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chapter 7

Interpretation: Perceptions and Values Taught in Media Content

A happy person is not a person in a certain set of circumstances, but rather a person with a certain set of attitudes.
—Hugh Downs

CHAPTER PREVIEW

This chapter introduces you to different explanations of how media content affects people's interpretations, perceptions, and values:

- Production, perceived realism, and perception
- Cultivation theory as an explanation of perceptual effects
- The process of cultivation analysis
- Narrative analysis as a method of revealing a story's structure
- Ideological analysis as a method of revealing the beliefs, values and norms in media content
- Depictions of thinness, consumerism, professions, socio-economic classes, sex roles, homosexuality, race, and age in media content

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Introduction

Media content can tell us a great deal about who we should be, and who other people are. From what to wear and what to eat to what an ideal woman is like or how a racial or socio-economic group behaves, the media has many implicit messages that influence perceptions of ourselves and others and communicate cultural values. This chapter looks at how media content can influence people's perceptions of themselves, the social and cultural values they hold, and the stereotypes we have for different subcultures in the United States.

Interpretations, perceptions, beliefs, and values are somewhat different from informational knowledge, which is discussed in Chapter 9. Knowledge is about observable fact and storing, accessing, and linking information in memory. Not all decisions are necessarily made based on mere information, though. We interpret information, evaluate it, have emotional reactions to it, store bits and pieces of it in memory, and all of those things influence how we see the world. That is **perception**. This chapter, then, works toward Chapter 9 as we look at how different types of media content influence perceptions and teach values.

Much of this discussion is rooted in cultivation theory. **Cultivation theory** asserts that the media, particularly television, is a source of socialization in America. We are socialized by the repetition of themes and depictions in television shows. But, these depictions are often inaccurate, and can lead to inaccurate perceptions of what other people are like and how we should be. According to the theory, we often think of these misperceptions as "fact," and therefore have a very skewed perception of the real world.

In this chapter, we begin by discussing elements of media content that increase perceptual effects, particularly perceived realism and identification. We go into some detail about cultivation theory to explain how media content influences consumers, then look at particular perceptions and values that are taught in media content, including perceptions of beauty; cultural values like consumerism; and stereotypes of socioeconomic, racial, and age groups.

A Critic's Case-in-Point:
"Don't read beauty magazines, they will only make you feel ugly"

(Baz Lurmann, *Wear Sunscreen*)

Adele received six awards at the 2012 Grammys, promoting her from indie rock sensation to international fame. She received awards for song of the year, pop solo performance, pop vocal album, record of the year, and short music video of the year. There were many things that were inspiring about the 24-year-old's amazing showing at the Grammys: She was young,

she paid tribute to her mom at the show, she won every category she was nominated in, and she was known for being heavy and not wanting to change to become the typical "pop icon."

Following her Grammy wins, she appeared on the cover of *Vogue* magazine looking nothing like she had at the Grammys just days before. Her skin was a warmer tone, cheekbones more pronounced, eyes wider, hair fuller and longer, and her waist was smaller.

Modifying cover photos is a widely accepted practice for magazines. They often use photo-shopping programs to remove age lines, wrinkles in clothing, fat, and other "flaws" to present the most "beautiful" image of a person possible. They have also, in the past, photoshopped celebrities' faces onto models' bodies, as *Newsweek* did in 2005 with Martha Stewart when she appeared on their cover while she was in jail.

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You can see some of the *Vogue* images here:
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/13/adele-vogue-2012-photos_n_1273149.html.

Magazines aren't the only culprit, though. Producers, costume designers, makeup artists, and editors can use lighting, clothing, airbrushing, and camera angles to make people more- or less-attractive in all forms of media. And even after the photoshoot, editors can use photoshopping software to "clean up" an image.

Why the big fuss over a beauty magazine cover? Researchers argue that the media sets an unrealistic and unattainable standard for beauty in our culture, particularly for women. Women in the media are young, thin, and well dressed, with wrinkle and blemish free skin, full, well-kept hair, and pearly white teeth. These unrealistically perfect media images, which are the products of personal trainers, stylists, makeup artists, directors, producers, and editors, affect average women's perceptions. Instances like the *Vogue* cover featuring Adele reinforce the myth that all women can and should be flawlessly beautiful, and those of us who can't live up to that standard feel badly about ourselves for falling short. It was particularly hurtful in the case of Adele because so many women and girls idolized her for being a successful woman who had previously stood up for herself against critics who had argued that she was "too fat."

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People often compare themselves to others to see how they measure up (social comparison processes). They also use the media to gauge how the rest of the world looks, behaves, and lives (cultivation effects). If they look to media images as a point-of-comparison, they may not live up to that standard, thus hurting their self-esteem. They may also overestimate the number of beautiful, physically fit people in the world. The effects of these types of media images are even more pronounced when people identify with the **characters** or stars in the images, and when the images are perceived as realistic depictions. It is possible that women who had identified with the unedited, heavier version of Adele and felt validated by having someone famous who seemed so similar to themselves could now perceive themselves as inadequate or less attractive as a result of seeing Adele's enhanced image on the cover of *Vogue*.

Television Production, Perceived Realism, and Implications for Perception

One of the reasons that entertainment media affects people's perceptions of reality is because of the perceived realism of media. Perceived realism does not necessarily mean that we think what we see on TV or read in magazines is 100% real. Rather, realism is whether we think what is in the media *reflects reality.* Also, elements of entertainment content can increase involvement. **Involvement** is how interested, or engaged, people are in media content. Realism increases involvement, and involvement increases the perceptual effects of entertainment media.

DEFINING REALISM

Potter (1988) argued that there are two aspects of realism: 1) **Factual realism** is whether people feel the events depicted *really happened.* 2) **Psychological realism** refers to whether the events, though not real, happen in a way that *seems realistic.* People are able to discern between what is real and what is not real when watching TV. That being said, even though we know that most entertainment media isn't real, there are aspects of media content that make TV and movies believable and, therefore, cause perceptual effects. Put another way, we know it isn't *real*, but we still perceive much of it as *realistic*.

In a more recent review of the research on realism, Busselle and Greenberg (2000, p. 257) identified six dimensions of psychological, or perceived, realism:

- **Magic window**: How TV allows us to *"observe* ongoing life in another place"
- **Social realism**: How *similar* TV content is to our lives
- **Plausibility**: Whether the things seen on TV could also *exist* in reality

- **Probability**: Whether the things we see on TV would be *likely* in real life in terms of how often they occur
- **Identity**: How *involved* we are in TV content
- **Utility**: The *usefulness* of TV content in our actual lives

Let's take the example of Food Network cooking shows, like *Paula's Home Cooking* with Paula Deen. Paula made recipes from her family and her restaurant in her home kitchen. She often had guests on the show, including friends, fellow restaurant owners, her husband, and her sons. To a certain extent, this created a "magic window" into Paula's life as you got to meet her family and hear about the events that they've cooked for using those recipes or the family memories surrounding different recipes. Paula, being a mother and grandmother who often cooks for her family, also seemed "socially realistic" as she fit a lot of conventional stereotypes for a southern grandma by making gooey desserts and comfort food, having a gentle demeanor, and a warm southern drawl. What she did on her show seemed both plausible and probable, as there are likely a lot of southern grandmothers cooking food like she did. If we like her stories, personality, and the food she cooks, we are likely to identify with her and find her recipes and advice useful. Therefore a show like Paula Deen's is likely to be perceived as very realistic.

Production elements and realism. Research has suggested that documentary-style media are perceived as more factually real, but fictional programs have more pronounced effects (Poulit & Cowen, 2007). The more pronounced effects of fictional film may be related to the production features of entertainment media. Poulit and Cowen concluded that effects may be the result of:

> Actors' performances in conveying human behavior and emotions . . . [and] point of view shots, cuts and editing, camera's movements, dialogue, and sound effects are often exploited by filmmakers to further heighten this identification and maximize the spectator's cognitive and emotional investment in ongoing actions and events (p. 253).

