Perspectives on the Applicability of Gerbner's Cultivation Theory of the Media in West Africa

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Abstract:

This perspective paper challenges the workability of George Gerbner's cultivation theory in West Africa. The theory assumes that TV viewers are susceptible to violent TV programming, and also that TV violence resonates with people who live in violent and high-crime areas and heightens their fear of the world as a mean place. The author did a semi-systematic review of evidence in the literature from West Africa, particularly urban slum areas in Nigeria and Ghana which are characterised by a high spate of insecurity, violence, and social exclusion. Using evidence from those areas, it was found that TV violence does not resonate with people in West Africa as predicted by the cultivation theory: exposure to violent TV programming in these areas is more likely to cultivate a different reality by positively inspiring the viewers. These people could see TV images as a source of fantasy escape and hope, and as a moral compass. The authors, therefore, suggest that instead of situating the cultivation hypothesis in West Africa, media researchers and educators should begin to look at the workability of a 'reverse effect' postulation in the sub-continent, especially in slums areas or similar settings that are characterised by violence and crime.

Keywords: **communication and media studies, cultivation theory, mean world syndrome, reverse effect, social reality, TV violence.**

1. Introduction

Gerbner's cultivation theory examines the long-term effects of television on viewers, particularly the impact of exposure to television violence on viewers. As expounded by Gerbner and Gross (1976), the theory proposes that viewers' perceptions of the world are essentially predicated on the images and ideological messages communicated through popular television. The degree of effect is said to be hinged on the amount of time that the viewer spends on TV, thus "the more time people spend 'living' in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality portrayed on television" (Cohen & Weimann, 2000). High-frequency TV viewers demonstrate more susceptibility to TV messages, and they are affected by what Gerbner (1998) called the "mean world syndrome" – the notion of a world that is a far worse and unsafe place than it is. Persons in this category have overstated fear about the level of violence they expect to encounter in their communities as a result of the heavy bombardment of violence and crime-related imagery on TV, and they are more aware of the world on TV, and less about the real world (Dillon & Jones, 2019).

Today, cultivation theory is one of the most analyzed assumptions in media and journalism studies because it has always been questioned with every media technological development (Mosharafa, 2015). Following the criticisms that have trailed it, the theory has been revised to consider some elements and concepts that deflate the early claim that TV has across-the-board effects on all heavy viewers. Two such concepts are mainstreaming and resonance. Resonance happens when the cultivated effects are heightened for a specific group of the population and when television reality corresponds to actuality whereas mainstreaming occurs when high-frequency viewership facilitates a convergence of outlooks across groups (Choi & Lee, 2021). Despite, these revisions, there is an assertion that the effects propounded by the cultivation theory are still, at best, debatable because they are still being challenged (Roberts & Powell, 2014).

However, the insistence on any form of association between TV violence and the mean world syndrome will continue to raise questions and call for different perspectives, especially in slum communities in West Africa which, like all slums in the world, are predominantly made up of people who are daily exposed to violence, crime, aggression and social exclusion in their neighbourhoods more than they essentially see on the TV and other audio-visual media such as social media, and are mostly occupied by those categorised as mostly non-viewers, light viewers, medium viewers, and sporadically, heavy viewers (Onuegbu et al., 2023). These slum dwellers are likely to suffer lower social inclusion and economic marginality (Popogbe et al., 2023), and they face a lot of poverty and have very limited resources (Jungari & Chinchore, 2022) to acquire items such as TV or watch it heavily. What effects does TV cultivate in those communities? What happens when TV

images coincide with their lived experience? Does TV violence truly resonate with people who live in violent and high-crime areas? If it does, will the effects be truly amplified? Do the residents of slums in West Africa share a common perspective of a violent world as a result of their exposure to the same TV images? Is it possible that TV could cultivate a different kind of social reality? With regards to the last question, instead of claiming that exposure to TV violence resonates with actuality or converges outlooks across groups (Choi & Lee, 2021), is it not possible that TV violence could cultivate an effect or social perception that is the opposite of the expected reaction to violence?

