

BLOCK 2
VIRTUAL WORLD AND HUMAN
INTERACTION



UNIT 3 PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND GAMING BEHAVIOUR*

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Learning Objectives

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- explain parasocial relationships,
- develop insights into the formation of parasocial relationships and their impact, and
- elucidate the effect of gaming and media fandom on human beings.

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3.0 INTRODUCTION

We are increasingly realizing that we inhabit a world more virtual than real, at least for the last two years (through 2020 and 2021); the reason being the world wide pandemic-COVID-19 and resulting work-from-home arrangements. Teaching and learning, consulting medical professionals or therapists, organization of celebrations and parties, seminars and conferences, shopping, entertainment – everything is being organized in an online mode. Due to the norms of physical distancing, face-to-face conversations and meetings have reduced significantly. Even before the pandemic, the rise in information technology access and awareness led to what we may term ‘digital natives’ or citizens of the virtual world. The extent of this can easily be deciphered from the fact that on an average a person in India spends roughly 5 hours per day consuming media across platforms and browsing the internet (Statista, 2021). Thus, with the increased use of mass media, there is a possibility of developing an interaction between the users of media and human representations appearing in the media, like celebrities, presenters, actors, etc. Such typical social relationships are known as parasocial relationships which will be the focus of this Unit. Audience participation, fan clubs, interactive fan communities create a social environment and cultural experiences that comes out of the popular media. Fans become emotionally attached to their favourite media. This unique interaction between fans and media, known as media fandom will also be discussed in the Unit. Finally, the Unit will describe the phenomenon of celebrity worshipping which develops in countless people and in extreme cases, might become pathological.

3.1 CONCEPT OF CELEBRITY AND PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Before formally defining para-social relationships, let us answer some questions:

- ✓ Are you a fan of some celebrity? Who are they? Do you consider them as ‘hero’ or your friend?
- ✓ Is there someone you consider an enemy or “bad person” yet cannot stop watching or do not want them to exit their show?
- ✓ Do you like Mumbai Indians or Chennai Super Kings or Bengal Royals?
- ✓ Who is your favourite television star? Do you ever wonder what these stars do in their non-screen life?
- ✓ Do you think about your favourite celebrity or feel close to them without even meeting them once in real life?

Is it correct to assume that while answering these questions you were thinking about some persons/groups and how you feel or think about them? And that in most of these relationships, your celebrity or television star does not know how they have a significant place in your life? Such a relationship

is called a parasocial relationship (PSR). A parasocial relationship is a relationship between 1) a media user and 2) their real or imaginary person(s) which is 3) mediated using a media platform (television, radio, games, YouTube and other such platforms). Interestingly, PSR can also be with fictional characters (like *Spiderman* or *Superman*) and other cartoon characters that do not exist in human form (like *Doraemon*, or *Noddy*).

Let us consider a few more statements-

I love Molly. The more I start to think about and analyse the depth of her mothering for her own children and Harry, the more overwhelmed with emotion I become.[†]

I don't think Snape has ever said anything untrue, or anything that did not happen or was false, not about anyone. I don't have any doubt about it.[‡]

If we pay attention to these quotes, taken from two of the *Harry Potter* fan sites or discussion forums, we can see how a character may emerge as a real entity from the pages of the books. These quotes are typical of several such posts posted on different fan sites about these two or other characteristics or this particular book/movie series and other such shows or books throughout the cyberspace. These figures (real or imaginary) have come to life for their fans and through the information available about these figures, fans believe that they know these figures and they are an important and intrinsic part of their lives, similar to people in their social circles. They seem to be emotionally involved in the series or how a particular character develops, to the extent that it may have consequences for the individual.

First described by **Horton** and **Wohl** in 1956, a parasocial relationship is “a kind of psychological relationship experienced by members of an audience in their mediated encounters with certain performers in the mass media, particularly on television” (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Since then, the definition of mass media has expanded far and wide to include much more advanced and interactive platforms (Facebook, YouTube, etc.)

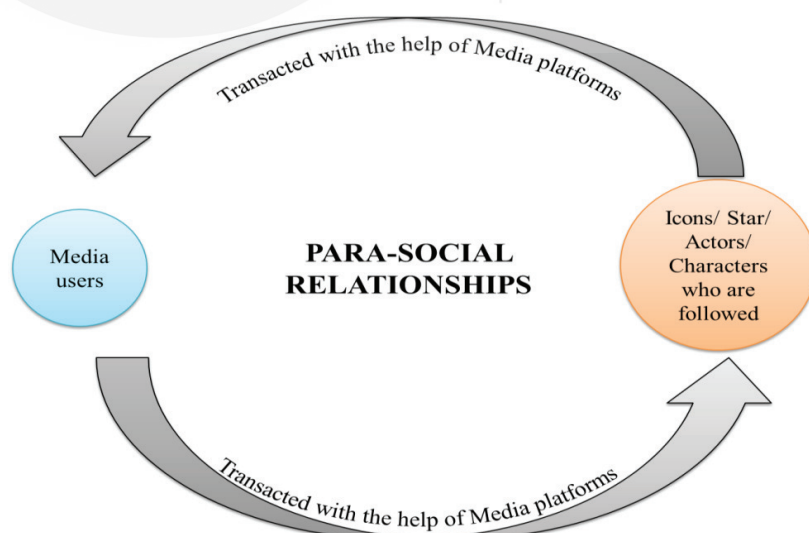


Figure3.1 What is a parasocial relationship?

[†]<http://leakylounge.com> (Harry Potter discussion forum)

[‡]<http://chamberofsecrets.com> (Harry Potter discussion forum)

As these relationships become more frequent and viewers spend more time with these media characters, a sense of intimacy develops (Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008). With time, these characters also become quite predictable and the viewer is able to “understand”, or “know” their next move. This sense of intimacy combined with a holistic understanding of the character and its persona, the viewer believes that these characters are included in their group of friends by extension (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

All relationship theories are founded on the assumption of reciprocity. Even when the connection is established via internet, there is an underlying assumption of reciprocity. For instance, if you email somebody and do not get a reply ever, you cannot say that you and that person had a conversation or a relationship. A parasocial relationship is not like a social relationship and therefore, the term parasocial is used here. But, at times people assume that the relationship is imaginary in nature and the person is actually in an illusion that the media figure is involved in a relationship with them. Here a word of caution is must that it is unlike a psychiatric syndrome (erotomania) where the person involved believes themselves to be sexually involved with a famous person (Franzini & Grossberg, 1995). For any individual, living in a modern society, parasocial relationships are experienced with various media figures, who are real, fictional, and perhaps even non-human.

3.1.1 Defining Characteristics of PSRs

The following points are what make parasocial relationships alike other social relationship or social interactions.

- 1) **One-sidedness:** Parasocial relationships are usually one-sided, where the consumer of media seems to know about and feel for the media image (character, actor, cartoon, etc.) but the media person has no idea about this consumer.
- 2) **Investment:** As a consumer, the person invests time, energy and emotions in these relationships. This is seen not only through the inability to stop binge-watching series on Netflix or other such Over The Top (OTT) platforms, but also in incidents where fans’ emotional investment in these media figures has devastating consequences as mentioned below.

TRIGGER

ADVISORY

WARNING

Emotional Attachment in PSR: The case of Sushant Singh Rajput and His Fans

Following the tragic death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput, some of his avid fans cited immense grief and an inability to deal with his death as a reason for tragically taking their own lives (Vaid, India.com, 2020).

- 3) **These relationships are voluntary:** PSR are voluntary relationships, much like other voluntary relationships in our real life. We can choose the media figure(s), we choose to invest in or not invest in. We can also choose to move away from a media figure we previously liked, but no longer do.
- 4) **Factors affecting interpersonal attraction apply to PSRs:** PSRs are also governed by factors similar to that of interpersonal attraction – we are more likely to develop a PSR with a person who is similar to us, shares common culture/ thoughts (Turner, 1993). The trends dominating the media make something “nearer” and easier to access for viewer. Age, gender and ethnicity also determine whether or not you would enter in a PSR with a media figure (discussed in detail in section 3.1.5)
- 5) **Provides companionship:** Parasocial relationships also provide the viewer with companionship, similar to the way social groups and friends do. Developing over a period of time, PSRs become more intense with time. The more the viewer can “*know*” the persona, the more they are able to “*predict*” their actions, giving an overall impression “*predictable*” person, something we can only do for people we are very close to. All of this proximity, intensity and predictability (though one-sided) mimics real-world friendships.
- 6) **Needs maintenance:** PSRs also need maintenance, much like relationships in real life. While in other social relationships one needs to stay in touch via messages, calls and personal meetings, in parasocial relationships one maintains the relationship through continued viewership, by following the media person across different social media websites and sometimes attending events where they get access to the celebrity in person (through concerts, meet and greets, etc.).