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In short, the production features of fictional media make them more involving for viewers, even though people recognize the difference between fictional and nonfictional content.

Narrative elements and realism. In addition to the production elements that may involve people in the plot and create a sense of realism among viewers, elements of the narrative, or story elements, also influence the extent of involvement. Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) identified two aspects of a narrative that may make it seem more realistic to TV or film viewers: 1) External realism is whether the aspects of the story are similar to what we would see in the real world. 2) Narrative realism is whether the storyline seems plausible or not. For fictional stories to fit our understanding of reality, they contain the following elements:

- **Setting:** The situation, place, time setting, and the rules for behavior in that place and time are internally consistent.
- **Characters:** The traits, personalities, characteristics, and motives are developed or revealed over time and are consistent.

Busselle and Bilandzic argued that these characteristics of fictional narratives help people who are watching the narrative organize and make sense out of the events as they're watching them unfold. People's ability to make sense of the events in turn makes those events seem believable or more realistic.

In summary, perceived realism of media increases the perceptual effects of that media. It is a combination of production qualities, identification with the characters, and narrative elements that can make TV shows, magazine and news stories, and movies seem more realistic. This sense of realism allows us to accept the implicit messages in TV shows, and integrate those subtle messages into our perceptions of the real world.

Cultivation Theory: A Mainstreamed, Mean World

It is this very narrative nature of television and movies that make them "a centralized system of storytelling" in our culture (Gerbner et al., 2000, p. 49). Gerbner argues that media is a "primary common source of socialization" in our society (p. 49). Humans have been storytellers for centuries. Historically, people have used stories to pass on knowledge and values from one generation to the next. Gerbner argues that television now serves this function in modern society. It tells stories that teach relatively consistent lessons about what people are like, how people live, and our social values, and these lessons are assumed to be uniform across different television genres.

Many have argued that media messages are not as consistent as cultivation theory suggests. And there are some individual differences that influence the extent of the cultivation effect.

Perceived realism is related to cultivation effects (Rubin et al., 1988). The more realistic people think television is, the more their perceptions are skewed by that content. There are numerous other determinants of the cultivation effect, including resonance, genre selection, and information processing or involvement in program content.

OVERVIEW OF CULTIVATION ANALYSIS

The method used to assess cultivation is three-pronged (Gerbner et al., 2002):

1. **Institutional analysis** looks at how distribution and ownership affect the content of media messages.
2. **Message analysis** looks at the trends, themes, and depictions in TV content.
3. **Cultivation analysis** traces the changes in people's perceptions

Institution analysis. In Chapter 5, we talked a great deal about how corporate ownership of media, the emphasis on achieving ratings, and the overarching goal of increasing revenues influence media content. Gerbner argued that institutional analysis was the first step in understanding the institutional policies and procedures that lead to particular types of media messages being created or avoided (Gerbner et al., 2002). He noted that "Television is driven not by the creative people who have something to tell, but by global conglomerates that have something to sell" (Gerbner, 1997, p. 360).

The father of cultivation theory, George Gerbner, was worried about corporate influence on our understanding of reality. He warned that children are exposed to stories through TV on average 7 hours each day.

> The stories do not come from their families, schools, churches, neighborhoods . . . or, in fact, from anyone with anything relevant to tell. They come from a small group of distant conglomerates with something to sell . . . technologies pervade home and office while mergers and bottom-line pressures shrink alternatives and reduce diversity of content (Gerbner, 1998, p. 176).

In fact, Gerbner (1997) contended that the reason there is so much violence on television is not because it increases ratings, but because it makes programming easier to export to other countries. Violence is universally understood and requires little translation. So there is little investment required to release content internationally.

Message analysis. Gerbner argued that institutional pressures and focus on profits lead to particular types of media content being created. In terms of looking at media content, message analysis is used in cultivation research to identify "the most recurrent, stable, and

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overarching patterns of television content" (p. 49). Cultivation research looks at broad themes in content across numerous genres of TV: representations of women and racial minorities; depictions of the family; depictions of violent crime; and depictions of how people live, including professions, material wealth, and social values. The world depicted on TV is skewed, though. It is not a direct and accurate reflection of reality: it creates caricatures of people and groups, projects idealized images, and portrays the most dramatic situations.

Message analysis is typically done through careful content analysis of TV. In fact, the Cultural Indicators Project is an ongoing quantitative analysis of trends in TV content that is used to track and describe what is being depicted in American television programming.

That is not to say that one could not qualitatively or even critically analyze media content and have results that fit the overall framework of cultivation theory. Methodologically, though, cultivation theory asserts that the mass media have pronounced *cumulative* effects. Therefore, media analyses conducted to explore cultivation trends tend to involve a huge, diverse sample of television shows. As discussed in the three methods chapters in this text, qualitative and critical studies tend to require smaller samples because of the depth of the analysis being conducted. Quantitative analysis, on the other hand, though providing less depth, allows researchers—often teams of researchers—to quickly and uniformly code content. So, given the assumptions of the theory, quantitative analysis is more appropriate for cultivation research.

Cultivation analysis. Lastly, cultivation analysis links media content to effects. The more a person watches TV, the more they are likely to perceive the "real world" to be like the one on TV (Gerbner et al., 2002): violent and full of stereotypical, wealthy, and beautiful young people. Heavy viewers, or those who watch TV the most, have the most skewed perception of reality according to the theory. But even light viewers are affected; they are just affected less. Heavy viewers are more likely to answer factual questions, such as, "What is the likelihood of being the victim of a violent crime?" in keeping with what they see on TV. Therefore, heavy viewers are likely to overestimate the likelihood of being a crime victim because they see so much violent crime on TV.

CULTIVATION CASE-IN-POINT: CRIME DRAMAS

As an example of how these elements work in concert, consider the popular show *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation,* which had two spin-offs: *CSI: Miami* and *CSI: NY*. This crime drama series focuses on teams of investigators who collect and analyze evidence from murder scenes. They often are shown using advanced scientific techniques, like DNA analysis, fiber analysis, and ballistics testing to link criminals to crime scenes.

Turnbull (2010) critically reviewed crime dramas, and noted that the storylines, or the common structure of the narratives in these dramas, are similar. The crime drama narrative has elements that make it entertaining: It begins with a crime. We learn about the characters as the crime is being solved. The crimes and investigations take place in familiar locations. They follow one particular investigator, whom the viewer gets to know personally over the course of the show. So, as Gerbner contended, these shows become a storyteller in our society; teaching us about people, places, and how things work in society.

According to cultivation theory, these shows, in concert with other popular programs that show incidents of violence and police investigations, will lead to perceptual changes in society. As an example of one such cultivation effect, critics argue that the popularity and pervasiveness of these types of shows are influencing people's perceptions and expectations when they become jurors. This has been termed the "*CSI* effect."

Studies suggest that watching crime dramas like *CSI* are related to people's perception that DNA evidence is reliable and the belief that not having DNA evidence is important in a criminal case (Brewer & Ley, 2010). Though people do not seem to be any more or less willing to convict defendants as a result of watching crime dramas, they do expect to see more sophisticated scientific evidence (Kim et al., 2009). Also, police and investigators report that people are offering suggestions, advice, and actually trying to participate in police investigations, and police attribute this to shows like *CSI* making people feel like they know how to investigate crimes (Huey, 2010).