The recognition of diversity and localization of knowledge are some of the key debates and discourses in journalism education in the 21st Century (Solkin, 2022). Therefore, this perspective paper challenges the operability of the cultivation theory in West Africa using primary and secondary evidence from the urban slum areas of West Africa – environments that are characterised by a high spate of insecurity, violence, and social exclusion, and offer an alternative hypothesis that journalism educators should explore. This perspective paper begins with a description of the urban slum communities in parts of West Africa, precisely Lagos in Nigeria and Accra in Ghana; then the extent of violence and socio-economic conditions in those communities; the TV viewership patterns; the emergence of celebrities in slum communities in Lagos and Accra, and concluded with a suggestion of different and more workable hypotheses for media and journalism researchers and educators in West Africa. The goal of this perspective paper is to inspire journalism educators and researchers in West Africa to make a sustained global push toward remaking theories that adequately account for West African realities.

II. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this position paper are to:
1. Contest the applicability of the cultivation theory in West African communities;
2. suggest an alternative hypothesis to the cultivation theory that is consistent with local realities in West African communities; and
3. inspire a global push among media theorists in West Africa towards remaking media theories that adequately account for local realities.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *The Cultivation Hypothesis*

The cultivation theory was first introduced by George Gerbner in the 1960s, modified by Gerbner and Gross (1976), Gerbner (1998), etc. and has been severally reviewed since its first establishment by several scholars (Busselle & Van den Bulck, 2019). The theory is a sociological and communication framework that posits that regular and long-term exposure to media influences how media consumers view the world and behave in real life, and the portrayal of various social realities in the media has a considerable influence on how the audience interprets such realities (Hannan et al., 2019). Researchers have described cultivation theory as a positivistic philosophical concept that recognises the existence of objective reality and adopts value-neutral research (West & Turner, 2010).

Television was the main focus of the initial research that birthed the cultivation theory as Gerbner looked at the potential effect of Television violence on those who watch TV. Though the theory has been applied to the rest of the mass media, the basic assumptions of the theory over time still revolve around TV viewership. The theory assumes that television is a unique, reachable, and universal medium that is frequently and abundantly viewed by the audience; television can form the cultural mainstream and form how people in society view life; television tends to uphold the status quo and standardise conventional values and practices; the observable and specific effects of television may be small but its cumulative impact on cultural consciousness is remarkable (Hughes, 2019; Kellner, 2018; Balnaves et al., 2017)

Gebner's (1998) introduction of the mean world syndrome to the cultivation theory has formed an integral part of the theory and a fundamental reason for the criticism that the theory has received. The concept of the mean world syndrome implies that there is a cognitive bias that makes viewers of TV violent programmes view the world around them as more dangerous than is warranted by reality. The concept explains that the bias tends to cause those who are considered heavy viewers of TV violence to experience higher levels of fear, anxiety, pessimism, and alertness to non-existent threats, and those who are considered light or medium viewers have less tendency for such feelings and see the world as less dangerous.

Criticism against the theory has been numerous. According to critics, the cultivation theory mainly disregards the demographic and psychographic characteristics of the subjects and does not consider all the variables that can be involved in cultivation (Magalhães, 2021; Shah, 2020). It is argued that Gerbner did not originally consider the lived experiences of those who reside in high-crime areas such as slums, and crime-filled rural areas (Chandler, 1995). More so, the research that gave rise to the cultivation hypothesis was more concerned with quantifying the effects of culture than it was with examining the traits of those affected (Shrum, 2017), and just because a survey response shows the presence of an effect does not mean that television was the cause (Mastrorocco & Minale, 2018; Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018) and they could be a third factor, which the propounders of the theory ignored (Griffin, 2012). It has also been noted that the theory has theoretical flaws, being that it addresses questions of humanities using social science methodologies (West & Turner, 2010).

Following periods of reviews and response to criticism, the concepts of mainstreaming and resonance were added to the assumptions of the cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1998). The researchers explain that mainstreaming is the process whereby TV consumers from different backgrounds develop a homogeneous outlook of the world by viewing common labels and images on TV (Gerbner, 1998). The implication is that traditional distinctions among the diverse groups are blurred in favour of the worldview project by TV; thus, making TV a melting pot of cultural and social trends and a destroyer of individual perspectives (Li et al., 2023). Resonance has been interpreted by scholars as when the TV images and labels

resemble those of the audience's everyday lives, it intensifies the impact of cultivation and leads to a greater influence of TV violence on society (Heckscher, 2020), which implies that TV images and labels can solidify individual's perspectives.

B. Slum areas in Lagos and Accra

Slums are considered by some authors as informal settlements that are inhabited by low-income groups of people (Chaudhary, 2023; Khatua, 2020). Slums have become a present-day reality in urban West Africa with the widespread rise in urbanization. Nigeria and Ghana – and most of the South-Saharan African countries – are home to some of the world's largest slums due to massive urban growth in these countries (Celhay & Gil, 2020). It is on record that about 62% of the region's urban population lives in slums compared with 35% in Southern Asia, 13% in North Africa, and 24% in Latin America and the Caribbean (Amegah, 2021; United Nations, 2022).