Gleich (1996) tried comparing the quality of relationships one has with media figures and the one has towards friends and/or neighbours. On dimensions such as confidence, proximity, idealism, strength of character, respondents’ best friends were evaluated higher than their favourite media figures, but ratings for a ‘*guter Nachbar*’ (good neighbour) and favourite media figure were much closer than those for friends. On dimensions such as sociability and passion, media figures were related highly than the good neighbours.

Rubin and Perse (1987) had an interesting take on parasocial interactions (PSIs). They discussed that these interactions may arise from an altruistic human instinct to form attachment with others, irrespective of the distance between them. Reeves and Nass (1996) tried putting forth the evolutionary perspective here and argued that this is an example of ‘media equation’ where a social response is elicited by cues that are related to some human characteristic, like a human face on screen. An important aspect to be considered here is that a fully comprehensive theory of PSI needs to distinguish between media figures who are direct representations of real

people (such as a news reader), a fictional creation (such as a character played by an actor), or a completely fantasy figure with ‘low modality’ (such as a cartoon character). Media consumers can possibly encounter some of these figures in the real world or physical realm, whereas certain others always remain imaginary. Until such a contact has been established, the nature of the relationship remains parasocial for the one who is using the media.

How to separate a parasocial relationship from stalking behaviour, delusional behaviours and other forms of socially inappropriate and potentially harmful forms of media figures interactions? It may seem that parasocial relationships are a kind of obsession which is harmful as the consumer may seem to be completely detached from reality believing that they are in a reciprocal relationship (give and take as in real life). But it is important to note here that the incidents where celebrities are stalked, harassed, or threatened, are actions resulting from other disorders (such as antisocial personality disorder and psychopathy) and not a result of a PSR. A PSR retains the “*as if*” characteristic, i.e., “I feel *as if* I know Alia Bhatt. The consumer can rationally distinguish a friendship from a PSR, even if they are equally emotionally invested.

3.1.2 The Changing Landscape of PSRs

Earlier the media figures with whom a PSR was formed included television and movie stars, even newsreaders and TV presenters. An excellent example of the intensity of PSR when television was relatively new in India, was the way people in India loved and worshipped Arun Govil and Deepika Chikhliya, the actors who played Lord Rama and Goddess Sita respectively in the popular Television series ‘*Ramayana*’ (Hindu epic poem) on Doordarshan in 1987-1988. “People would bathe and garland their TV sets before the serial began”, says Biswas (2011). The rituals people engaged in before watching the program “mirrored temple conventions and the series brought the temple experience of *darshan* – visual communion – into homes and public spaces where it was screened” (Verma, 2019). Such is the impact of parasocial relationships! Similarly, the extremely popular show ‘*Friends*’ aired by NBC from 1994 to 2004 continues to have huge impact on the younger audiences even now.

Over the years, the way media consumers interact with personas, has evolved. This is largely attributed to the advent of *internet* and *social media*, but advertisers and data giants also play a big role in this change. This means that while Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and other such platforms do encourage a larger population of people to form a greater number of PSRs, algorithms that suggest content and advertisement companies that curate content specific to each and every one of the millions of internet users have also played a big role in shaping the PSRs that are being formed today. Following are the few ways in which PSRs have changed over the course of time:

- 1) **Number of PSRs:** As the content market grows, with new models, creators, influencers each day, an individual has larger scope to form more PSRs. As the world moves towards a more individualised society (Santos, Varnum & Grossmann, 2017), the need of parasocial relationships also increases.

Box 3.1 The case of Mukbang: Korean Eating Shows

In the early 2010s, a trend of Korean and other Asian influencers, eating online began. The idea was to share a meal together. The presenter would cook and eat food, while conversing with the viewers. As the number of households with single members skyrockets in Korea (Chea, 2021), this was one way for people to dine together, while not having to follow the traditional and strict food eating culture of Korea.

- 2) **Increasing intimacy of PSRs:** With the emergence of reality television and talk shows, viewers get as close a view into a media persona's life as possible. This has led to a gradual increase in the intensity of the relationship formed. This can be explained by the fact that as more about the persona is known (and stars who are "authentic and relatable" garner attention and support), the more "*real*" the PSR becomes.
- 3) **Increasing accessibility- Are PSRs no longer a one-way relationship?** Unlike when the term was coined, PSRs now have a possibility of becoming two-way relationships, at least partially. This happens when a celebrity responds to a fan or critics Tweet, or hosts a live vlog, or arranges a meet and greet, fans get to have a real interaction with the persona behind the screen.

3.1.3 Developmental Aspects of Parasocial Interactions

While discussing various aspects about parasocial relationships, it would be imperative to discuss how PSIs develop across lifespan. Media's role in the lives of children has been heavily researched upon and as we have already discussed that the media landscape is forever changing, the role it plays in children's lives is also changing. Research in the area of PSR has suggested that when consumers identify with media personas and form bonds with them, it is a form of relationship similar to an interpersonal relationship (Giles, 2002). Research has demonstrated that children bond with media characters much before they even start preschool and form an emotional and parasocial relationship with them (Hoffner, 2006). Such PSRs usually imply that children identify with these characters as a person, they have internalized norms of behaviour, and they also express a desire to have these characters as a friend in real life (Giles, 2002; Wilson & Drogos, 2007). We all know that children spend a lot of time and learn from their first relationships with their parents/caregivers but they also spend a great deal of time with different media outlets- watching cartoons such as *SpongeBob*, *Peppa Pig*, *Dora*, *Mickey Mouse*, *Chota Bheem*, etc. Thus, it is influential in development of

certain characteristics in a child (Hoffner, 2008). Many researchers have concluded that a considerable amount of time is spent in learning from television characters, forming potential relationships with these characters, and being influenced by the images they see (Hoffner, 2006; Wilson & Drogos, 2007). It also has an impact on the kind of friends they select, if they select same-sex friends or not. It may contribute to their understanding of social rules, language, social role and culture.

PSRs are common in adolescence; in fact, they demonstrate a greater attention to and preoccupation with media figures and relatives in comparison to other age groups (Maltby et al., 2005). They may have an important role to play in adolescent identity formation and autonomy development along with maintaining them as real interactions and relationships (Schiappa et al., 2007). These relationships are also a reflection of the social concerns of this particular developmental period. Madison and Porter (2015) reiterated that as adolescents begin to construct their autonomous selves and engage in identity formation, parasocial processes might present different identities for their consideration, they may take inspiration from these media figures and this may help the individuals in developing their own perspective. Thus, we can say that the media figure choice might actually be meaningful. For instance, an adolescent girl might engage in PSR with a popular, attractive actress, who affords an alternate and attractive affiliation to that provided by her own parents (Klimmt et al., 2006). Adults on the other hand, describe media figures as akin to their neighbours (Gleich, 1996, as cited in Giles, 2002). Adolescent relationship with celebrities, in addition to or instead of friendship, might also seem supportive and hierarchical, such as those with their mentors or coaches.

3.1.4 Understanding PSRs through Piagetian theory of Cognitive Development

Piaget's theory of cognitive development is well documented and clearly states in four different stages how cognitive development may happen from infancy to adolescence. The theory demonstrates that as a child moves through development, each stage operates with a set of limitations on the ability of the child to perceive, understand and make sense of the information from the environment. Therefore, for the same stimulus, the comprehension might be different, as it depends upon the child's age.

Four stages outlined by Piaget are from birth through the age of 15 (by then the child is said to develop adult information processing ability). The first or the initial stage is sensorimotor (birth to 24 months). This is the stage with innate, reflexive capabilities of the child but primitive symbolic representation gradually begins. By the end of this stage, the child has a clear understanding of when the television is on and off, and if that means they can or cannot watch their favourite shows. This could be understood as the beginning of establishing a routine of television watching and eventually getting attracted to certain characters, songs or programmes. A child in this

stage (at least by the end of it) can recognize symbols and logos well enough to make sense if they are on the “correct” channel or video or not (Palmer & Mac Neil, 1991).

With this basic understanding, the child enters the next stage- preoperational stage (2 to 7 years). By this time, symbolic performance begins with object stability and the individual may continue with symbolic play and language development. At this stage, the relationship with media characters is transformed in the child’s mind. The child forms attachment to favourite characters, pretends to be like them, dresses up, and engages in imaginary play even with their favourite character (Hoffner, 2008). As mentioned above, this is also vital to school relationships and play behaviour. One of the major limitations of this stage is the difficulty in differentiating between reality and fantasy which is also reflected in the fact that they may lose sight of the fact that the characters that are on screen are not in real life (Richert & Smith, 2011).

Preschool children are perceptually bound, that is they pay extra attention to how a stimulus looks and sounds, even at the cost of excluding some other relevant information or bypass certain conceptual properties and functions (Wilson 2008). Their path and understanding of decision making are extremely simple and that may influence their choices, likes, and dislikes. Children at this stage are more likely to attend to a character’s physical appearance and actions and may even learn from those, rather than paying too much attention to their plot line. It has already been documented that preoperational children are more likely to admire an attractive character irrespective of the fact if they are heroes or villains (Wilson, 2008). Children as young as 2–3-year-old often ascribe life to inanimate objects, have imaginary friends, but by the age of 4 or 5, they start questioning the reality of television and programmes. For instance, cartoons are often understood as fantasy, especially because the characters are animated. Chernin (2008) discussed that if the children are not clear whether a character is real or fictional, they tend to be easily persuaded by the messages and internalize them.