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THE MEAN WORLD SYNDROME

In addition to changes in people's expectations about police investigations and evidence in criminal trials, TV also makes the world seem like a very violent place. The **mean world syndrome** is when people who watch a lot of TV start to see the world as a mean and scary place. Gerbner and Gross (1976) content analyzed eight years of television programming in the 1960s and 70s and collected survey information about people's perceptions of how safe the world is. They found that there was significant, consistent violent behavior depicted in television programming, and people who consumed a lot of TV tended to be more distrustful of others and overestimate the chances of becoming a victim of violence.

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In cultivation research, violence in TV content is defined as "the overt expression of physical force (with or without a weapon, against self or other) compelling action against one's will through use threats of being hurt or killed or actually hurting or killing" (Signorielli & Gerbner, 1995, para. 10). One can simply count the number of times this occurs in a program, or how much time is spent in a program showing this type of behavior occurring, and get a frequency score that reflects the amount of violence in a program.

The **violence index** is used to calculate the breadth and severity of violence in media (Signorielli & Gerbner, 1995):

- *Extent of violence*: The number of programs in a sample that contain violent acts divided by the total number of programs in that sample.
- *Frequency*: The number of violent acts divided by the number of programs in the sample.
- *Rate*: The total number of violent acts observed divided by the total number of hours of programming coded.
- *Number of violent vs. victim roles*: The number of characters who are being violent or are a victim of violence divided by the total number of characters portrayed in the sample.
- *Percentage killed*: The number of people who killed or who are killed divided by the total number of characters in the programming sample.

Arguably, the more a person watches TV, the more violence they see due to the extent, frequency, rate, and number of violent roles, and the number of people killed in programming. Therefore, people who watch a lot of TV may overestimate the amount of violence, particularly deadly violence, present in the real world as a result of this overrepresentation on TV.

MAINSTREAMING

Though TV depicts violence a lot, while violence is arguably an extreme and less common behavior in the real world, other extremes or individual differences are downplayed or ignored altogether. **Mainstreaming** is the "homogenization" of people's perceptions: People's political, social, and cultural values, which are typically an outcome of class, region, race, and personality, become streamlined into a common, middle-of-the-road set of values (Gerbner, 1998).

Gerbner (1987) asserted that there were three B's to the mainstreaming effects of TV: Blurring, blending, and bending. TV:

- Blurs distinctions between political ideologies
- Blends together very distinct social groups into one common "mainstream"
- Bends content to fulfill corporate goals for profits and social power

Put another way, long-standing divisions between political parties are rarely discussed in entertainment television. There is also little discussion of "working class," "middle class," and "upper class" on television and differences between cultural and racial groups are often glossed over. So, though there are stereotypical caricatures of gender, sexuality, race, and social class on TV, the "typical" main characters, whether they are Black or White, rich or poor, tend to look and act in similar ways. Those who are outside the "norm," like homosexuals, are depicted in unflattering ways or ignored altogether, which reinforces mainstream norms (Gross, 1991).

Why are these groups marginalized and differences downplayed in the media? Because media companies want to create products that most people will want to watch. Therefore, they will shy away from controversial topics that may put off viewers by avoiding or dismissing the very real problems with politics, race relations, and gender inequity in our society.

LIMITATIONS AND EXPLANATIONS OF THE CULTIVATION EFFECT

Resonance. Resonance, or having personal experiences that agree with what is seen in the media, increases the cultivation effect. Like perceived realism, resonance makes what is seen on TV a confirmation of one's own personal experience. For example, people who have been victims of crime are more likely to experience the mean world syndrome (Shrum & Darmanin Bischak, 2001).

Genre. The genre one watches and the channel one chooses to use for media does influence the cultivation effect (Grabe & Drew, 2007). Gerbner et al. (2002) argued against looking at "genre-specific effects" because TV is viewed by cultivation theorists as a complete system of storytelling and a lot of TV viewing is ritualized grazing of content. But, there is also merit to the argument that some people watch very narrow and specific genres, and that different genres tell very different stories in very different ways. A person who watches only sci-fi may see a crime drama, like *Warehouse 13* or *Grimm*, but the elements of the show would be fundamentally different than shows like *CSI* or *NCIS*. Sci-fi crime drama viewers may not experience a *CSI* effect because of the fundamental differences in the genres: It seems unrealistic for people, regardless of how much TV they watch, to expect that supernatural investigators actually exist. Further, those who do not watch any crime shows would likely experience even less of an effect.

User differences. People vary in how and why they use the media, but cultivation looks only at how much time people spend with the media. People are sometimes selective and often intentional about what media they use, and they also vary in how realistic they perceive media to be (Rubin et al., 1988). In a survey study, Rubin et al. found that perceptual effects described in cultivation theory, including the mean world syndrome and mainstreaming, were related to individual differences that determined media use patterns rather than media

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use predicting effects, as cultivation would have predicted. Individual differences are discussed in further detail in Chapter 6.

The heuristic-systematic explanation.   Though the cultivation effect is a relatively small effect, and it is determined by several important individual and content variables, it is still worthwhile to understand why cultivation occurs. One explanation is that TV makes certain instances accessible in memory (Shrum, 2002). **Accessibility** is how quickly, or easily, something comes to mind. Much like the priming explanation of agenda setting effects discussed in Chapter 8, the accessibility explanation of cultivation effects explains that seeing depictions on TV makes them accessible in memory and, therefore, they influence people's perceptions.

Shrum (2002) outlined three elements of TV content that lead to increased accessibility:

1.   Frequency and recency
2.   Vividness
3.   Relationship to other memories

TV shows similar images repeatedly. For example, cultivation research suggests that violence is ubiquitous on TV. Therefore, we see instances of violence frequently, and the more frequently we see them, the more accessible those instances will be in memory. Also, if we have recently seen violence, it will be more accessible.

Further, the more **vivid**—or the more engaging, emotionally provoking, and concrete—the images on TV are, the more they will stand out in memory. Thus, particularly elaborate and visually exciting fight scenes will be more accessible in memory. This has particularly important implications in this era of high definition 3D televisions and DVRs. TV and movies are now even more visually engaging than they were in the heyday of cultivation research back in the 1980s.

Lastly, TV tends to present narratives in particular ways. Narratives arrange ideas, events, or behaviors together in a neat little package. The more we see that story structure repeated, the more we internalize that narrative, particularly as it fits with other, similar narratives. For example, if crime dramas always show detectives using scientific evidence and people being proven guilty, and we see that narrative play out repeatedly in numerous different shows, our memories for how crime investigations happen will be very consistent, and that consistency will make what we see in those shows more accessible in memory.

In short, there are elements of the storytelling, or narrative, nature of TV and movies that make cultivation effects occur. Though there are some individual variations in media use that affect cultivation, there are common elements of TV that make cultivation effects relatively consistent.

Narrative Analysis: The Critical Study of Stories in the Media

Much like Gerbner et al. (2000), Fisher (1987) argued that humans are storytellers by nature, and that we learn about, understand, and describe the world through narratives. Cultivation research is typically a combination of quantitative content analysis and surveys. Though they are critical approaches to understanding the values and cultural perceptions in media content, both ideological and narrative criticism focus on many of the same concerns that cultivation theorists discuss. There are three interrelated elements to all narratives: plot, characters, and setting, though the relative emphasis on any one of those elements may change. To understand the lessons taught via media content, we have to understand the narratives that are used to transmit those lessons.

PLOT

Plot is the series of events that occur in narrative and how they are related to each other, and it typically involves some cause and effect relationships. Plots teach us lessons (i.e., the moral of the story), how things work, and how things are related to each other. In a critical analysis of plots, we may discuss the implications of numerous elements of the storyline (Foss, 2004):

- The major turning points in the story: the essential elements of the major plot line
- The minor events in the story: details that support the major events
- The organization of events: linear chronological order, flashbacks, flashforwards, etc.
- The causal relationships among events: what event leads to what outcomes
- The intended audience for the narrative
- The theme of the narrative, or moral of the story

CHARACTERS

Characters include main characters, supporting characters, and narrators (Foss, 2004). Characters are developed over the course of the narrative, and can teach the audience ways to behave (or not behave). When critically evaluating a narrative, we consider the following aspects of characters:

- Traits
- Behaviors
- Extent of character development

We also consider the narrator's tone, pace, viewpoint (are they describing, evaluating, informing, summarizing, explaining in retrospect, etc.).

