

A Literature Review on Cultivation Theory: How Media Consumption of Content Related to Violence, Crime, and Cultural Stereotypes Affects Viewers' Attitudes and Beliefs

Denrique Preudhomme, M.A.

writer@denrique.com

Cultivation theory investigates the relationships between viewers' exposure to television and their beliefs and attitudes about the world. Professor George Gerbner developed the theory for a cultural indicators project at the Annenberg School for Communication in the late 1960s (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Shanahan, 2009). The project documented "levels of violence and other socially relevant information (such as portrayals of women and minorities)" (Shanahan, 2009, p. 2). When the project began to suggest that television programming was overtly and overly violent, Gerbner used cultivation theory "to ascertain whether viewing contributed in any way to viewers' conceptions and beliefs about the world" (Shanahan, 2009, p. 2). Cultivation theory suggests that the media, primarily television, "may exert an incremental influence over time that shapes an individual's perspective of the world to match the symbolic representations of the medium" (Behm-Morawitz & Ta, 2014, p. 2). This theory posits that heavy television and media viewing cultivates a perception of the world that is often more violent and scarier than is warranted. For example, extended media intake of violence in the Middle East makes us believe that all people of Middle Eastern culture are violent. Similarly, excessive media images of Arab Muslims engaging in violent and terrorist acts make us believe all people of Muslim or Middle Eastern culture are terrorists (Leiva & Bright, 2015).

The advent of digital media has increased the need for cultivation analysis, since, in modern culture, most people get much of their information in a mediated fashion (e.g., social media, podcasts, video games, and movie streaming platforms) versus through direct experiences. This is especially the case regarding violence, according to cultivation theory. According to Media Psychologist Cynthia Vinney, "cultivation theory has become one of the most cited theories in research on media, a trend that seems bound to continue for the foreseeable future" (Vinney, 2022, para. 9). Vinney (2022) argues that extended in-take of television not just depicts the world as a more violent place but also "shows a disproportionate number of people employed as lawyers, doctors, and police officers, and overrepresents wealth and affluence" (Vinney, 2022, para. 7).

This paper examines research studies on cultivation theory to understand how perceptions of reality are adopted due to messages that are cultivated in television and news media. Communication practitioners and journalists can benefit from the results of this brief to understand how the media combined with cultivation theory concepts can create inaccurate views about the world that are potential contributors to media influence on audiences.

Literature Review

This paper reviews the literature of four studies on cultivation theory that examine how television and media cultivate perceptions of the real world and influence audiences.

Research on Cultivation Theory in the Media

Research suggests that broadcasters cultivate race perceptions of major league sports players. Arth and Billings (2019) conducted a study to analyze whether the way major league baseball newscasters describe players shaped perceptions of athletes' race. A total of 30 major league newscast games were analyzed over three seasons (Arth & Billings, 2019). The analysis examined descriptors (e.g., adjectives, adverbs, adjectival phrases, or adverbial phrases) used by national newscasters to describe players based on their ethnicity (i.e., Black, White, Hispanic, or Asian). The results show that newscasters' commentary significantly differed in terms of how they described players of different ethnicities (Arth & Billings, 2019). Newscasters were more likely to discuss White players in terms of their speed and intelligence, while discussions for non-White players were significantly underrated (Arth & Billings, 2019), cultivating the perception that non-White players were athletically inferior to their counterparts in major league baseball. However, future research on local broadcasting versus national broadcasting should examine athlete descriptors used for differences between ethnicities, as descriptors and perceptions may differ at both local and national levels (Arth & Billings, 2019).

Research in cultivation theory shows that a high intake of crime-based media results in increased fear of crime. Dolliver et al. (2018) conducted a study to examine the direct and indirect effects of media viewing, fear of crime, and support of criminal justice policies (punitive and defensive). A total of 1,311 U.S. citizens over the age of 18 were selected from a database (Dolliver et al., 2018). Crime-related media consumption was constructed from a variety of local and national newspapers, and TV news programs (i.e., CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News). Participants were asked questions about the type of media they watch, how many times per week they spent watching each type of media, how they accessed the media, and what are their

feelings/reactions to each crime-related story. Participants were also “asked to identify how strongly they supported or opposed four criminal justice policies on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 – *strongly opposed*, 3 - *neutral*, and 5 - *strongly support*): three-strikes, death penalty, stand your ground, and open carry” (Dolliver et al., 2018, p. 406). The results show that most participants who spent a significant amount of time watching crime-related media not only reported fear of crime, but also supported the four criminal justice policies (Dolliver et al., 2018). The finding also reveals that fear of crime amplifies media consumption and support for criminal justice policies (Dolliver et al., 2018). A limitation of this study is the absence of a cross-sectional analysis to understand whether individuals who experience a greater fear of crime are predisposed to consume more violent media (Dolliver et al., 2018). A longitudinal design could also help future researchers evaluate the causal nature of the relationships between consumption, fear, and support of the four criminal justice policies (Dolliver et al., 2018).

Studies show a direct correlation between exposure to media influence and attitudes toward immigration. Seate and Mastro (2016) conducted a study to test how threatening news stories on immigration influence viewers. A total of 445 participants at a large public university in the United States close to the Mexico border participated in the study (88% White, 4.8% Asian, 4.8% Black, and 2.4% Other) (Seate & Mastro, 2016). Since the study was related to immigration on the United States-Mexico border, Hispanics and non-U.S. citizens were excluded from the study. Participants were asked to watch news segments containing immigration news reports that were manipulated (unbeknownst to participants) using fake news anchors (actors) and complete a questionnaire. The results showed that a significant number of participants who were exposed to immigration threats in the news reported high levels of anxiety toward undocumented immigrants (Seate & Mastro, 2016), suggesting that the media cultivates audiences’ attitudes toward immigration and undocumented immigrants. However, since the sample size consisted of 88% White, this could have affected the outcome of the study. Researchers should consider a sample size that consists of more minorities. More racially ethnic minority participants could produce a statistically different outcome (Seate & Mastro, 2016).