The next one is concrete operational stage (7-11 years) and comes with a set of new abilities which include being able to see a situation from another person’s perspective, which gives scope for additional identification and empathy for the media character (Palmer & MacNeil, 1991).

The final stage is the formal operational stage (11-15 years) wherein the child is capable of thinking about abstract concepts, like deductive reasoning, and systematic planning. It is akin to reaching maturity in cognitive ability. Understanding these stages of cognitive development is important in comprehending how media affects children differently at all ages, especially considering their age-specific strengths and limitations.

3.1.5 Factors affecting PSRs

The main factors affecting parasocial relationship are as follows:

- 1) **Similarity and ability to empathise with the character:** Research suggests that media users evaluate media figures along similar criteria to people they encounter in real life (Rubin et al., 1985). If individuals find a media character similar to them or aspire to be like them then there are higher chances that they will identify with that particular character much more. It also seems likely that once we have made a judgment about a media figure or attribute person characteristics to them, then we respond to that figure “as if” it occupies our physical space, eventually incorporating it in our social realm. Thus, we attribute similar psychological processes to both parasocial relationships and face-to-face relationships. Turner (1993) tried understanding parasocial interaction from the perspective of homophily and found similarity to be an important factor in the strength of the parasocial relationship.
- 2) **Gender and age of the consumer:** Gender of the individual also plays a role in identifying with a media character and also emulating it. Let’s take children as an example in this case. It has been found that children are most likely to select same-sex friends. If we look at the current media landscape, there are limited female characters for children to relate to and bond with. Perhaps *Dora the Explorer* is the only most notable example of a female protagonist (in cartoon characters) in comparison to a variety of male characters such as *SpongeBob*, *Mickey Mouse*, *Chota Bheem* etc. Due to this situation, girls are left to either choose a male character or choose from a very limited selection of female characters. Hoffner (2006) concluded that girls are much more likely to select favourite male characters than boys are to select female characters. Children’s media relationships may also impact them socially in terms of their inclination to play with opposite sex friends. Gleason, Theran, and Newberg (2017) concluded that most adolescents (61.1%) consider their favourite media figures as relationship partners. They found that boys choose more athletes than girls and imagined celebrities as authority figures or mentors than their friends. Girls seemed to focus more on actresses.
- 3) **Prevalent trends:** Sometimes, it is the fad or the trend that decides which media character becomes popular and is followed by people. For instance, *Dhinchak Pooja* emerged as a trend and received enormous media attention after her music videos were released. They received millions of views on YouTube shortly after their individual releases. Another popular figure *Khabane Lame*, popularly known as ‘Khaby Lame’ is a social media influencer, who is famous for posting videos. It began when one of his videos went viral on TikTok and thereafter became a star on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter as well. Another popular trend that has emerged quite recently is “Stand-Up Comedy” and

many comedians such as Zakir Khan, Biswa Kalyan Rath, Kannan Gill, Sumukhi Suresh became popular, especially with teenagers and young adults.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Define parasocial relationships.

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- 2) Define various characteristics of PSRs.

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- 3) What makes PSRs like other social relationships?

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- 4) Explain the evolutionary perspective in understanding PSRs.

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3.2 EFFECTS OF PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) can range from healthy social relationships to negative and potentially harmful social interaction. Let us see the effects of PSRs.

3.2.1 Positive Impact of PSRs

- 1) **Shaping identity.** Consistent with Bandura's social cognitive theory, research evidence demonstrates that children learn from all kinds of televised role-positive and negative. It has a role to play in acquiring norms and standards for conduct through various media platforms. For instance, they may learn sex stereotyping through it, as gender of children's favourite TV character has been found to be strongly correlated with gender of the children (Hoffner, 1996). As discussed these interactions become all the more important for adolescents, especially in the context of identity formation.

- 2) **Can act as social glue.** In an urbanized and alienated society, these imaginary characters become social frame of reference. A society has a cast of characters that its members are expected to know about- spirits, leaders, media figures etc. Such factors act as social glue and provide common cultural ground among strangers also. We spend a lot of time conversing about people we have never met, yet we feel that we know them. We spend more time privately, consuming media-watching television, reading newspapers, magazines, surfing internet etc. and all these activities immerse us in a virtual social network where we come to know about a variety of things, sometimes to a degree of intimacy that is not even possible with a romantic partner (Giles, 2010).
- 3) **Rejection-free relationship.** PSRs also provide idealized figures with whom the adolescents can imagine total acceptance. The potential lack of actual contact with these idealized figures offers positive social interaction without risk of rejection or feelings of worthlessness. One can never know everything about a media character or icon, this allows adolescents and young adults to attach various attributes (could be fantasy) onto these figures which may help them in meeting their own specific wants or needs.
- 4) **Learning through media.** Learning from parasocial relationships is directly correlated with the strength of the relationship. Lauricella and Colleagues (2011) conducted a study in which they tried teaching seriation sequencing by one of the two characters-Elmo and DoDo. Elmo is an iconic character in the American culture and thus is socially meaningful. DoDo is a popular character in Taiwan and less well known in America. They found that children were able to learn from the socially meaningful character better than the one they less easily recognized. However, when they were given DoDo toys to play with, their ability to learn from this character increased.
- 5) **Parasocial Contact Hypothesis – building bridges with the help of media.** Parasocial relationship or parasocial contact may play an important role in adjusting discriminatory behaviors, such as racial attitudes. Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes (2005) suggested that people could potentially decrease their dependence on stereotypes and levels of prejudice towards a group if they are exposed to media in which these groups are featured. This has been termed as Parasocial Contact Hypothesis. The research in this area has been mostly focussed on sexual orientation and ethnic minority.

3.2.2 Negative Impact of PSRs

- 1) **Parasocial breakups.** It has been defined as “a situation where a character with whom a viewer has developed a PSR goes off the air” (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). It has been seen that the emotional distress that consumers experienced after a parasocial break up is more or less similar

to the one that is felt after a social relationship gets dissolved but is weaker than that of a real-life interpersonal relationship (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011).

- 2) **Impact on body image.** PSRs can also be evaluated with regard to body image and self-perception. A study with adolescents revealed that media exposure may have a direct negative impact on body image. It revealed that parasocial relationships with favourite characters, motivation to compare self, and engagement in social comparison with these media characters amplified the negative effects on body images of adolescents. Young, Gabriel, and Hollar (2013) concluded that men who did not form a parasocial relationship with a muscular superhero had a poor self-perception and felt negative about their bodies, especially after being exposed to muscular characters.
- 3) **Provocation of aggression.** PSIs could also act as a link between aggression and identification with aggressive characters. It has been found that people who tend to be more aggressive usually develop PSRs with characters that are aggressive or display aggressive tendencies (Eyal & Rubin, 2003).

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Explain the role of PSRs in shaping identity of an individual.

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- 2) What is the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis?

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- 3) What are parasocial break-ups?

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3.3 RELATIONSHIP TO VIDEO GAME STREAMERS AND UNDERSTANDING MEDIA FANDOM

With the growing trend of social media and OTT platforms, researchers have started examining microcelebrities- individual who have amassed a large collection of followers in an online context (Senft, 2008). In this section we will discuss the aspects related to gaming and media fandom.

3.3.1 Gaming and its Consequences

The “self”, as a concept has grown increasingly important in interactive media environments. A study by Jin and Park (2009) investigated self-related processes in an avatar-based game console, *Wii*, which has a motion-sensing capability that allows players to manipulate and interact with items on screen via movement. Here, parasocial interaction was defined as the extent of game players’ interpersonal involvement with their avatar (in the game) and the degree to which they perceive themselves as interacting with the avatar. It was concluded that game players who had a high interdependent self-construal demonstrated closer parasocial interaction than the ones who had low interdependent self-construal.

3.3.2 Media Fandom

Over the years, media fandom has rapidly evolved as a result of alternative ways to consume media (Twitter, Twitch etc.). Due to emergence of social TV, consumption of parallel media (for instance, watching TV while using twitter to comment on the program one is watching simultaneously) is impacted by interactions consistent with live events on screen (Buschow, Schneider, & Ueberheide, 2014). Fandom is possible without online communities but with new age media, like-minded fans have united across the world. Members of communities may gather for annual events, conventions etc. (e.g. Comic-Con). These online communities allow the fans to unite, bringing a whole new meaning to the term “community”. A huge sense of identification as a self-proclaimed and knowledgeable fan is an integral part of belonging within a community. Factors and considerations such as belonging, friendship, support, and conscious identification impact the overall communal element of being a fan. These online platforms allow fans to interact with other members of large audiences ranging from fans to other onlookers and even potentially rival fans (Wood & Baughman, 2012).