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SETTING

Lastly, we look at the setting. We consider where the events take place and whether they are real or imagined places. We consider the time that is being depicted: Is it the present, past, or future? We also reach conclusions about how important the physical environment is to the storyline and the characters: is it simply a backdrop or is the setting an integral part of the narrative?

EXAMPLE NARRATIVE ANALYSIS: *THE BREAK-UP*

The Break-Up (2006) starring Jennifer Aniston (Brooke) and Vince Vaughn (Gary) was a funny, but poignant, story about the process of breaking up. Set in modern urban Chicago, the couple bought a small starter condo. Gary is a likable but lazy tour guide, and Brooke is a caring but picky art studio manager. The movie begins with an awkward dinner that the couple hosted to help their families get better acquainted. After the dinner, there was a huge fight, presumably about Gary not wanting to help Brooke wash dishes. When it becomes clear that there would be no resolution to the argument, Brooke breaks up with Gary, and the remainder of the movie focuses on the slow process of ending the relationship.

Brooke tries numerous things to get Gary to feel jealous, left out, and to miss her, which Gary mistakes as an escalation of the conflict, leading him to be even more sloppy and

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crude in retaliation. Ultimately, they sell the condo and go their separate ways: Gary to build his tourism business and Brooke to tour Europe after taking a leave of absence from her job. In the end, he learns to be a little more responsible, and she learns to be a little more free-spirited.

So what are the lessons taught to moviegoers? Taking into account the well-developed characters, relatively cliché plot, and modern, urban setting we can reach the following conclusions. First, the narrative of the story has a lot of the conventions of a romantic comedy: opposites attract, they fight over their differences, they struggle with getting back together, and there are a series of funny and sometimes heartbreaking missteps and misunderstandings along the way. The difference with this movie, though, is that the couple does not get back together in the end. The narrative and the characters teach us some life lessons: If we're too inflexible, we'll be alone. We should say what we mean, and not play games in relationships. Sometimes it's better to give in a little. When relationships do end, we should learn from it and become better people. Interestingly, the characters also conform to stereotypical gender roles: Gary is a partier who likes to play video games, and Brooke is focused on the relationship and their home. One interesting possible lesson from this narrative is that too much gender stereotypical behavior can drive our partners away.

Similar movies with these life lessons have been made, like *The War of the Roses*, but *The Break Up* reinforces these lessons for a new generation of young, professional twenty- and thirty-somethings. Though the film itself was not particularly well received (IMDb gives it a mediocre 3 out of 5 stars, and Metacritic gives it a failing 45% score out of possible 100%), it still grossed over $200 million, and therefore reached a substantial audience. This narrative, which fits nicely with other narratives from more happy-go-lucky romantic comedies, teaches and reinforces important lessons about love and relationships in modern America.

Ideological Analysis: The Critical Study of the Beliefs and Values in Media Content

Ideological analysis of media content is conducted to look at how systems of symbols and signs are used to reinforce dominant political and social beliefs, values, norms, and perceptions. Like cultivation theorists, critical scholars argue that media can be a significant source of social and political beliefs. Further, corporate control over media content means that a relatively small, powerful group of media moguls create and disseminate those ideological messages. In this view, television is a form of social control.

Narrative analysis can be part of exploring the ideology in media content. The "lessons" taught in narratives serve to reinforce the dominant ideology. But, ideological analysis is

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concerned with both the social normative consequences of media content and the intentions of the media executives that create such content.

Therefore, a small group of wealthy, private owners are creating or reinforcing an ideology that serves their interests. In this view, media is a dominating, hegemonic force in society because the group that controls the media is disseminating ideological messages that promote their belief system and values while also ignoring or derogating competing ideologies.

KEY CONCEPTS FOR CONDUCTING IDEOLOGICAL CRITICISM (FOSS, 2004)

- **Hegemony**: When one group's ideology dominates another group's ideology
- **Muting**: When a group outside of the dominant ideology is silenced by being ridiculed or ignored
- **Symbols / Semiotics**: How different aspects of media content, like production techniques, characters, dialogue, costumes, setting, etc., imply particular values or beliefs
- **Marxism**: Wealth, ownership, and capitalism affect the production and dissemination of a particular ideology through the use of media symbols

PROCESS FOR CONDUCTING AN IDEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS (FOSS, 2004)

Ideological analysis is conducted to uncover the ideologies embedded in media content and which ideologies are rejected by that content. Critical analysis in general tends to focus on a few key elements of the overall message in order to define and describe the values in the message and to explain how the elements of that message communicate those values.

1. Choose a media text, like a TV series, movie, or advertisement
2. Explore the ideology created or reinforced in the content:
   a. Who "belongs" in our social group and who doesn't
   b. What people should and should not do
   c. What people's motives or goals are
   d. What is good, right, and just versus bad
   e. Where people are on the social ladder and who the enemy is
   f. What material resources do people have or need
3. Explore *how* the content of the media is influential or persuasive
   a. Does the genre enhance or diminish the ability to sell the ideology?
   b. How many people are exposed to this message?
   c. What aspects of the ideology in the message are emphasized or suppressed? What aspects of competing ideologies are emphasized or suppressed?
   d. How are the stylistic elements of the show, like use of labels, turns of phrase, metaphors, and adages, used to support or undermine an ideology?
   e. What are the interactions like? Who is in control, winning, and dominant and who is subverted?

CASE STUDY: DOS EQUIS' "MOST INTERESTING MAN IN THE WORLD" AD CAMPAIGN AND THE INDIVIDUALISTIC IDEOLOGY.

In the Dos Equis ad campaign, the ideology presented is promoting an elite, hypermasculine, individualistic, and adventurous value system. The ad campaign includes a combination of magazine ads and TV spots which focus on the Most Interesting Man. He is drinking Dos Equis, typically in a bar with beautiful younger women, with a narrator describing how interesting he is. The ads have been widely disseminated and are very popular, particularly in the blogosphere.

Some of the ads poke fun at run-of-the-mill, "pink collar" middle class America by stating that people who wear pleated khakis and eat mild salsa (meaning, those who are not classy or adventurous) are making a choice to be boring. Ads also ridicule average America by saying, "happy hour is the hour after everyone from happy hour has left." In terms of fantasy sports, he explains, "there are better things to fantasize about than teams of men." In this ad campaign, bland, typical lives are the object of ridicule: they are visually excluded from the pictures and verbally belittled in the ad content. One way people can be adventurous and refuse to conform, according to the ads, is to drink Dos Equis.

Reinforcing the sexual nature of the ads, the Most Interesting Man advises that there is one time for pick-up lines: "Never." He also advises, "Fellas, leave the tight pants to the ladies. If I can count the coins in your pocket, you better use them to call a tailor." The explicit, though satirical, sexism in these ads also stirred controversy, such as a print ad that advised, "approach women like you do wild animals, with caution and a soothing voice."