Ghana and Nigeria have very large urban slums. In Lagos, slums are found in large areas such as Agege, Ajegunle, Amukoko, Badia, Bariga, Bodija, Ijeshatedo/Itire, Ilaje, Iwaya, Makoko, Mushin, Oke-Offa Babasale and Somolu, Ikorodu (Aliu, 2021), and a total of over 100 hundred other slums (Afolabi et al., 2019; Adelekan, 2010; Gilbert & Shi, 2023). Lagos slums are highly populated. United Nations World Population Prospects (United Nations, 2022) and Oyegoke et al. (2012) report that 66% -70% of Lagosians live in slums. The explosive population was explained by Popogbe et al., (2023) who found that households in the Lagos slums are usually very large and include numerous extended relatives. It is characterised by a deteriorating environment, poor urban services, rising inequality, lack of clean water, and poor hygiene (Amegah, 2021). Most of the slum dwellers in Lagos State are extremely poor and their living conditions are appalling (Popogbe et al., 2023).

In Ghana, slums are found in Amui Dior, Ashaiman, Agbogbloshie, Jamestown, Kojokrom, New Takoradi, Suame Magazine, Aboabo, Maamobi, and Nima areas (Addi & Ayambire, 2022). One of the biggest slums in Ghana and West Africa is the Old Fadama (also known as Agbogbloshie) which was established in the 1980s by northern migrants that were fleeing tribal violence (The Conversation, 2022). Since then, it has grown steadily with spikes from intense domestic conflict in 1994 and drought conditions in 2015. It is home to some 150,000 Ghanaians living in extreme poverty (The Conversation, 2022).

C. Violence and Socio-economic Conditions in the Slums Areas in Lagos and Accra

Evidence from existing research shows that the people in the slums areas in Lagos and Accra suffer and have become accustomed to a lot of insecurity, violence, and social deprivations (Wado et al., 2022), poverty (Olubodun et al., 2019), unemployment and informal economy (Addi & Ayambire, 2022). The Old Fadama slum in Accra has been known as an epicenter of violence and the use of violence means to settle the misunderstanding between youth groups in the communities. Slum dwellers are likely to suffer lower social inclusion, more violence, and other problems (Popogbe

et al., 2023). Empirical data suggests that children who live in slums are exposed to a lot of violence early in their lives (Popogbe et al., 2023), including homicides, prostitution, rape, trafficking, gang fights, gambling, drugs, and the use of light weapons have been recurrent in slums all over the world (Joshi et al., 2019; Diwakar, 2019). Also, slum dwellers are likely to suffer physical, sexual, and domestic violence. This can be explained by the high rate of marital stress which is caused by very limited resources in the households (Jungari & Chinchore, 2022). Nevertheless, the slum dwellers are known for their resilience to respond to disturbances either through making occasional changes or adapting is common among the individuals dwelling in these environments (Obaitor et al., 2021).

Urban slum areas in Lagos and Accra share the same socioeconomic conditions: both have low-cost housing and inappropriate housing conditions (Aliu et al., 2021). The main occupations of the residents are fishing, subsistence farming, and the informal sector (Oloko et al., 2022) and a high proportion of the occupants are unemployed (Nnachi, 2021; Ibikunle, 2009) There are deplorable schools, and no structured waste disposal system as animal and human waste are littered everywhere and dispersed during torrential rains (Ugbomoiko et al., 2018). At Old Fadama in Ghana, the living conditions have also been terrible, with community violence, lawlessness, poor sanitation, and solid waste management, the vulnerable population, and flooding that spread faecal matter to the markets, which has been blamed for the frequent outbreaks of cholera and the attendant deaths of hundreds (The Conversation, 2022; Akpor et al., 2014).