If we talk about gaming communities, it would be important to note here that the interdependent relationships are created to overcome challenges together (Teng, 2013). Watching a streamer overcome a challenge while the community encourages him/her leads to a sort of satisfaction in the individual and also develops affinity. Over time, stream viewers may develop parasocial relationships with the streamer as they experience the achievements of the game together.

3.4 EXTREME PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND CELEBRITY WORSHIPPING

Parasocial phenomenon is a very common response of users to media characters but in very rare cases they may take extreme forms and are considered detrimental to the long-term social adaptation of a user. Extreme and delusory forms of parasocial relationship may hamper the personal well-being of an individual. According to Horton & Wohl (1956), “it is only when the parasocial relationship becomes a substitute for autonomous social participation, (or) when it proceeds in absolute defiance of objective reality that it can be regarded as pathological” (p. 223).

If maintenance of parasocial relationships result in exclusion, rather than inclusion of an individual from an existing social group, it turns dysfunctional. In such cases, the potential short term positive effect (such as support they obtain from the media character) is outweighed by the more detrimental long-term negative effects which may result from the alienation among really-existing peers. PSRs also turn dysfunctional if they become delusory, that is, if individuals become ignorant towards their one-sided character and desire or expect reciprocity. In the long run, they may hamper an individual’s healthy adjustment to and inclusion in relevant real-world social settings.

Extreme forms of celebrity worshipping can also be detrimental to healthy social adaptation of an individual (McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran, 2002). Fervent and devoted fans of a celebrity may show behaviour similar to the celebrity or the characters played by them and engage in similar activities. It has been believed that low levels of celebrity worshipping is common and also functional in nature as it focuses on celebrity’s ability to entertain and knowing or sharing information about the celebrity (Stever, 2011) but moderate forms can be considered as problematic, as they seem to appeal mainly to individuals with a compromised identity structure. They may include intense feelings of mental preoccupation with a celebrity (“My favourite celebrity is my soulmate.” “We are destined to meet.”). Intense forms are considered as borderline pathological as they are characterized by exaggerated devotion (“If I get lakhs of rupees, I will consider them spending on a personal possession (like a napkin etc.) once used by my favourite celebrity”). They may also have compulsive and delusory qualities (erotomania, stalking etc.) and thus may negatively affect the well-being of an individual.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Discuss an individual’s relation to gaming and video game streamers.

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2) How does fandom and online communities impact an individual?

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3) What is the extreme form of parasocial relationship?

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3.5 SUMMARY

Let us review what we have learnt in this Unit.

- Parasocial relationship (PSR) is a one-sided connection imagined with media figures and celebrities. As the sense of intimacy and connection increases with these characters and personas, viewer starts believing these characters to be a part of their group of friends by extension.
- Some of the important characteristics of PSR include the fact that these relationships are one-sided and voluntary in nature, they demand investment of time, energy and emotions from the consumers. Different factors that apply to interpersonal attraction also apply here and much like real life relationships they need maintenance.
- PSRs are different from stalking behaviour, delusional behaviour and other forms of socially inappropriate and potentially harmful forms of behaviour.
- Due to advent of internet, various forms of social media, advertisers, and data giants, the landscape of PSRs has changed drastically. The change is so huge that now PSRs have a possibility of becoming two-way relationships, at least to some extent.
- Children bond with media characters and figures much before they even start with pre-school and these characters may play a role in internalizing norms and behaviour. Similarly, PSRs play an important role in adolescent development as well, especially in identity formation.
- Factors such as similarity and empathy with the media character, gender and age of the consumer, and trends prevalent at that time in the society affect parasocial relationship and its quality.
- PSRs have both positive and negative consequences. Some of its positive effects could be its role in shaping identity, acting as a social glue, learning opportunity that media provides, chance of a rejection free relationship and also in adjusting with discriminatory behaviour. Some

negative consequences may involve provocation of aggression, body image issues and a situation of parasocial breakups.

- Certain forms of parasocial relationship may negatively impact the personal health and well-being of the individual concerned. It may include forms such as intense celebrity worshipping which may also have a compulsive and delusional quality to it.

3.6 KEYWORDS

Body Image An individual's thoughts, feelings and perceptions about aesthetic, sexual or overall appeal of their body's attractiveness. This is highly governed by media exposure and para-social relationships, the celebrity we identify with.

Celebrity Worshipping When a person becomes overly involved with details of a celebrity (public figure), their personal and professional life.

Cognitive Development It focuses on child development, in terms of information processing, perceptual skill, language development and other aspects of the development of adult brain. It involves how we perceive, think and gain sense of the world around us.

Parasocial Relationships One-sided relationships where one person invests interest, time and emotional energy and the other party is completely unaware of their existence. For instance, our relationship with celebrities, athletes, etc.

Parasocial Contact Hypothesis Parasocial contact can provide the experience that may help in reducing prejudice and discrimination, especially when the majority group has limited opportunities to interact with the minority group, media exposure can be of great help.

Parasocial Break-ups A situation where a media character or celebrity suddenly goes off air or withdraws all contact.

3.7 REVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss some of the ways in which parasocial relationships have changed over the years.
- 2) How do parasocial interactions develop across lifespan?
- 3) Explain PSRs in the context of Piagetian theory of cognitive development.
- 4) Elucidate some of the factors affecting PSRs.
- 5) Elaborate upon the positive and negative impacts of PSRs.
- 6) How is celebrity worshipping maladaptive?

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3.8 ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES

- <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00255/full>
- <https://www.findapsychologist.org/para-social-relationships-the-nature-of-celebrity-fascinations/>
- <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20210615-why-tvs-most-toxic-stereotype-endures> 50993_ch_8.pdf (sagepub.com)



UNIT 4 ISSUES IN MEDIA PSYCHOLOGY*

Structure

4.0 Introduction

4.1 Social Construction of Reality

4.1.1 Social Constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1996)

4.1.2 Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969)

4.1.3 Postmodernism

4.2 Media and Culture

4.2.1 Media as Socialization Agents

4.2.2 Creation of Public Opinion

4.2.3 Mobilization

4.2.4 Rise of Consumerism

4.3 Media Regulation of Human Behaviour

4.3.1 Gatekeeping Hypothesis

4.3.2 Two-Step Theory (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaundet, 1948)

4.3.3 Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1969)

4.3.4 Agenda-setting Theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972)

4.3.5 Media Framing (Bateson, 1955/1972)

4.4 Summary

4.5 Keywords

4.6 Review Questions

4.7 References and Suggested Reading

4.8 Additional Online Resources

Learning Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to,

- explain what is meant by the social construction of reality;
- describe the different theoretical perspectives related to construction of reality;
- discuss how media regulates behaviour, and
- critically evaluate how media shapes culture.

4.0 INTRODUCTION

In today's world, the media have come to dominate our lives. The media is supposed to offer us with an 'objective' coverage of global economic, political, and social events so that we can grasp the 'truth' and understand

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what is happening in the world around us. Is there, however, an ‘objective reality’ that the media presents to us and that which can be examined using a set of established criteria? Most media psychologists would not agree with the idea of an ‘objective reality’. How then does the media portray social events and concerns in order to convey specific reality constructions? Moreover, these social constructions impact the way we think, feel and behave and also shape the culture in which we live. What are the processes through which the media affects us and shapes our culture? These and related questions are important concerns that we will consider in this Unit.

4.1 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

The media have a powerful effect on how we perceive issues and on our ‘construction of reality’. Let us take a few examples to understand what it means by ‘construction of reality’. A crime occurs on a busy day and is covered by major newspapers. One newspaper reports the story from the perspective of a human tragedy while another reports police apathy in apprehending the criminal. Each of these newspapers presents a different perspective of the crime. This brings up the question of which newspaper is depicting reality? Each newspaper constructs the story of the crime according to its own perspective that reflects a specific purpose. Both newspapers reflect different realities.

Let us take another example of representation of domestic violence towards women in the media. The construction of domestic violence takes place through the journalists’ understanding of events. One journalist blames the woman’s conduct for the domestic violence while another portrays the story in the context of patriarchal structures of the society. The journalists reporting such events are not neutral but have different constructions of the world which get reflected in their stories. The first journalist portrays the story in terms of male centric worldviews and hence the story is coloured by sexism with an attitude of blaming the victim. The second journalist has more egalitarian attitudes which in turn are reflected in the story. In the above example, constructions of the event are based on the journalists’ interpretations of the world. All news reports can be thought of as ‘constructions of reality’. The event which is known by the name ‘September 11’ can similarly be conceived in terms of different constructions of reality- as an act of terror, an act of war, or an act of revenge.

Let us now understand the different theoretical perspectives that guide us how we construct our worlds.

4.1.1 Social Constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966)

The philosophy of ‘construction of reality’ is central to the theory of social constructionism. Social constructionists take a variety of approaches in their understanding of the nature of reality, ranging from those who believe that there is some objective reality to those who feel that everything is socially

constructed. Even though some social constructionists may believe that there is an objective reality independent from the observer but they additionally state that this objective reality is difficult to grasp. Despite their different orientations, all social constructionists believe that there are multiple social realities which are constructed jointly during social interactions with others including family members, peers, and even the media. Language is central in this entire process. The notion of 'a 'neutral observer' who reports 'objective reality' is totally unacceptable to the social constructionists.