Studies suggest that TV audiences adopt inaccurate ideas about reality based on extended exposure to homogenous messages on topics such as violence, crime, and culture. Pollock et al. (2022) conducted a study to assess whether extended intake of crime-related media would influence an individual’s decision to select a career in law enforcement. A sample size of 863

individuals across the United States, 18 years of age or older, and U.S. citizens, were surveyed (Pollock et al., 2022). Respondents were asked to select the reason they did not work in American law enforcement if they had an interest, why they did or did not have an interest if they enjoyed watching or listening to crime-related media (e.g., TV shows, movies), their gender, race, and region they reside in the United States (e.g., Northeast, Southeast, Midwest) (Pollock et al., 2022). The results show that living in the Southwest, exposure and repetitive consumption of crime-related media, and race were statistically significant predictors of seeking a career in law enforcement (Pollock et al., 2022). Based on individual feedback, the findings suggest that White individuals were more cautious about joining the police service because they believed people were likely to react to them with distrust based on media coverage of White police officers using excessive force against non-White citizens, such as the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man who died as a result of a White police officer kneeling on his neck for almost nine minutes (Pollock et al., 2022), suggesting that perceptions of reality are adopted due to extended in-take of cultivated media messages that influence audiences' decisions. However, Pollock et al. (2022) believe that the financial income bracket of participants may have influenced the result, as participants in higher income brackets may not be inclined to take an online survey for a nominal fee to participate in the study and could have differing views from those in a lower income bracket. Pollock et al. (2022) also believe that a larger sample size would make it possible to observe more variables and stratify the data state-by-state, as well as examine the reaction of subgroups (i.e., disabled, or gay or lesbian individuals).

Conclusion

This literature review found that media consumption of content related to violence, crime, and cultural stereotypes affects viewers' attitudes and beliefs. Cultivation analysis shows how the media influences audiences' perception of the world through symbolic representation cultivated in media messages. Cultivated media messages influence audiences and trigger reactions, because individuals tend to use media coverage as a cognitive tool to make sense of complex social issues (Shih et al., 2008). Although cultivation analysis was developed in the 1970s, cultivation effects among people who spend extended periods watching television, remained strong over the decades, despite the immense change in the television landscape and technology industry (Hermann et al., 2021). Hermann et al. (2021) argue that compared to earlier media, the

stories on television in older media programming were consumed in a more ritualistic and non-selective fashion.

Communication practitioners can use this information to understand how exposure to media, over time, cultivates audience perceptions of reality, the types of cultivated messages (e.g., violence, crime, cultural stereotypes), and the types of effects (e.g., fear, anxiety) cultivated media messages could have on viewers. This information can also be used to support media literacy by providing audiences with credible information to share across digital and social media platforms on how the media contributes to viewers' adoption of inaccurate perceptions of the real world. Additional cultivation analysis will help communication practitioners to further understand whether people who adopt inaccurate perceptions of reality are more predisposed to the consumption of media that shape drastic perceptions of the world.

References

- Arth, Z. W., & Billings, A. C. (2019). Touching racialized bases: Ethnicity in major league baseball broadcasts at the local and national levels. *Howard Journal of Communication*, 30(3), 230–248. doi:10.1080/10646175.2018.1466746
- Behm-Morawitz, E., & Ta, D. (2014). Cultivating virtual stereotypes?: The impact of video game play on racial/ethnic stereotypes. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 25, 1-15. doi:10.1080/10646175.2013.835600
- Davis, W. M., & Riles, J. M. (2022). Grappling with race: The performance of identity in prizefighting promotion. *Communication & Sport*, 10(6), 1092–1112. doi:10.1177/2167479520950767
- Dolliver, M. J., Kenney, J. L., Reid, L. W., & Prohaska, A. (2018). Examining the relationship between media consumption, fear of crime, and support for controversial criminal justice policies using a nationally representative sample. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 34(4), 399-420. doi:10.1177/1043986218787734
- Hermann, E., Morgan, M., & Shanahan, J. (2021). Television, continuity, and change: A meta-analysis of five decades of cultivation research. *Journal of Communication*, 71, 515-544. doi:10.1093/joc/jqab014

- Leiva, A., & Bright, D. (2015). 'The usual suspects': media representation of ethnicity in organised crime. *Trends in Organized Crime, 18*(4), 311-325. doi:10.1007/s12117-015-9251-2
- Morgan, M., & Shanahan, J. (2010). The state of cultivation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 54*(2), 337-355. doi:10.1080/08838151003735018
- Pollock, W., Tapia, N. D., & Sibila, D. (2022). Cultivation theory: The impact of crime media's portrayal of race on the desire to become a U.S. police officer. *International Journal of Police Science & Management, 24*(1), 42–52. doi:10.1177/14613557211036555
- Seate, A. A., & Mastro, D. (2016). Media's influence on immigration attitudes: An intergroup threat theory approach. *Communication Monographs, 83*(2), 194–213. doi:10.1080/03637751.2015.1068433
- Shanahan, J. (2009). Cultivation theory. *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory, 254-257*. doi:10.4135/9781412959384.n94
- Vinney, C. (2022, January 18). *What Is cultivation theory in media psychology?* Retrieved from Very Well Mind: Psychology: <https://www.verywellmind.com/cultivation-theory-5214376>