

Course Name: Communication Theories-II

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Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory (aka cultivation hypothesis, cultivation analysis) was an a theory composed originally by G. Gerbner and later expanded upon by Gerbner & Gross (1976 – Living with television: The violence profile. Journal of Communication, 26, 76.), they began research in the mid-1960s endeavoring to study media effects, specifically whether watching television influences the audiences idea and perception of everyday life, and if so, how. Cultivation theory states that high frequency viewers of television are more susceptible to media messages and the belief that they are real and valid. Heavy viewers are exposed to more violence and therefore are affected by the Mean World Syndrome, the belief that the world is a far worse and dangerous place then it actually is.

Cultivation research is one that studies media effects (in my opinion one of the most controversial areas of media research). Cultivation theorists posit that television viewing can have long-term effects that gradually affect the audience. Their primary focus falls on the effects of viewing in the attitudes of the viewer as opposed to created behavior.

Heavy viewers of TV are thought to be ‘cultivating’ attitudes that seem to believe that the world created by television is an accurate depiction of the real world. The theory suggests that prolonged watching of television can tend to induce a certain paradigm about violence in the world.

Hypothesis

The theory postulates that watching television frequently influences an individual to develop certain ideas of reality or beliefs and assumptions about life that mirror the most consistent or universal values that are showcased on television. The more a person watches television, the more likely he is to be influenced by what he watches when compared to others who watch less but share other similar demographic characteristics.

Cultivation Theory

The theory argues that the media generally presents an image of the world that does not reflect reality. Television images are an exaggeration or fantasy of what actually exists. There is a disproportionate number of handsome gentlemen, beautiful women, crime, wealth and violence. As a result, people end up perceiving the real world in a distorted manner and viewing actuality through a ‘television perspective.’

Television offers a plethora of ideas and conceptions on a variety of social and cultural dynamics like race, gender, sexuality, etc. Over a period of time, a fixed image of various groups of people is formed and viewers start to absorb these ideas which they then use as a map to navigate through life. This constant exposure to the media content cultivates specific values, beliefs, attitudes and desires in people. These newly preconceived notions shape their perception of the world and they ultimately influence how others perceive them. People, therefore, end up unconsciously shaping their thought processes and behaviour based on what they consume. In today's world, people are increasingly starting to depend on television more than any other medium to understand the intricate web of the norms, values and mindset of the society in which they live.

Cultivation theory research views television as a system of messages and tries to understand its function and consequences on an audience. These messages complement one another and are organic and coherent in nature. Cultivation analysis focuses on the impact of long term cumulative exposure to television.

Origin

Gerbner proposed that over time, repeated exposure to media cultivated the belief that the messages conveyed by the media apply to the real world. As people's perceptions are shaped by media exposure, their beliefs, values, and attitudes are shaped as well.

When Gerbner originally conceived of cultivation theory, it was part of a broader "[cultural indicators](#)" project. The project pointed to three areas of analysis: institutional process analysis, which explored how media messages are formulated and distributed; message system analysis, which explored what those messages conveyed as a whole; and cultivation analysis, which explored how media messages impact the way the consumers of media messages perceive the real world. While all three components are linked, it is cultivation analysis that was and continues to be most widely researched by scholars.

Gerbner's studies were specifically dedicated to television's impact on viewers. Gerbner believed that television was the dominant storytelling media in society. His [focus on television](#) rose out of several assumptions about the medium. Gerbner saw television as a resource for the most broadly shared messages and information in history. Even as channel options and delivery systems expanded, Gerbner insisted that the contents of television concentrated into a consistent set of messages. He proposed that television restricts choice because, as a mass medium, television must appeal to large, diverse audiences. Thus, even as choices of programming proliferate, the pattern of messages remains the same. As a result, television will most likely cultivate similar perceptions of reality for very different people.

As his assumptions about television indicate, Gerbner wasn't interested in the impact of any one message or individual viewers' perceptions of those messages. He wanted to understand how the [broad pattern of television messages](#) impact public knowledge and influence collective perceptions.

Features of the Theory

- People believe whatever is shown in media unconsciously.
- Media is used to maintain status quo.
- Media influences attitudes, beliefs, meanings and perception in a society.
- Media has the most persuasive power in society.
- Television has long-term indirect but significant effects.
- Media shapes what people think.
- Mean World Syndrome is the result of televisions' portrayal of violence.

Mean World Syndrome

Gerbner's original focus was on the influence of television violence on viewers. Media effects researchers often study the ways media violence impact aggressive behavior, but Gerbner and his colleagues had a different concern. They suggested that people who viewed a great deal of television became fearful of the world, believing that crime and victimization were rampant.

[Research showed](#) that lighter television viewers were more trusting and saw the world as less selfish and dangerous than heavy television viewers. This phenomenon is called the "mean world syndrome."

Mainstreaming and Resonance

As cultivation theory became more established, Gerbner and his colleagues refined it to better explain the influence of media by adding the ideas of [mainstreaming and resonance](#) in the 1970s. Mainstreaming happens when heavy television viewers who would otherwise hold very different views develop a [homogenous](#) view of the world. In other words, the attitudes of these divergent viewers all share a common, mainstream perspective that they cultivated through frequent exposure to the same television messages.

[Resonance](#) occurs when a media message is especially noteworthy to an individual because it somehow coincides with a viewers' lived experience. This provides a double dose of the message conveyed on television. For example, television messages about violence are likely to be especially resonant to an individual who lives in a city with a [high crime rate](#). Between the

television message and the real-life crime rate, cultivation effects will be amplified, enhancing the belief that the world is a mean and scary place.

Criticism

- The theory is criticized for being oversimplified as social relationships are complex.
- The theory focuses on television only and have not considered effects of other media and human experiences.
- There is no mention of social situations affecting media portrayal of images.
- More fearful people can be watching more television and not the opposite.
- Other studies have shown that change in variables like age, location, education and sex could have removed cultivation effects.
- People rarely compare others in social situations with people on television.
- It is also criticized on being entirely about the US and not getting similar results in Britain.
- Most people do not believe what they see on television.
- Content and choice of programs also change cultivation in people