Box 4.1 An example of Social Constructionism

There are sometimes reports in the newspaper where a crime has taken place and a girl has been killed. Journalists reporting this crime may all agree that a girl has been killed but may have varying interpretations or meanings of the event. One journalist may call the killing of a girl a 'murder' while another journalist may call it 'honour killing'. Although some social constructionists may argue that at least some objective reality (killing of the girl) is there but all social constructionists would agree that there are different interpretations or meanings of this event. The language used to describe the event is especially important. Using terms like 'murder' or 'honour killing' provides extremely different contexts and creates different meanings for the event. The media therefore plays an important role in construction of these meanings or realities.

If there are multiple meanings or multiple realities, then it may become very difficult for the target audience to know what is happening in the world out there. Sometimes this is what happens when we read contradictory news in different newspapers and are left confused about the happenings of the world. It is then left to us which newspaper to believe and which not to believe. Often news which is reported consistently across several credible newspapers is considered as 'truth' by the public. The process of meaning making is not so simple however and additional factors need to be considered in this process of meaning making. Although, millions may read the same newspaper yet each individual may understand the same news article in a different way depending on his or her own personal experiences and backgrounds. Two individuals react very differently to the same television comedy. One may construct it as "stupid" while other finds it "entertaining". Hence, for every individual the 'meaning making' process is very unique.

4.1.2 Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969)

The media's representation of family life has long served as a yardstick by which we can measure our own achievements and lives. Many Indian serials portray families that are rich, beautiful and successful as being ideal families. We pick up these ideas to develop similar kinds of representations for ourselves. Symbolic interactionists provide an analysis of such kinds of symbols and many others used in our daily lives. Like social constructionism,

symbolic interactionists too state that all knowledge is socially constructed and that the existence of an objective reality needs to be questioned. In addition, the theory places importance on ‘symbols’ that are generated through the meanings we attach jointly to objects in the social world. These symbols are usually in the form of language but include various others such as visual symbols and gestures. The media also develops and disseminates symbols that serve as the foundation for our collective understanding of society. For example, the media often depicts a worldview that only thin women are beautiful. These symbols for beauty, perpetuated by the media then create pressures for women to stay thin even at the cost of their health.

Box 4.2 Applying the Symbolic Interactionist perspective

In a classical study, Cohen (1972) applied the interactionist perspective to two British teenage subcultures called the rockers and mods. The rockers were interested in motorcycling, and they wore black leather jackets and motorcycle boots. The mods on the other hand were interested in fashion and music, and quite a few mods rode scooters. According to Cohen, the two groups were involved in “minor” fights but the media exaggerated the clashes. They used words (or symbols) like ‘battle’ and ‘riot’ in their reporting of these clashes. Media articles also emphasized other symbols which made the group more distinctive to the general public including clothes (e.g., leather jackets), lifestyle choices (e.g., riding motorcycles), musical tastes etc. This was done in order to warn the public that this is not something that should be done and as a result the groups were devalued even further. Using the interactionist perspective Cohen, stated that the media exaggerated behaviours that contradicted social standards causing “moral panic” in the public. “Moral panic” was defined as a state where the fears of the public and the interventions by the state are much more than the threat posed by the situation. He also argued that the media was responsible for constructing images of certain youth subcultures in a very negative and stereotypical manner thus creating “folk devils”. ‘Folk devils’ essentially related to a socially defined group who were perceived as a threat to society and were perceived in a completely negative light. Examples included in this category could be football fans, student protestors etc.

4.1.3 Postmodernism

Social constructionism gave rise to postmodern theory in the 1970s. Postmodernists like the previous perspective also believe that language constructs our world and our reality. Furthermore, postmodernists also argue that the multiplicity of meanings depends on the changing context and that what is constituted as ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ is the result of knowledge-power nexus in society. Meaning, then is unstable, multi-faceted, and changeable.

Jean Baudrillard, a French postmodern thinker, wrote an influential book titled *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) where he attempted to explain the differences between ‘reality’ as experienced by individuals in their daily lives and ‘reality’ as portrayed by the media. He states that there is blurring of boundaries between our everyday lives and media. The fantasy world that has been generated by the media is full of symbols which seem very real to us and at times even more real than the actual world we live in. Baudrillard further states that we seek to build our lives around “simulacra” which are constructed representations that have no originals but are nonetheless thought to be ‘real’. For e.g., some people think that many of the characters in movies and serials are ‘real’ and their own lives are closely intertwined around these “simulacra”. The death of these “simulacra” (even though only in a serial or movie) creates the same trauma and pain as the ‘real’ though there is no ‘real’ but only a copy. Other people seek to imitate their “simulacra”, copy their appearance or ostensible lifestyles and at times even propose marriage to them. Baudrillard (1988) refers to this condition as “hyperreality” where the fantasy experience generated by the media becomes more real than the everyday reality and there is an inability to differentiate reality from simulation of reality. According to Baudrillard, the media today is dominated by “hyperreality” as represented by fiction and fictional characters. Further, Baudrillard argues that concepts like gender, caste and class are social constructions and the media only constructs “simulacra” i.e., “representations of representations”.

Box 4.3 Disneyland as an example of Simulacra and Simulation

In ‘*Simulacra and Simulation*’, Baudrillard (1994) cites Disneyland as an example of how simulation blurs the boundary between reality and representation to produce a hyperreality. Disneyland is a prominent tourist attraction in America (and other parts of the world as well) that both children and adults dream of visiting. The park's attractions are based on fairy tales and stories which transport the tourists into a most beautiful fantasy world. While the tourists enjoy and are excited visiting it, they are aware that this is not ‘reality’ but only an imaginary world. However, Disneyland also creates in the tourist an illusion of how the ‘real’ towns where the tourists come from should look like. The tourist starts believing that their ‘real’ towns should conform to this fake world or simulation. Consequently, a hyperreal world is being constructed which is based on a simulacrum of Disneyland. For Baudrillard, the whole purpose of Disneyland is to remind us that Disneyland is unreal and that the ‘real’ is outside of Disneyland, (i.e., modern day America or other parts of the world). This is a false reminder because, outside of Disneyland, nothing is real anymore; the real has died and been replaced by the hyperreal.

Check Your Progress-1

1) What do you understand by social construction of reality?

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2) Explain the theory of Social Constructionism and differentiate it from Symbolic Interactionism.

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3) Give examples from daily life to clarify the concept of simulation and simulacra.

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4.2 MEDIA AND CULTURE

The emergence of digital media, particularly the internet, has resulted in a large and unprecedented growth in media usage. The images, symbols, sounds and stories portrayed by the media have come to dominate our lives. People in all age groups especially young people spend a lot of their leisure time surfing the web, being connected to others on the social media, watching TV, and playing computerised games. Smartphones and laptops are no longer the exclusive domain of the wealthy.

This pervasiveness of the media in our lives has brought about a rapid transformation of our culture. Culture can be thought of in terms of a shared system of beliefs and values that is communicated from one generation to another. Culture comprises not only of tangible things such as clothes, artwork, architecture, modes of transportation etc. but also non-tangible goods such as languages, knowledge, and collective identities. This section will discuss how media shapes our culture.

4.2.1 Media as Socialization Agents

Socialization refers to the lifelong process wherein individuals acquire the culture, beliefs, values and norms of a specific society and culture. Several socialization agents are involved in this process including parents, peer groups, educational systems and the media. Depending upon the individual's

life stage, personality, and experiences, the media have played a very important part in our lives.

The media conveys to the masses the culturally acceptable ways to approach the entire life's spectrum from childhood to old age. The mass media also spreads ideas about societal values, morality, justice, democracy, and societal norms. Often news programmes as well as dramas, show how human acts that lack morality, such as murder and robberies, are unacceptable and will be punished. Popular mythological serial like *Ramayana* convey to the masses that the righteous will always vanquish the evil. Magazines bombard us with images of what is considered fashionable, what are the latest trends in music and so on. They also present to us images of what is attractive and how to look attractive. We may disagree personally with many of the ideas that are presented in popular media but these ideas are often shared by a lot of people. There are also spaces in the media for alternative ideas to develop so that change can happen. What is considered culturally unacceptable can become acceptable when the media report on it and people are ready to accept it.

The social media presents ample opportunities to people for self-expression and help in the construction of new identities. For e.g., one can affirm one's caste or gender identity by sharing one's experiences on several such groups on the social media. We can also develop new identities by changing the way we look on social media, develop new interests or even question dominant discourses. The internet has restructured our lives and led to the emergence of what Rheingold (1993) calls a 'virtual community' where users can interact in multiple ways including sharing of information, playing games, and participating in political debates. Such activities indicate that these virtual communities are marked by their own cultures. Rheingold (1993) warns us however, of the hazards of the internet, such as disclosing the details of virtual communities with anybody for profit. Further, he adds that the internet can also lead to continued surveillance and monitoring of the population so that people's lives can be controlled by the State. The continuous connection with others can also create undue pressures on the individual leading to anxiety and low self-esteem. Also, with increasing globalization there is a tendency to be exposed to similar kinds of music, fashion, books, movies and TV shows. Some researchers believe that this has led to a tendency towards cultural mainstreaming and homogenization. Others, on the other hand, are critical of this approach, claiming that not only has there been an increase in locally created media, but that viewers cannot be viewed as passive consumers of messages.