D. Television viewership in slum communities in Lagos and Accra

In a study carried out in Lagos and Accra slums, Ejem (n.d.) found that only 42% of those who live in the slums own Television but much more than that (78%) watch television. The majority (84%) of the slum dwellers agreed that poor electricity supply affects their TV ownership and viewership. However, whenever they do watch TV, the majority (77%) prefer to watch a lot of violent content such as boxing, wrestling, and war films. Quizzed about the perceived effects of violent content, the majority (58%) of them declared that the moral codes contained in violent TV programming inspire them; only 19% felt that they pick violent traits from TV programming. While the author did not extend this research to Ghana, there is an existing evidence in bodies of literature that slum dwellers in Ghana make widespread use of the media (Nkrumah Agyabeng et al., 2022), and that Ghana, like Nigeria, has one of the most diverse and applauded media landscapes in Africa (Cohen, 2020; Anyanwu et al., 2015); so, the authors can infer that there is a fairly reasonable amount of TV viewership in Ghanaian slums.

E. Emergence of Celebrities in slum communities in Lagos and Accra

Nigeria has one of the most vibrant music industries in the world, and some of the most notable names in Nigeria's music industry as well as football, film, and fashion stars were born and grew up in slums. A few notable names that were

discovered from the Nigerian slums include Taribo West, Odion Ighalo, Victor Osimhen, Obafemi Martins, Samson Siasia (former footballer and coach of Nigeria's national football team), African China, Brown Ideye, Daddy Showkey, Oritse Femi, Ferdinand Jesuwane (winner of World Chess Championship), Don Jazzy (one of the most prolific African entertainers, and CEO of MARVIN Records), Patoranking (one of Africa's best dancehall artistes), Mastakraft (one of Africa's best music producers), Olamide (a prolific rapper, record label owner, and producer). Timaya (accomplished Hip Hop artiste and founder of DM Records Limited).

Ghana is not an exception as prominent men and women have risen from the slums. A few of them are Angela Tabiri who has PhD in Mathematics and is currently a teaching assistant at the University of Ghana, Juliana Naa Dei Ashaley who grew up in Osu slums but currently has a Master's Degree in Architecture, and Joseph Agyepong Siaw, the CEO of Jospong Group of Companies, which employs over 250,000 Ghanaians, was born on the rocks.

With all the violence that characterises the slums and their proclivity to view violent TV programming, what is it about the slums that make these people successful? Is it not time to rethink the proposition that their exposure to TV or violent programming on TV makes them more violent and see the world as a violent place?

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In finding a theoretical underpinning for this perspective paper, it is only fitting that the researchers adopt a theory that explains that the media do not have an overbearing influence on the audience, rather the audience uses the media for their own needs or desires and are satisfied when those needs are fulfilled (Kamboj, 2020; Ray et al., 2019). That, in essence, is the summary of some of the arguments in this perspective paper. The uses and gratification theory, propounded by Katz and Blumler (Blumler & Katz, 1974), offers a point of view that contradicts the cultivation theory and inspires the search for a new hypothesis that explains that TV violent programmes can have a positive effect on the audience if the effect is consistent with what the audience has set out to derive. By implication, the theory puts the audience in the driving seat for the nature of influence that TV programmes exert on them. The uses and gratification approach helps researchers to determine the motivations behind media use by examining the factors that influence the media choices of different audience groups (Sheldon et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020). Media gratification can be several interpersonal and social needs such as social interaction, relaxation, escape, arousal, entertainment, and many others (Camilleri & Falzon, 2021).

Those needs and gratification that people seek from the media have been categorised into five, namely, cognitive needs, the use of media to acquire knowledge, facts, information, etc.; affective needs, the use of media to satisfy emotions, seek pleasure and assuage moods of the audience; personal integrative needs, the use of media for status conferral and reassurance, gain credibility and stability; social integrative needs, use of media to socialize with family relations and friends; and tension free needs, the use of the media to escape from the real world and to relieve from stress and tension (Athwal et al., 2019; Hossain et al., 2019). All of these needs and gratifications that people seek from the media offer better explanations of what the media, particularly TV, can do for the audience instead of making them see the world as a mean place.

V. METHODS

A semi-systematic review of literature was adopted for this perspective article. The literature search was conducted on SCOPUS, EBSCO and Google Scholar. They are three free and credible electronic databases. Following the initial search from the three databases, useful articles and webpages were found in the references of the select articles, and they were searched on Google. The search made use of search terms, subject headings and keywords, including "cultivation theory," "critic of the cultivation theory," "social realities in West Africa" and "West Africa." Boolean operators ("AND" and "OR") and wildcards (* and /) were used to combine the search terms as a query in the databases. Inclusion criteria include articles published in English; full texts, empirical and observational studies (systematic review, opinion articles, mixed-method research and literature review).