The Most Interesting Man, on the other hand, is so brilliant that "his two cents is worth $37 and change." "Police often question him just because they find him interesting." He also "lives vicariously through himself" and "if opportunity knocks and he's not home,
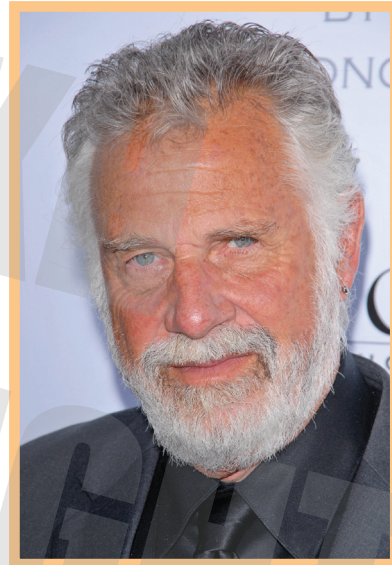
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opportunity waits." He is often shown in scenes doing adventurous, interesting, and intellectual things, even when the ad ends with him at a table in a bar surrounded by beautiful, young women.

So, the ideology depicted is twofold: there is a reinforcement of stereotypical masculinity in the pictures, because the rugged, well dressed, cigar smoking older man is surrounded by well dressed, beautiful, younger women. There is also an emphasis on being an adventurous individual, trying new things, and refusing to conform to the mundane standards of typical middle class life, like, for example, drinking cheap mass-produced beer.

Beer drinking is elevated beyond the "partytime" middle class focus that Budweiser and Miller ads had in the 1990s. In these Dos Equis ads, beer is a way to be more masculine, to assert one's individualism,

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and live an upper class lifestyle even as the economy wanes. Interestingly, these ads came out at a time when microbrew and craft beer sales had increased by about 15% (*Food Technology*, 2012). Bill Saporito of *Time* magazine (2012) argued that this is part of an "individualization" of the liquor, wine, and beer industry. Arguably, what you drink communicates who you are as an individual.

This approach to advertising has been essential to getting Millennials to drink beer, as this younger generation tends to prefer liquor and mixed drinks and shun mass-produced American beers, like Budweiser and Miller. Hence, the Dos Equis tag line from the TV commercials: "I don't always drink beer, but when I do, I prefer Dos Equis" may be appealing to this demographic. Dos Equis is a way to drink beer and to assert your own uniqueness.

See AdWeek's collection of articles about Dos Equis ads here: http://www.adweek.com/topic/dos-equis

View some of the TV ads on Dos Equis You-Tube channel: http://www.youtube.com/user/dosequisbeer?feature=watch

COMPARING IDEOLOGICAL AND NARRATIVE ANALYSIS WITH CULTIVATION ANALYSIS

Clearly, cultivation theory and ideological and narrative analysis are concerned with similar issues: How media content can cumulatively affect how people perceive the world around them and influence their values. Both perspectives view the media as a source of ideology, or as a socializing force in American society. However, there are very important methodological differences between these approaches to media content.

Ideological Analysis	Cultivation Analysis
• Critical methodology • Small sample • Each media text is part of a system of meaning; supports one narrative • Considers media content within the historical and cultural context • Describes and evaluates *what* is presented and *how* it is presented • Considers what is not shown in media content • Infers how people may be affected by explaining the ideological or narrative elements in a text • Recognizes the influence of corporate interests on content	• Quantitative methodology • Large sample • A system of symbols emerges from the study of many texts • Sees the media as a source of context for viewers • Counts what is presented in media content • Counts only *what* is shown in content • Correlates what is found in content with people's real world perceptions • Recognizes the influence of corporate interests on content

In the following section, we look at applications of cultivation, ideological analysis, and narrative analysis to consider the many subtle messages implicit in media content that may affect people's perceptions. We begin by looking at self-perceptions, which include body image, self satisfaction, and cultural values, then go on to explore how media messages influence our perceptions of others.

Our Obsession with Beauty and Youth: Depictions of Women in Media Content

In a study looking at the characters shown on prime-time television between 1975 and 1993, Gerbner (1997) found that women were underrepresented compared to men, and women at midlife and late in life were the most underrepresented in media content. Even fewer older and middle-aged women have lead roles compared to men and women under age 45. Older women are more likely to be shown in married contexts and are rarely shown in romantic situations. In all, the depiction of women in the media is one that over-represents young women, and paints a picture of middle-aged and older women as more matronly. Further, older people are often depicted as senile, infirm, and older women in particular are likely to be ridiculed. As a result, media images of women may cultivate inaccurate perceptions of how "real women" are and how they should be.

THE THIN IDEAL

In addition to the obsession with youth, the media tends to project images of women as impossibly beautiful and thin (López-Guimerà et al., 2010). Content analyses suggest that women in magazines have progressively gotten thinner over the course of 40 years (Sypeck et al, 2004). This creates a "**thin ideal**," or a preference for extreme thinness, even among women who are a healthy weight.

Consider the example of Marilyn Monroe. Model Elizabeth Hurley famously quipped, "I'd kill myself if I was as fat as Marilyn Monroe." Though certainly a tacky comment, the fact is that Marilyn would not stand a chance in modern modeling or even acting. Marilyn was probably a size 10 in today's dress sizes (claims that she was up to a size 16 were discredited by Snopes and numerous others). Compare this to actress and Victoria Secret model Rosie Huntington-Whitely, who is estimated to be a size 4 and topped *Maxim Magazine*'s 2011 Hot 100. What do you think the implications are for what women and girls will expect of themselves, or what others will expect of them?

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In addition to genetics and the use of personal trainers and dieting, which keep modern models and actresses thin, magazine images are often manipulated, as discussed in the Critic's Case-in-Point at the beginning of this chapter. These images may make otherwise healthy women feel unattractive, leading to disordered eating, dieting, exercising, and, in extreme cases, anorexia or bulimia. People's body image, or perception of the attractiveness of their own bodies, may be negatively affected.

The preponderance of evidence is that the "mass media are an extremely important source, if not the principal source, of information and reinforcement in relation to the nature of the thin beauty ideal, its importance, and how to attain it" (López-Guimerà et al., 2010, p. 406). When we see all of the thin, beautiful women on TV, our own body satisfaction goes down (Grabe et al., 2008). Similarly, when we are repeatedly exposed to images of thin women in beauty magazines, we may go through the process of social comparison and increase dieting and exercise to try to achieve that thin ideal (Knobloch-Westerwick & Crane, 2012). Exposure to fashion and celebrity magazines, in particular, decreases women's self-esteem as a result of the social comparison processes readers experience when they see these images (Krcmar et al., 2008).

SOCIAL COMPARISON

Social comparison is part of the human condition that leads us to compare ourselves to others as a way to evaluate ourselves (Smeesters et al., 2010). We compare ourselves by con-

sidering how similar versus dissimilar we are to others. If we compare ourselves to people who are better than we perceive ourselves as being—people who are more thin, beautiful, successful, etc.—it can damage our self-esteem because we fail to measure up.

One of the reasons people use media is for the purpose of social comparison (Baruh, 2010). But we are not always consciously choosing to socially compare ourselves to the women we see on TV, in magazines, or in movies. One concern is that we may be going through this process of social comparison unconsciously and automatically as we are exposed to different forms of media (Smeesters et al., 2010). In a study comparing the effects of extremely thin, moderate, and heavy models in advertising, Smeesters et al. found that people who were thin had their self-esteem enhanced and women who were heavy had their self-esteem reduced by exposure to either extreme.

REFLECTED APPRAISALS

Another concern we have about media content that routinely advances unrealistically thin and beautiful images of women is that people's appraisals of us may be affected (Milkie, 1999). **Reflected appraisals** are when people who are exposed to these images in the media may become concerned that others will judge them against those idealized images.

Milkie found that young girls are concerned that other people will compare them to the models in beauty magazines and judge them as less attractive. As a result, girls who read those magazines recognized that the images were not realistic, but still indicated a desire to be like the models pictured. This was particularly true for White girls, who tended to identify with the magazine content. Black girls, on the other hand, were under-represented in the magazines and, therefore, did not identify as closely with the images in the magazines.