4.2.2 Creation of Public Opinion

The media continues to be the primary source of information for establishing opinions on a variety of topics. This is very clearly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic in India where the media have ensured that it provides the public information about the virus, its early detection and about COVID-19 appropriate behaviour, such as maintaining social distance, hand washing

and wearing masks. Many of these behaviours are burdensome and may initially be rejected by people but the media repeatedly conveyed these messages so that public opinion in favour of such behaviours was developed.

The media also makes visible, several other stories from across the globe. Although we are not present there but the pictures, sounds and images presented by the media creates a reality for us. When the war took place in Vietnam, it was the media that provided us with images and stories of the war-stricken country. The media played a very important role in forming public opinion against the war and ending it. In more recent times, the media have covered the war in Afghanistan and helped turned American sentiments against sending any more soldiers to the war-torn country. The media not only brings scenes from the war-torn country but also provides a forum for discussion and debate.

The media functions to expose corrupt people, investigate crime and inform people about it, all of which are critical for a healthy democracy. In recent times, investigative journalism has exposed several scams including those involving Punjab National Bank (2018) where fraudulent transactions in the bank were linked to Nirav Modi, Vijay Mallya scam (2016) where Mallya was accused of fraud and money laundering in the country; Unnao rape case (2017) where a former Member of the Legislative Assembly was accused of the rape and systemic denial of justice for a 17-year-old girl; Lalit Modi corruption case (2015), Illegal mining in the Aravalli Range (2014); and the Indian coal allocation scam (2012). In all these cases and several others, the media played an important role in exposing corruption, acting as a pressure group for speedy trials and continuously informing the people about the progress of the cases.

The media can influence public opinion by narrating the stories from a particular perspective. At times, it has also led to the undemocratic practice of 'trial by media'. There have been several high-profile cases of this kind where the media attempts to investigate the case. The suspect is pronounced guilty/not guilty even before the court has given a fair trial. Public opinion is influenced in a way that it goes against the suspect. This can create havoc in the lives of people who are pronounced guilty before a fair trial in court.

4.2.3 Mobilization

The media also mobilizes people to become agents of change and development. It accomplishes this by bringing individuals together on a common platform, raising awareness, and encouraging debates and discussions. During the British rule in India, the media played a major role in mobilizing mass movements against the colonial rule. Even though the Britishers imposed several stringent acts to curb press freedom yet several newspapers like *Amrita Bazar Patrika* continued to mobilize people in support of India's independence. Novel ways were used by the Indian media including the use of secret radio messages and also distributing information

through cyclostyled news-sheets. The Indian Press fought back against the harsh censorship imposed by the British and played a very important role in India's war for independence. Following independence, AIR (All India Radio) and Doordarshan, the country's public service broadcasters became agents of social change as they were given the responsibility of providing educational programme in addition to information and entertainment.

Box 4.4 The 'Yellow Vests' Movement

'Yellow Vests' was a social movement that began in Paris in 2018. The protests began after the French President announced an increase in the fuel price. The movement was initially successful as a large number of people signed up, and the majority of the populace backed it. However, the movement later became violent and did not get much public support. The media played an important role in these protests. They gave it much visibility and the protestors relied to a large extent on the social media to organize their protests. Although initially the media reported it widely but later the media did not support the violent acts of the group and this led to the decline of the movement.

4.2.4 Rise of Consumerism

Consumerism is based on the assumption that one's level of personal consumption, particularly the acquisition of material goods, is closely tied to one's level of happiness. The present society is frequently referred to as a consumer-oriented society, as it is motivated by the need to consume goods. The media have played a critical role in the emergence of consumerism. Almost all media outlets now rely on advertising revenue to survive and hence there is often a cluttering of commercial advertisements on the media.

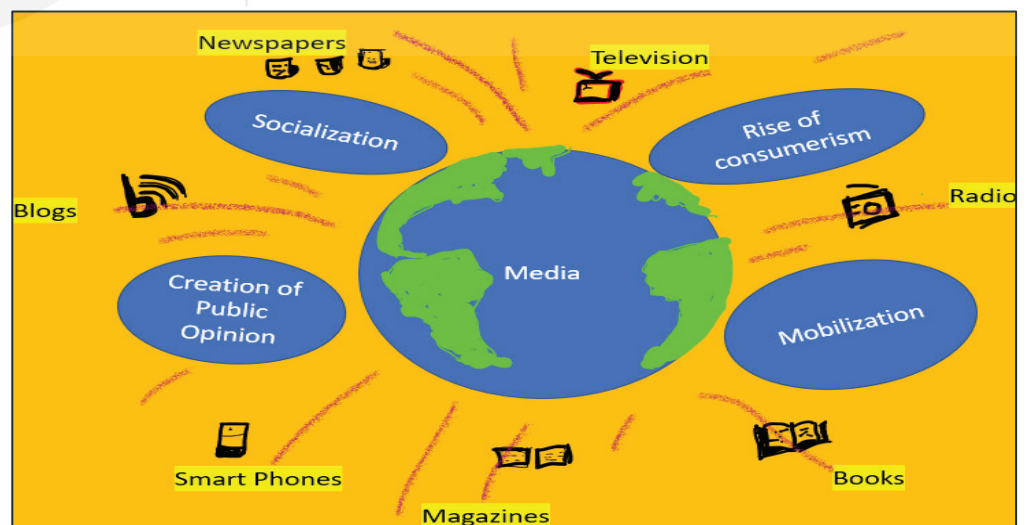


Figure 4.1 Impact of Media on Culture

The internet too has made shopping extremely convenient and has dramatically transformed our purchasing habits. Consumer culture has risen

as a result of the endless options available in the media and the ease of shopping. Advertisers target the young and children, promoting the notion that purchasing various things will make them happy. While some blame the media for the rise of this consumer culture, others feel that the media are not to be solely blamed- parents, peers, leaders and other factors are also responsible for this behaviour.

Check Your Progress-2

1) What role does the media play in the formation of one's identity?

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2) How is the media responsible for creating public opinion?

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3) Give examples from recent history to demonstrate how the media have aided in the mobilization of the masses for social movements.

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4) What is consumerism?

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4.3 MEDIA REGULATION OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

Our construction of social reality not only takes through our personal experiences, interpersonal interactions but the media too plays a very important role in this. Several theories have been suggested for the media effects and some of the most important ones are discussed in this section.

4.3.1 Gatekeeping Hypothesis

Every moment a number of significant events are occurring around the world, but only a small number of these events will make it to the news due to practical considerations such as relevance, space and time limits. For e.g., a journalist may decide to cover a story of the outbreak on COVID-19 pandemic but will only present those aspects of the which she/he/they thinks will be relevant and hold the interest of the public. The journalist is involved in the process of 'gatekeeping' wherein certain information that is considered newsworthy is given prominence. However, it is not only the journalist but different news personnel exercising different levels of power are involved in the process of gatekeeping. When an event occurs, the journalist will decide what to report and what not to report. After this, the editor will have to decide whether to publish it in the newspaper. There may be several other news personnel who are involved in the publication of any news. All these news personnel act as gatekeepers and in doing so modify the information, legitimize certain stories and thus set the agenda for what will be the topics of discussion amongst the public.

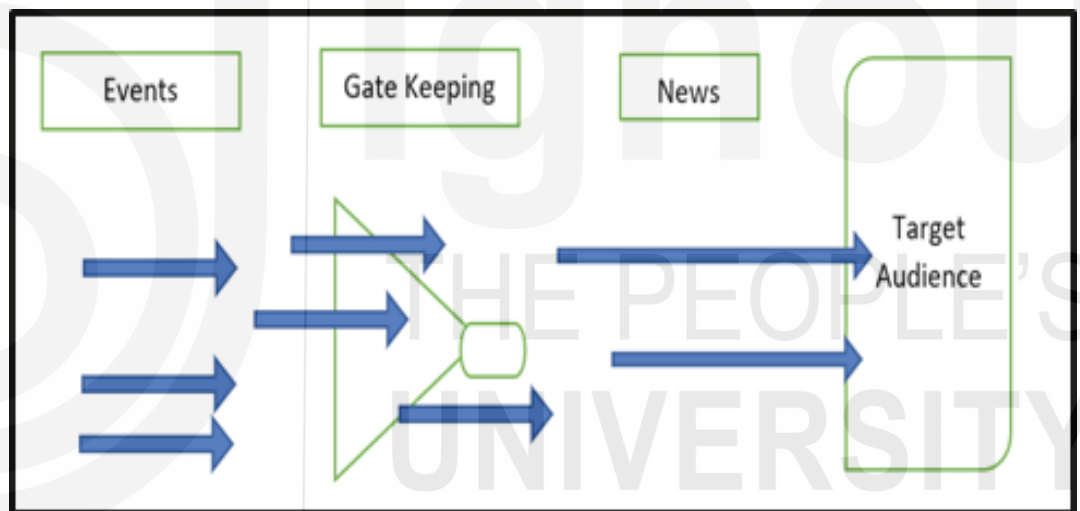


Figure 4.2 The Gatekeeping Hypothesis

There are several criteria for judging whether a particular story is newsworthy enough to publish it. Journalists often see if the story would make a strong impact on the target audiences. Reading about personal losses and human tragedy may attract attention and therefore can be given prominent space in the newspaper. Similarly, violence, calamity and scandal too capture attention. Another criterion is recognizability. When news articles deal with issues that affect the general population or involve circumstances that are recognisable to a big audience, they get more attention. People also pay more attention to local news than they do to global or national events. Uniqueness of the story and permanence may be other indicators for deciding whether the story will be published.