VI. NEW THEORETICAL SUGGESTION THAT MATCHES WEST AFRICAN REALITIES

This perspective paper uses the primary and secondary evidence from slum areas in Lagos and Accra so far presented in the previous section to discuss some of the questions surrounding the application of the cultivation theory in West Africa and ultimately suggests a more workable hypothesis in those social environments.

A. What Social Reality can TV Cultivate in Slum Areas in Lagos and Accra?

The world that slum dwellers in Lagos and Accra live in is mean, and evidence shows that TV programming has no part in that reality. Omilusi (2020) describes slums as a "pool of recruits for cult, criminal and vigilance groups" (p. 36), and Lagos and Accra slums are no exception. Slum dwellers have also been described as people who experience violence almost daily and have become accustomed to a lot of insecurity and social deprivations (Olubodun et al., 2019). But the slums in Lagos and Accra have produced very successful people, despite the evidence that the majority of them prefer to watch a lot of violent TV programming, whenever they can watch TV.

There is a piece of alternative deduction (other than the assumptions of the cultivation theory) in the literature that shows that when people of low social class watch TV, they are keen to see their aspirations more than the dramatization of their current circumstances (Proulx & Raboy, 2016). This is because the TV shows are replete with the aspirations of the poor people and not their conditions (Proulx & Raboy, 2016).. More so, Reissler's (2006) study found that when the media depicts violence, they always show repercussions of the violent act. This means that there are moral codes that accentuate every violent depiction in movies and TV programming, which makes it possible for viewers to take

home the lessons and disregard the violent acts. It always ends in the hero beating the villains, indicating that with great power comes great responsibility; and that good will always trump evil.

Therefore, if anything, the TV shows them an alternative world of relative peace where they can dream and aspire to achieve anything. Their lives are changed by the images on TV because they admire the characters and aspire to be like them (King, 2020). Instead of instilling fear, TV violence helps them to learn life lessons and seek an alternative reality where there is no violence but hope and fun.

B. Suggestion for a reverse effect hypothesis in media research and education in West Africa

Based on the facts presented above, the authors are suggesting a reverse effect hypothesis for future research studies. The proposition is that the more people who live in crime-filled environments are exposed to TV violence, the more they realise the repercussions of the violent acts and are eager to seek alternative reality, and eventually rise above their current circumstances.

Several research findings had previously alluded to the fact that TV does not necessarily cultivate social reality for those who are not psychographically or demographically predisposed to it (Bilandzic, 2006; Shanahan et al., 1999; Morgan &. Signorielli, 1990). Audience members cultivate their perception of the world based on their aspirations, backgrounds, experiences, education, geographical location/neighbourhood, social media exposure, TV viewership, socialization, ethnic nationality, antecedents, attitudes, and existing biases. If anything, individual TV viewers fear what they are predisposed to fear, not what they see on TV.

Ejem (n.d.) indicated that a majority (58%) declared that the moral codes contained in violent TV programming inspire them; only 19% felt that they pick violent traits from TV programming. The implication is that people who live in

violent and crime-filled neighbourhoods witness violence and crime often, and as a result, they are already jaded toward violence and crime. They have known violence, poverty, social exclusion, and other material deprivations all their lives, and are desensitized to fear and violence. Therefore, there is a chance that they do not even pay significant attention to the violence and crime-related imagery on TV. Even when the TV narratives are similar to the everyday lived experience of the slum dwellers, they might not necessarily reinforce the effects of the violence. If TV cultivates any social reality, it does not have to be violent. They could see TV images as a source of fantasy escape, hope, and a moral compass. The imagery on TV could serve to expose them to better realities and the belief that they can have a better life.

VII. CONCLUSION

The norm among West African scholars have always been to underpin their studies with Western-based theoretical frameworks (Ben-Enukora et al., 2023; Akerele-Popoola et al. 2023, etc.), but there is an urgent need to intensify the intellectual quest to develop models, theories, and paradigms that fit into West African realities, or what Oye et al. (2023) called indigenous models, as it is evident that Western-based theoretical frameworks cannot adequately account for local realities. The authors hope that this perspective article has challenged the applicability of the tenets of the cultivation theory in urban slums in West Africa, and will challenge journalism/media researchers and educators to seek out theories that would better explain the effects of TV programming among West African viewers than the cultivation theory. The authors are concluding an ongoing research to validate the arguments advanced in this perspective paper and empirically test the veracity of the reverse effect hypothesis in Nigeria and Ghana. It is also recommended that future researchers in media theory should explore the workability of an alternative hypothesis in West Africa.

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