SELF-DISCREPANCY AND BODY IMAGE

The concept of self-discrepancy integrates social comparison and reflected appraisal processes by suggesting that **self-discrepancy**, or how positively we feel about ourselves, is the outcome of who we are relative to who we think we should be. Each of us has a unique understanding of who we are (actual self), who we should be (ideal self), and who others would want us to be (ought self) (Harrison, 2001). The differences between the actual, ideal, and ought self determines the extent of the discrepancy, and the more discrepancy there is, the more our self-esteem is injured.

What we see in the media determines which aspect of the self is activated (Harrison, 2001). If I see thin characters on TV being rewarded, this would activate the "ideal self." If I see obese women in the media being punished, this would activate the "ought self." Activation

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of either the ideal or ought self increases negative feelings in viewers, and can lead to eating disorder symptoms.

The extent of discrepancy can influence a person's **body image**, or how positively or negatively they view their own physical appearance. Having a negative body image is related to being less satisfied with one's physical appearance, feeling a drive to be thin, and disordered eating (Heinberg & Thompson, 1992).

In terms of media content, then, the significant differences between the size of the average model and the average American woman can have severe implications for body image, self-esteem, and healthy eating. The average model weighs 23% less than the average American woman and many models and actresses meet the criteria for anorexia because their body mass index scores are so low (Lovett, 2012). While half of American women wear a size 14 or larger, most runway models are smaller than a size 6. Those from size 6 to 14 are "plus sized" models. Therefore, there is bound to be a discrepancy between average women and the images they see in media content.

Our Understanding of Material Success and Professions: Cultural Values and Ideology in Media Content

In addition to media content that portrays young, thin, beautiful women, the media also depicts lifestyles that influence how we perceive the world and our own definition of success. In terms of the ideological implications of the narratives we see on TV, particularly with the scenes in which those narratives are set, there is a clear visual emphasis on material wealth and consumerism.

CONSUMERISM AND MATERIALISM

Heavy TV viewers are exposed to a world full of affluent people who wear expensive clothes, live in gorgeous, immaculate homes, and drive expensive cars. There are several outcomes of these depictions on TV. First, people tend to overestimate others' wealth and ownership of luxury goods (O'Guinn & Shrum, 1997). Also, people who watch a lot of TV tend to have more materialistic values (Yang & Oliver, 2010). This is particularly true of viewers who are lower in socioeconomic status. Also, the amount of television viewing people participate in is related to how satisfied people are with their own personal situation and how happy they are with social equality in the United States.

When coding for visible signs of affluence in TV content, O'Guinn and Shrum (1997) took into account not only the mere presence of wealth, but also how wealth was emphasized

in TV content. They assessed the vividness of the wealth depicted, whether it was central to the **plot**, and the intensity of the depiction. They found numerous instances of people owning convertibles, having house servants, and drinking wine. People who watched a lot of television, particularly the less affluent and less educated, had higher estimates of these consumer behaviors occurring in real life. In a follow-up study, Shrum et al. (2005) found that heavy TV viewing also increased people's materialist values.

Consider the CW show, *Gossip Girl*. The show is a drama that follows the lives of young adults who are the children of "Manhattan's elite" on the Upper East Side. The characters go to expensive schools, vacation in Europe, wear designer clothes, have servants, drivers, posh parties, and luxurious homes in Manhattan and vacation homes in the Hamptons. The characters' wealth is central to most of the plotlines in the show, and they often openly discuss the extent of their wealth in the dialogue of the show. People who watch *Gossip Girl* may overestimate the number of people who actually live that lifestyle, and may themselves internalize the values of consumerism and materialism that the characters represent. Both narrative and ideological analysis, which suggest that the most prominent elements of the story (in this case, the setting) may influence people's values, and cultivation theory, which asserts that TV can affect people's perceptions of others, support the conclusion that this type of TV content can influence people's expectations.

Research has suggested that *The Real Housewives* reality TV shows often promote consumerism through depicting women shopping and suggest that one can achieve happiness through shopping (Cox & Proffitt, 2012). Home makeover programs like *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* have a similar message: people can completely reinvent themselves and be happy if they invest in their homes (Dixon, 2008). Also, advertisements, like Apple's "Get a Mac" campaign, which shows a pouty PC owner lamenting the shortcomings of his technology to a hip and happy Mac owner, promotes an ideology of personal identity through consumerism.

In fact, much of modern "lifestyle programming" promises us a better life, more happiness, success, and personal fulfillment, through consumerism. Shows like *What Not to Wear* teach us that we can be the best possible us by buying clothes and cosmetics. Further, HGTV shows like *House Crashers*, *House Hunters*, and *Kitchen Impossible* teach us that our home, decorations, and furnishing can help us live the good life. Finally, Food Network shows like *How to Cook Like a Restaurant Chef*, *Dessert First*, and *Everyday Italian* teach us that food can make us happy. If we don't want to make it ourselves, we can watch *The Best Thing I Ever Ate* and learn where we can buy the best possible meals. Not surprisingly, as mentioned in Chapter 5, the networks that feature this programming also have advertisers and endorsements of products we can buy to live the dream they're selling. Some of the networks, like Food Network, even have their own product lines.

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PROFESSIONS

Television and movies can teach us a great deal about different careers and professions as well. What we see in the media affects young adults' career aspirations (Van Den Bulck & Beullens, 2007). In fact, seeing scientists on TV can increase kids' "wishful identification," or their desire to be like those scientists they see on TV (Steinke, et al., 2012). Media content also demonstrates how to achieve professional success.

In a discourse analysis of makeover programs, like *Extreme Makeover*, Lee (2009) found that one of the key themes in the show was that "beauty brings about success in career and romance" (p. 511). Breast augmentation and other cosmetic enhancements are described as a means for women to "pursue their careers." Though the vast majority of research on social comparison, body image, and satisfaction focuses on women, men can be affected by overly idealistic depictions as well, particularly in terms of professional success (Gulas & McKeage, 2000). Men who were exposed to advertisements featuring financially successful male models tended to experience a dip in self-esteem.

Police and law enforcement. In terms of specific careers, there is a sizable body of literature that explores the depiction of police. For example, Dirikx et al. (2012) coded the content of popular police shows, including *CSI* and *NCIS*, to explore how trustworthy, respectful, and justified police behaviors were. They also coded for the consequences, the voice or communication style of the police, and their neutrality or objectivity as investigators. They found that there were numerous depictions of police violating civil rights, being verbally disrespectful, and conducting accusatory interrogations. Also, there were numerous instances of justification for the infractions and personal involvement in the cases. But there were not a lot of consequences shown for those behaviors. Oliver (1994) also found that police in reality programs were more aggressive than the criminals were.

Prosise and Johnson (2004) also found several similar recurrent themes in reality programs about police work like *Cops*. Police were often morally superior and more humanized than the suspects. Their work was portrayed as exciting work where the police were in control and aggressive. Fishman (1999) added that, in *Cops*, the ideology depicted is one where people are subordinate to the police and the police are often depicted as heroes who always catch the bad guy. In terms of the demographics of police, Oliver (1994) found that African Americans were rarely shown as police officers, but were overrepresented as perpetrators of crimes and victims of physical violence from police.

Therefore, media depictions of police suggest that they are "moral agents" who sometimes have to break the rules and be aggressive to save people. They often racially profile, but this too is justified.

Consider the example of Jack Bauer on *24*. As a member of the Counter Terrorist Unit, Jack Bauer (played by Keifer Sutherland) tried to thwart terrorist attacks including an assassination attempt, detonation of a nuclear bomb, kidnappings, and a military coup in Africa. The investigation is shown in real time, with each episode being one hour of the 24 hours of the investigation. Bauer often broke the rules, ignored authority, and used torture to get information.