The above are only some of the criteria out of the several possible that dictate which events are chosen and which are not for publication. Journalists also

have several other pressures while reporting a news event. For e.g., the journalist may think that the event is newsworthy but the editor may think it is anti-government and is against the political orientations of the newspaper. In this case, the editor may decide not to publish it. Although journalists may appear to operate in the name of freedom of information, but there are several subtle and sometimes not so subtle pressures on them to publish specific kinds of information. These may include pressures from advertisers as well as economic and political forces that may result in publication of only those stories that reflect the power centres in the society. Thus, the construction of reality may be based on what the powerful elements want the public to see.

Herman and Chomsky (1988) proposed the model of “manufacturing consent”. According to this model, power is concentrated in the hands of a few elite individuals or corporations. These power centres act as gatekeepers and decide what news will be reached the public. This news often supports the power centres in a way that it maximizes their power and profit. According to Herman and Chomsky, news must pass through five filters. The first filter is “ownership”. The information provided to the public will be skewed in favour of the owners' interests, which are mainly the government and large businesses. The second filter is “advertising”. Advertising provides funds for the media to cover the cost of production. Hence, the viewpoint of the advertiser is an important filter in deciding what will be published and what will not be published. The third filter is “powerful sources of mass media news”. Even large media corporations do not have the finances to place their reporters everywhere in the world. Instead, they concentrate their resources in places where they feel news stories are likely to happen. These include police stations, government sources, big business corporations and trade organizations who provide the media corporations with ‘news’ that has to be accepted. Editors and journalists who challenge the accuracy of these power centres may be barred from receiving any news. As a result, non-powerful sources like a small NGO representing a marginalized section of the society may not be able to publish their stories in the newspaper even though the story may be newsworthy.

The fourth filter, known as “flak” is employed by the politically and economically powerful elite to keep the media in check. “Flak” is defined as strong unfavourable reactions to media coverage. For e.g. the newspaper may receive complaints, or even legislative actions may be taken against it for certain news items. Finally, the fifth filter is fear of a common enemy that has been created by those in power. During the Cold War days, it referred to communism and so was termed as ‘anti-communism’ but now refers to “war on terrorism”.

Thus, the five filters limit the news that passes through the gates, deciding what can become “major news” even further.

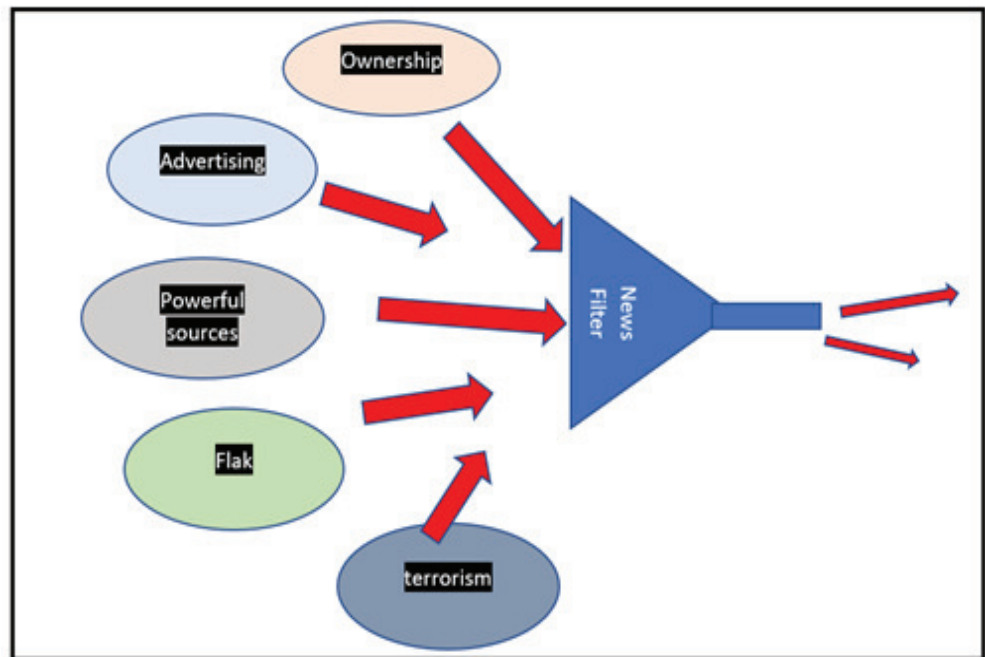


Figure 4.3 Criteria for judging newsworthiness of a story

4.3.2 Two-Step Theory (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1948)

Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet (1948) conducted a seminal study which has helped improve our understanding of how the media influences our attitudes and beliefs. In a study held during a Presidential election campaign, the researchers began with the hypothesis that media such as TV and radio could persuade voters to vote for one party or the other. However, they were surprised to find out that the voters found informal personal contacts much more persuasive than the mass media. Based on these findings, the researchers suggested the two-step flow theory of mass communication. In the first step, the theory emphasized the role of opinion leaders who are influential members of the community such as local celebrities, political leaders, social media influencers and also some informal personal contacts such as friends. These opinion leaders pay attention to the mass media and form an opinion. They then act as filters or gate keepers allowing only certain information to pass through to the general public. This is the second stage wherein the opinion leaders influence the general public to change their attitude, beliefs and opinions. Thus, instead of a direct effect of media on the target audiences, a two-stage process is proposed i.e., from the mass media to the opinion leaders and from the opinion leaders to the public. These opinion leaders therefore play an important role in the construction of our reality by modifying what is presented by the media.

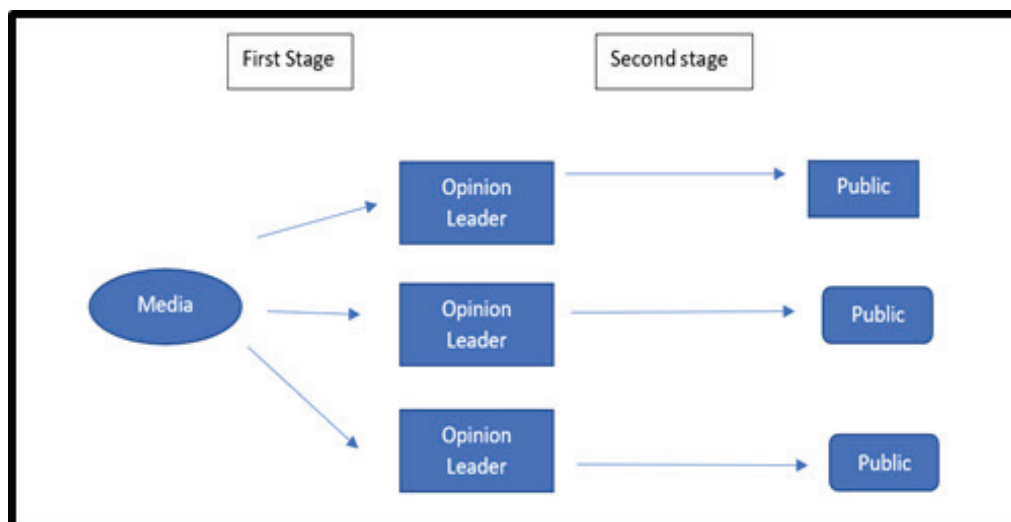


Figure 4.4 Two-Step Theory

4.3.3 Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1969)

Children who repeatedly see stereotypical images of men and women on TV (e.g., women as homemakers and men as bread winners) often also develop these stereotypical ideas themselves. They too start believing that women should take care of the home while men should go out and work. Our realities of the world are often consistent with what we see on the TV and read in the newspapers. Cultivation theory which was developed in the context of increasing popularity of television in the USA proposed that TV is an important source for the cultivation or construction of reality. Further, as exposure to television increases over time, the reality of TV audiences becomes closer to the reality depicted by television. Gerbner observed that audiences who were exposed to more violent content on TV tended to develop cognitive biases which predisposed them to see the world in a more threatening manner than it actually is and hence also experienced more fear and pessimism. Additionally, heavy viewing of television can lead to “mainstreaming” and “resonance”. “Mainstreaming” refers to a tendency to see the world in a homogeneous manner disregarding individual differences (Gerbner, et al., 1980). For e.g., people from diverse backgrounds such as age, class, caste and gender may see the same TV shows where a middle-class Indian family is depicted in a particular manner and consequently may start constructing a reality which is very similar based on these TV shows. “Resonance” refers to the combined influence of TV and similar real-life experiences that provide a double dose of the same message. Heavy viewers of television who also live in high-crime areas often get a double dose of the message that the world is a cruel and dangerous place (Gerbner, 1998).

