

The Effects of Media Priming on Perceptions of Immigrants in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explain the ways in which media depictions of immigrant groups and online/social media interactions may influence audience perceptions, attitudes and behaviors towards immigrants using theoretical frameworks of cultivation and priming. This paper analyses how media institution, message production and message effects on viewers influence the perceptions of immigrants based on the repetitive messages shares in mass media and new media environments. This paper also talks about mainstreaming and resonance to explain the attitudinal and behavioral changes towards immigrants.

Keywords: immigrants, interactions, production, cultivation, social media

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to explain the ways in which media depictions of immigrant groups and online/social media interactions may influence audience perceptions, attitudes and behaviors towards immigrants using theoretical frameworks of cultivation and priming. This paper analyses how media institution, message production and message effects on viewers influence the perceptions of immigrants based on the repetitive messages shares in mass media and new media environments (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). This paper also talks about mainstreaming and resonance to explain the attitudinal and behavioral changes towards immigrants. Lastly, cultivation theory is used to explain these effects through frequency of viewing and making value judgments. Priming is also used here to explain how individuals use networks of memory nodes to perform cognitive tasks and in this case form social judgments, affective responses and behaviors towards immigrants (Carpentier, 2017). The reason for choosing these theories to explain this phenomenon is that exposure to messages about immigrants through various media channels will result in long-term effects that are better explained through cultivation theory and short-term effects that can be sufficiently explained through priming.

II. MEDIA INSTITUTION, MESSAGE PRODUCTION AND MESSAGE EFFECTS

According to the cultivation hypothesis, as applied in this case, the audience exposed to messages about immigrant on mass media or social media will perceive them in terms of the recurrent messages on these media platforms (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 337). For example, viewers who follow President Trump on Twitter and watch all his speeches on TV are likely to believe that immigrants are a threat to national security, they are criminals and they take away the jobs of U.S. nationals. Dolliver et. al. (2018) found that there is a relationship between media consumption and fear of crime. They also found that fear of crime amplifies media affect and support for three strikes, death penalty and open carry laws. With this logic, individuals who regularly watch TV shows or news broadcasts where immigrants are represented negatively and as criminals will increase the fear of crime by immigrants among viewers. These audiences are also likely to see them as a threat and vouch for stricter immigration policies.

In this respect, the institutional process analysis enables us to understand organizational forms, decision-making pressures, power relations and institutional processes (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 338) that must be analyzed to understand cultivation effects. For example, the variables listed above will be different for Fox News and CNN and will result in different means of understanding and representing immigrants, depending on their political leanings, organizational beliefs and processes that result in the production of messages. Therefore, individuals who are heavy viewers of Fox News will most likely have a perception of immigrants (negative) that is different from those who are heavy viewers of CNN (probably more

sympathetic). Most of the research done in the field of cultivation doesn't focus on institutional processes (Potter, 2014), but it was important to highlight the role of these institutions in cultivation.



The second entity of the cultivation theory is the message system analysis that investigates repetitive or consistent patterns in messages in media (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 338). Heavy viewers of television who are exposed to negative portrayals of immigrant groups are more likely to have a negative perception about them. Accordingly, this results in attitudinal and behavioral changes such as discrimination on the basis of color, class, and ethnicity, avoiding socialization with individuals who resemble the ethnicity of immigrants, suspecting immigrants groups of criminal behavior, etc. Heavy viewing in addition to selection of specific TV programs or repetitive exposure to social media pages, accounts and groups can result in forming misconceptions about immigrants among viewers. Although, the original theory talks only about cultivation effects of heavy TV viewing (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 350), I factor social media in my understanding of cultivation not only because of its widespread use but also because of the fragmented media environment where many individuals rely on social media for news and information.

The final component in this theory is the message effect of cultivation analysis. This points to the potential changes that can be seen as a result of heavy exposure to negative messages about immigrants. Since cultivation emphasizes long-term effects, a clear example is the cry for strict immigration policies, changes in visa rules for potential immigrants seeking visa entry and idea to build a wall at U.S.-Mexico border pitched by President Trump and supported by people whose fear of immigrants has been amplified by heavy exposure to negative media messages about immigrants, be it on TV or social media echo chambers. Although long-term is a loose definition and cultivation theory doesn't clearly specify time frames, I consider the above effects to be long-term because they seem to be the outcome of snowball effect of negative and consistent messages about immigrant groups.

III. MAINSTREAMING AND RESONANCE

Mainstreaming and resonance were added to the cultivation theory as refinements to address the criticism received by the theory (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Mainstreaming is the homogenization of outlooks among otherwise divergent groups of viewers. Morgan & Shanahan (2010) give an example of a study where more religious male students were found to be more accepting of homosexuality as a result of heavy viewing, explaining that the perceptions of heavy viewers might converge due to mainstreaming. In the case of immigrant groups, negative portrayals on news and stereotypes mediated by the president on twitter or in public addresses about these groups can result in a shared perception (mostly negative) among heavy TV viewers and social media followers of the President. Although these viewers and users may be of disparate groups, belonging to different ethnicities, racial or economic backgrounds, their construction of views about immigrant groups will be similar to the messages they received from TV or social media. However, this is only true if we don't take into account the selectivity resulting from ideologies, cultural influences and belief systems and fragmentation of the media environment for the scope of this paper.

Resonance implies that viewers whose life experiences are consistent with TV portrayals will be most affected by messages in TV programming (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). An example of this would be U.S. nationals living in areas with a large immigrant populations that also happens to be a potential crime zone with an above average unemployment rate. If the

U.S. nationals in this community get their information from more conservative media outlets or follow the President and other conservative politicians, they are more likely to believe that the immigrant population in their area is responsible for the criminal activities. Also, these U.S. nationals, especially those struggling to find employment, will be more endorsing of the idea that immigrants are taking away their jobs.

IV. PRIMING

Based on the network models of semantic memory described by Carpentier (2017) I draw from the nodes and connections concept to describe how priming can influence the perceptions and behaviors towards immigrants. The stereotypical depictions produced by the mass media (Dixon, 2019) are incorporated in common knowledge or schemas that audiences construct in their memories (Carpentier, 2017). Further exposure to these stereotypes through mass media or new media influences perceptions and behaviors of audience towards the group that has been stereotyped. In case of immigrants, audience who receive their information from conservative media sources that portray immigrants as criminals and a threat to the American society, are likely to develop schemas in their memory using these information cues. These schemas influence their perceptions and behaviors in real life.

For example, when a member of the audience group mentioned above will interact directly or indirectly with a member of the immigrant group (or what they perceive to be an immigrant) they may draw information from the respective schema and think of them as criminals or people who have entered the country illegally. This may also change their behavior towards these groups such as ignorance, disrespect, discrimination and increased hostility. Another important behavioral change can be seen in voting patterns in support of candidates who propose stringent regulatory practices for immigration (Esralew & Young, 2012). This can result from exposure to negative information on TV or social media about immigrant groups and candidates who are in favor of stricter immigrations laws a few weeks before an election. Exposure to such media stimulus primes these cues in the minds of audiences and can lead to implicit memory traces that can be activated by the audience members while casting their votes.

The application of cultivation and priming theories help us understand how media depictions of immigrant groups effect audience perception, attitudes and behaviors. Both the theories combined present us with potential long-term and short-term effects. Although the effects proposed above need experimental evidence, they satisfy Gerbner's cultivation theory and psychological effects of priming as mentioned by Carpentier (2017).

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