The popular show ran for eight seasons. Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2009) argued, "*24* and its leading character are embedded in the U.S. political culture" (p. 368). Journalists and columnists used *24* as evidence of real world problems, to justify policies, and as a point of comparison for politicians and policies regarding torture. This entirely fictional show became part of real political discussion in the United States, which clearly demonstrates how fiction can influence the attitudes, beliefs, and values of viewers.

Medical doctors. Medical doctors are also grossly overrepresented in the media. Medical dramas, like *ER*, *Chicago Hope,* and *Becker*, depict doctors as mean and unethical (Chory-Assad & Tamborini, 2001, p. 514). This is in stark contrast to the portrayal of doctors in the 1980s and '90s, who included Cliff Huxtable from the *Cosby Show* and Doogie from *Doogie Houser, MD*. In those shows, doctors were caring, affectionate, and involved professionals.

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In a more recent study that explored *Grey's Anatomy* in particular, Quick (2009) found that people who watched the show saw doctors as more courageous when they perceived the show content as credible. They attributed this to the numerous heroic acts portrayed by the characters in that show. Also, doctors are depicted as rarely making mistakes (Foss, 2011). When mistakes are depicted, there is typically an external cause, like institutional problems. Chory-Assad and Tamborini (2001) and Foss (2011) pointed out that these types of depictions can influence people's perceptions of doctors and the health care industry. We may begin to see doctors as infallible, or become skeptical of modern medical care.

House is a good example of the depiction of doctors as heroic but loathsome people. Hugh Laurie played Dr. Gregory House, head of a diagnostic team at a university teaching hospital. House was brilliant, but verbally aggressive, angst-ridden, and addicted to painkillers. Using investigative tactics, team collaboration, and his own medical expertise, House accurately diagnosed and treated obscure diseases that other doctors could not identify. This show sets the expectation in viewers that doctors, though cold and detached, have all of the answers and can save almost anyone's life.

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In short, television depicts police and doctors as aggressive heroes who save lives. These shows over-represent the number of police and doctors in American society, and create a myth that these professionals are cold hearted but always right. These depictions can have real life implications for how we perceive the people in these professions, how we interact with them, and this can impact the quality of service we receive.

Our (Mis)perceptions of Others: Stereotypes in Media Content

SOCIOECONOMIC GROUPS

Though we are certainly shown "the good life" in the media, and are exposed to the most exciting careers, most depictions of social class on TV have historically focused on the middle class (Gerbner, 1997). Long running and popular shows like *Cheers, Roseanne, King*

of Queens, *The Simpsons*, *King of the Hill*, *Married . . . With Children*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, *Friends*, *Grounded for Life*, *The Drew Carey Show*, *Boy Meets World*, *The Wonder Years*, *Home Improvement*, and *Full House* featured working- and middle-class people.

Modern reality TV often exploits working class people for the entertainment of the masses. Take the popular show, *Wife Swap*, where two women from geographically, ideologically, and socioeconomically different households "trade lives" for two weeks. The show often switches an urban, middle class woman with a rural working class woman. They often have extremely judgmental reactions to each other's parenting styles, housekeeping, marriage type, and diet. Lyle (2008) argued that the working class people featured in the British version of *Wife Swap* are often shown as out of control, lazy, and unhealthy, and invites the audience to look down on the working class. This reinforces the dominant ideology and long-standing cultural divisions between middle- and working class people, and makes less socioeconomically advantaged lifestyles the object of contempt.

In terms of depictions of working class and the economically disadvantaged, traditional news also depicts the working class as more likely to be involved in crime (Grabe, 1997). When coding content, Grabe defined working class as anyone depicted as "just getting along" or "barely making ends meet," compared to the middle class, who had "average comforts and living standards" (p. 932). In tabloid news coverage of crime, working class people were often depicted as the victims with other working class people as the perpetrators. In highbrow news outlets, middle class people were the victims and working class people were the criminals. In all, working class people are often depicted as criminals when crime is covered in news shows. This further reinforces stereotypes of the working class.

Programming also often celebrates the middle class. For example, *American Chopper* is a reality show about a father and son team who own Orange County Choppers and make custom-made motorcycles. This show celebrates the manual, blue collar labor of the middle class (Carroll, 2008). Customized bikes are a way to "display middle class affluence" (p. 267). Also, the success of the business reinforces the American dream of working hard, doing well, and achieving economic prosperity. The bikes being built also often reflect a sense of nationalism, as they have included choppers that pay tribute to American veterans and American workers.

Generally, depictions of the middle class are flattering and support the lifestyle and values of middle class America: hard work, patriotism, and upward mobility. One classic example of the middle class, *The Cosby Show*, drew criticism in its day, though, for minimizing the struggles of Black middle class families (Innis & Feagin, 1995). Some critics and focus groups argued that the depiction of a wealthy, upper-middle class Black family in *The Cosby Show* ignored the issues with racism in the United States, and may actually undermine the ability to handle racial issues by making it appear as if there aren't any problems with dis-

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crimination. In general, the celebration of the middle class and dismissal of the working class in media content can minimize the struggle faced by both socioeconomic groups.

SEX ROLES

Sex roles are people's expectations for how men versus women should behave, or what roles are appropriate for each gender. Traditional gender roles depict women as domestic, emotional, and weaker, and men are depicted as dominant, less emotional, strong, and active (Calvert et al., 2003). This is particularly true in children's programming, as male superheroes dominate and female characters are often underrepresented. Children's television content can influence kids' perceived gender roles, though exposure to television shows with a nontraditional gender depiction can diminish these effects (Calvert et al., 2003). But, even in ads targeted to children, men are more likely to be depicted in work settings and are more likely to be the dominant character (Davis, 2003), thereby reinforcing long-held stereotypes that women are domestic and men are the breadwinners.

These stereotypical sex roles are reinforced in entertainment programs and commercials aimed at adolescents and adults as well. Even commercials aimed at adult women have stereotypical portrayals of females: women in food commercials, compared to men, are depicted as more dependent, in domestic settings, younger, less likely to give scientific explanations of products, and the outcomes emphasized focus on self-enhancement rather than practicality (Aronovsky & Adrian, 2008). Beyond just TV, video games and magazines that discuss video games depict men as aggressive and women as sex objects, and this leads to increased stereotyped perceptions (Dill & Thill, 2007).

Sex roles in the media that socialize people into these stereotypical perceptions of gender have very real implications for women in America. Specifically, in an analysis of campaign coverage of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin in 2008, we see how sex roles can influence how people think about and react to female candidates (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). Specifically, coverage of both Clinton and Palin talked about their physical attractiveness and clothing, which are two uncommon topics when critiquing male candidates. Coverage of Palin focused on how her work interfered with mothering and she was often depicted as a "pet" of the McCain campaign. Clinton, on the other hand, was portrayed as an iron maiden: she was described as "not feminine enough" (p. 337).

Gender roles depicted in entertainment programming and in commercials socialize people into certain expectations for how men and women should behave. As a result, we tend to think of men and women in stereotypical ways, and evaluate them against standards set by the stereotype. Because men are often depicted as the dominant characters, we expect that in our real lives men will fill the dominant roles: they will be the bosses, the managers, and the politicians. Women who want to have leadership positions are caught in a double-bind:

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If they are too feminine, then they are "too weak" to lead and if they are strong and domineering, then they are not likeable.