4.3.4 Agenda-setting Theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972)

Early in the morning when we pick up the newspaper, we read certain stories depicted in the news. There are days when the headlines may capture a political event while on other days the news may depict global issues. This sets the agenda for our day – what we will think about and what we will not.

According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), the news media sets the public agenda by making people think what they want them to see. Similarly, Walter Lippman (1922), also spoke about agenda setting much earlier. Agenda setting researchers propose that the media sets the agenda by focussing on a few problems. The media may focus on certain political events rather than environmental issues. It may do so by giving more space in the newspaper, giving headlines about such events, or by covering it more frequently and thereby leading the public to believe that issues such as political events are more significant than other issues such as global warming. Similarly, the media reporting of an event like Olympics is so aggressive that it cannot be ignored by the public. This ensures that the majority get interested in the event even if many were not interested in Olympics previous to the reporting.

Hence, media plays an important role in shaping or constructing our reality. Lippmann claimed that the media is a major source of "images in our heads." about the world that is "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind." In other words, if a news story is covered frequently and prominently, the public will consider the news as more significant than other issues.

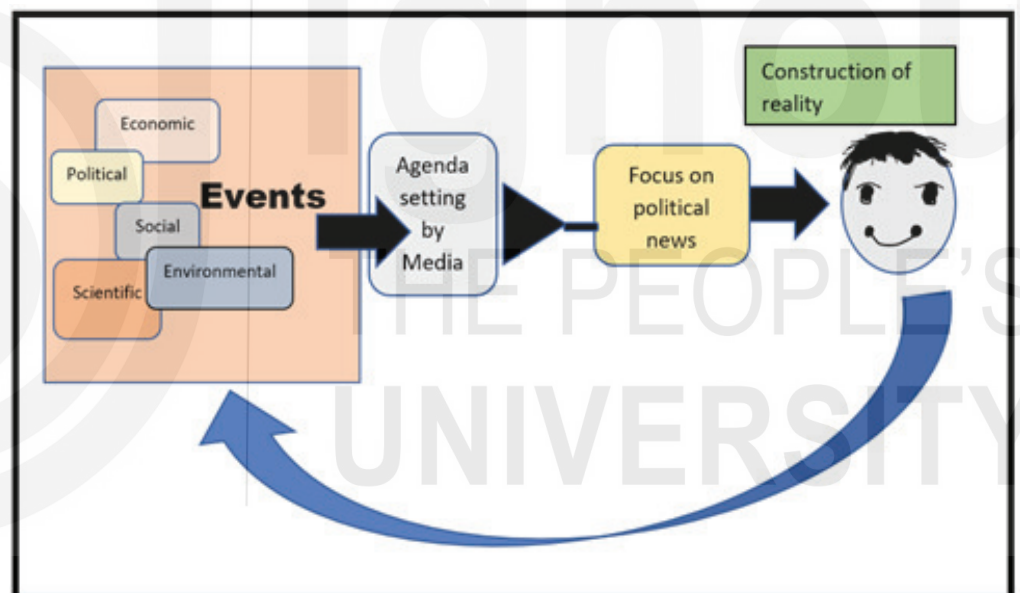


Figure 4.5 Agenda-setting Theory

4.3.5 Media Framing (Bateson, 1955/1972)

One may advertise a product as 5% fat or 95% fat free. Although both refer to the same product but the second option seems a healthier option since it is framed in more positive terms. Framing is one of the most important ways of constructing reality. A frame can be defined very simply in terms of a viewpoint or perspective from which a story is narrated and is developed by certain linguistic tools such as the choice of words, images and symbols that the media uses to cover a story. Consequently, it encourages certain interpretations while discouraging other interpretations. While the frame can be understood as a perspective of how the story is portrayed after it has been

covered, agenda setting or gate keeping determines what will be covered and what will not be covered.

Let us take the example of alcoholism and see how it can be framed by the media. Alcoholism can be viewed as a law-and-order problem where the media portrays the alcoholic as a danger to society. In this case, victims may be interviewed and police officials may be questioned as to what is being done to stop the criminal activities of the alcoholics. Alcoholism may also be framed in terms of a health issue. Here the media may report the lack of treatment centres in the community. Interviews with health professionals may also be taken to portray the complexities and controversies regarding their treatment. Thus, the media may construct different realities depending on the frames they use to cover the story.

Box 4.5 An example of Media Framing

A study by Pratt, Ha, and Pratt (2002) on disease portrayal in the media in Africa found that when reporting on diseases like HIV/AIDS, the media frequently utilised negative frames. For e.g., the media often referred to HIV/AIDS as a 'gay man's or 'white man's disease' and consequently people with HIV/AIDS were stigmatized and perceived negatively. On the other hand, in reporting diseases like tuberculosis, there was hardly any such language that was used by the media and consequently people with tuberculosis were more likely to receive sympathy.

Check Your Progress 3

1) What role do journalists play as gatekeepers?

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2) Critically evaluate the two-step flow theory of mass communication.

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3) Discuss how excessive media exposure may cause people to have a distorted perspective of reality.

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4) How can framing be seen as an extension of agenda setting?

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4.4 SUMMARY

Let us review what we have learnt in this unit.

- Social constructs like caste, class and genders do not have an objective reality but have been constructed by the society including the media. Even though they are distinct, yet social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, and postmodernism can be considered as some of the theoretical perspectives that constitute constructionism.
- Jean Baudrillard (1981) believes that we seek to build our lives around “simulacra” which are constructed representations that have no originals but are nonetheless thought to be 'real'. Baudrillard (1988) refers to this condition as “hyperreality” where there is a blurring of boundaries between the fantasy world generated by the media and the reality.
- The media serves as socialisation agents by offering representations of what is and is not culturally acceptable to the general public. People's identities are shaped by social media, which provides numerous options for self-expression. The media influences our attitudes by narrating stories from a particular point of view.
- Some theorists have emphasized gatekeeping role of media while others suggest an indirect effect i.e., the flow of influence from the mass media to the opinion leaders and from the opinion leaders to the public. Cultivation theory proposed that heavy viewing of television can lead to ‘mainstreaming’ while agenda-setting theory emphasizes how the public agenda is set by the media. Frames too encourage certain interpretations while discouraging other interpretations.

4.5 KEYWORDS

Consumer Culture A form of material culture where people believe that materialistic goods provide happiness.

Frame This can be considered a type of a schema that constructs reality in a way that encourages some explanations and opposes others.

Gatekeeping Process of filtering information such that only particular types of information are allowed to pass through the channel.

Homogenization of Culture This refers to the idea that local cultures are affected by globalization in a way that diversity is reduced.

Opinion Leaders These are individuals in society who wield significant power and have the ability to affect the opinions of those in their networks.

Simulacra Jean Baudrillard proposes that a simulacrum is a copy which has no original and has now become the reality.

Social Constructionism This perspective highlights the many realities that emerge from social interactions and in which language plays an important role.

4.6 REVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) Cultivation theory emphasized which of the following:
 - a) Resonance
 - b) Mainstreaming
 - c) Cognition
 - d) Priming
- 2) Symbols are generated through the _____ we attach jointly to objects in the social world.
- 3) Mainstreaming refers to a tendency to see the world in a _____ manner disregarding individual differences.
- 4) Herman and Chomsky (1988) proposed the model of _____.
- 5) Watch the TV coverage of the same event on different channels and describe the differences in the news coverage of this event. How has the media constructed multiple realities of the same event?
- 6) What kinds of stories or issues are not being reported by the media? Why do you think so?
- 7) Examine how the media influences public opinion. Using real life examples, describe how the media have been accused of being unfair in some instances.
- 8) Discuss the agenda setting theory in the context of current political scenarios.
- 9) Explain the concepts of simulacra and hyperreality, citing suitable examples from the Indian context.
- 10) Explain consumer culture and how it shapes the values and beliefs of the consumers.

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4.8 ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES

- Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. The Social Construction of Reality A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge - [Berger social-construction-of-reality.pdf \(perflensburg.se\)](#)
- Media, Society, Culture and You. [Media, Society, Culture and You – Media, Society, Culture and You \(rebus.community\)](#)

Check your answers Review Questions: (1-4).

(1) a and b (2) Meanings (3) Homogeneous (4) Manufacturing consent