative deprivation, pursuit of materialistic possessions, ideological, religious, political and ethnic polarization, extremism, fragile democracy and a weak support for the political system, among many other topics (Khan et al., 1999; 1998).

Conclusion

The emergence of new media technologies and the proliferation of new media platforms may be altering traditional television viewing patterns and transforming the way audience members spend time in the fictional world of dramatized entertainment and consume cultural messages. At the same time, the market place of ideas and opinions created by social networking sites may be giving rise to further fragmentation of audiences which, in turn, may be eroding commonality of cultural outlook and challenging cultivation's idea of mainstreaming. As such, there is a need to test cultivation effects theory's applicability in this changing media environment, which may be having greater implications on the current and future paradigmatic status of cultivation and its macro-level conceptions (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Morgan et al., 2014, 2015).

While scholars can quibble about how to conceptualize television in a radically changed social and media structure, one thing is certain that Gerbner's basic principle of "new state religion" still holds, as people watch stories on screens even more now than they ever did, (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Morgan et al., 2015). As such, it is even more important and urgent to pay attention to the aggregate patterns of media messages and identify common themes, images and lessons, especially in Pakistan, in view of the presumed profile of dramatic entertainment programming and its potential impact on the cultural and ideological identity of audience members. While the new media environment may appear to be offering

audience a platform to become producer, distributor, and consumer of messages, Morgan and Shanahan believe that such a scenario seems "far-fetched," and that "it's safe to say that television will remain our primary cultural storyteller for some time to come" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010).

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