HOMOSEXUALITY

Media depictions of people who are homosexual also tend to follow commonly held stereotypes. For example, male actors who play gay characters use a more feminine voice when acting, reinforcing the stereotype that gay men are effeminate (Cartei & Reby, 2011). Also, gay couples depicted in television shows tend to have the same stereotypical roles as heterosexual couples on TV: one character is dominant and the other is more feminine and submissive (Holz Ivory et al., 2009). Submissiveness includes being indecisive, obedient, sexually submissive, committed to the couple, and being a homemaker. The dominant-submissive relationship type was found for both gay and lesbian couples. This perpetuates the stereotypes about the gendered behavior of homosexual couples, and leads people to expect homosexual couples to be similar to heterosexual couples with a stereotypically submissive "wife" and dominant "husband."

In addition to the depiction of stereotypical "gay" people, shows also reiterate the belief that heterosexuality is "normal" and preferable, which is called **heteronormativity**. For example, shows like *Playing it Straight*, a dating show where women got to know men and tried to eliminate the gay guy from the field of potential suitors, perpetuated the idea that homosexuals are to be excluded, singled-out, and are noticeably abnormal (Tropiano, 2009).

Further perpetuating those myths, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* reinforced the stereotype that gay men are stylish, fashion forward, and sarcastic. In the show, five gay men offered advice on fashion, decorating, and lifestyle to stereotypical straight men. The show centers on a complete life transformation for the straight men involved, and focuses on typically feminine self-improvement outcomes. The witty and often snarky stars of the show reinforce many of the commonly held stereotypes about gay men's femininity, even though the show itself seems to be promoting gay lifestyles (homonormativity) (Papacharissi & Fernback, 2008).

RACE

Racial stereotypes are common in media content as well. Movies like Tyler Perry's *Madea* and Martin Lawrence's *Big Momma's House*, which have men dressed up to play overweight "mammy-like" Black women can hurt the self-esteem and social identity of women who are minorities (Chen et al., 2012). These increasingly popular movies depict Black women as obese, ignorant, and overbearing, which reinforces long-standing stereotypes of Black mothers and grandmothers.

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Reality TV is another culprit of casting participants who fit stereotypes of African Americans as thugs, hoochies, and "hood rats" (Tyree, 2011). In addition to perpetuating stereotypes, the depictions of African Americans in reality TV also reinforce the belief that race is often a point of tension and conflict, and over-emphasize racial differences through casting choices (Bell-Jordan, 2008). Even minority members of Congress are depicted in the news media in stereotypical ways (Zilber, 2000). Finally, in coverage of the NFL draft, Black athletes are lauded for their physical abilities while White athletes' mental abilities are emphasized (Mercurio & Filak, 2010).

Like gender stereotypes, we also see racial stereotypes in non-TV media as well. For example, racial minorities are underrepresented, and are more often the aggressors in video games (Burgess et al., 2011). This perpetuates the stereotypes that African Americans are more likely to be perpetrators of violence and less likely to be heroes.

Other racial groups are also depicted in stereotypical ways. Asian Americans are often stereotyped as being "nerdy, smart, and polite" (Ramasubramanian, 2011). Advertisement depictions of Asian Americans imply that Asian women are either subservient or seductresses, and Asian men are depicted as socially inept, martial artists, or villains (Lee & Joo, 2005). In media in general, Asians are depicted as the "model minority," or as an exemplary subculture within the United States.

Like Asians, Latinos are also underrepresented in the media. In a study of prime time TV, it was clear that Latinos were grossly underrepresented as characters on TV, and the Latino characters that were on TV "were the youngest, most inappropriately dressed characters, with the heaviest accents" (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). Latinos are often sexualized in media content, leading to a "hot Latina" stereotype. Looking at Eva Longoria's character on *Desperate Housewives*, Gabrielle, we see the embodiment of the "hot Latina" stereotype:

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> She is sexy, sultry, promiscuous, sexually experienced . . . quick tempered, materialistic, devious, desiring, not inclined to work, has an Anglo love interest for whom she will risk almost anything to keep, becomes pregnant quickly, uses her wiles to manipulate men, wears flashy, brightly colored and tight-fitting clothing (Merskin, 2007, p. 146).

In all, media content perpetuates many long-standing stereotypes about racial groups in the United States. Content suggests that Black people are lazy, violent thugs; Asian people are nerdy and socially awkward; and Latinos are very sexual. With these stereotypes being constantly reproduced in American media, it's not surprising that racism, particularly implicit racism, is still such a problem in our country.

AGE

Lastly, stereotypes of older people are prevalent in media content. Gerbner (1997) found that middle aged and elderly people are underrepresented on TV, and that the depictions of the elderly are unflattering. He concluded "Heavy [TV] viewers believe the elderly are in worse shape both physically and financially than they used to be, are not active sexually, are closed-minded, are not good at getting things done . . . old age, especially for women, begins relatively early in life. It cultivates conceptions that trap the elderly in limited and demeaning roles" (p. 94).

Even in children's cartoons, the elderly are underrepresented, and the depictions of the elderly are of unattractive, overweight, and physically handicapped characters (Robinson & Anderson, 2006). These depictions of the elderly as infirm reinforce existing stereotypes in American culture. In fact, these are the very characteristics children often list when asked to describe older adults.

Consider, for example, the father on *King of Queens*, or Ray's parents on *Everybody Loves Raymond*. These parents are supporting actors, so they are not central characters in the shows, though they definitely do play an important part in each episode. They are often used for comic relief, as the absurd things they say and do are the butt of numerous jokes on the shows. They are depicted as pushy, silly, lacking good reasoning, outdated, and physically unfit.

Critique and Closing

There is clear evidence that numerous groups are depicted in stereotypical ways in the media: social classes, men and women, racial groups, and age groups are each presented in the media in a way that reinforces dominant (mis)perceptions. According to cultivation theory and narrative and ideological research, these portrayals can have a significant cumulative

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effect. In fact, many of these stereotypes and values are shown in children's programming and continue to be reinforced in the diverse media we consume even as adults, including TV, magazines, video games, the news, and sports coverage.

That being said, there is still some debate over whether the effect of these stereotypical depictions, consumerist values, and body image portrayals are truly "large" effects. In general, the shift in perception from viewing any one show is relatively small. Part of the difficulty in clearly determining the size of the effect is because we are such a media saturated society, with remarkably diverse media consumption habits and personal experiences. Truly parsing out what portion of our perception comes from the media versus personal experience or other sources of socialization, like our parents and peers, is nearly impossible. But, the overwhelming evidence is that there is an effect, we just don't know how big the effect really is. However, it's hard to imagine, with the overwhelming amount of research that points to the prevalence of stereotypes, ideal body images, and consumerist values in TV that there could possibly be *no* effect.

In terms of the implications for media content, there is a debate: do media companies create this content because it's what *they want* us to see, or do they create it because it's what *we want* to see? Media economics would suggest that it's the interplay of what we want to watch blended with content that helps media conglomerates sell other products. Selective exposure suggests that we don't like content that challenges our beliefs, values, and attitudes. So, in terms of creating media messages with mass appeal, it's best for them to avoid challenging deep-rooted stereotypes. On the other hand, cultivation and ideological analysis suggests that media conglomerates are creating these messages because it helps them sell products, like diet supplements, make-up, and material goods to "enhance" our bodies and our lives. These researchers also suggest that media messages are a form of social control. And that also seems like a plausible explanation of how and why we see the messages we do. So, what comes first, the viewers' preferences or the companies' bottom lines? It may be both, and it may be neither. A lot of research remains to be done.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we see two extremes in content studies in the research summarized here. On the one hand, there is cultivation theory, which explores massive samples of media content and explores broad trends in that content. On the other hand, we have narrative and ideological analysis, which tends to be an in-depth look at one or two episodes or a single season or series to look for emergent themes. Neither of these methods is without weaknesses. Cultivation research may miss some of the nuances of a particular genre, and critical analysis may overlook, or possibly overstate, the existence of particular trends in media content. Results from each end of the spectrum should be interpreted and applied cautiously.

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