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CULTURAL THEORIES IN COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA: A SYNTHESIS PAPER

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Abstract

This paper narrates the historical development of cultural theory while traversing through societies in the Western hemisphere. In brief, cultural theory ponders cultural, ideological, communication, and media-focused narratives affecting intricate human relationships where power structures, for instance, with their strengths and imbalances, mirror discourse that will emancipate individuals and create balance in society. The process of cultural amelioration instigates a deep understanding of ideological structures and symbolisms forming meaningful connections. With societies rising through the passage of time, cultural theory will also embrace a complex understanding of the human condition.

Keywords: Communication and Culture, Communication and Media Cultural theory, Cultural Communication theory, History of Cultural Communication theory.

Introduction

Cultural theories in the realm of communication and media have played a pivotal role in shaping our understanding of how societies transmit, interpret, and create meaning through various forms of communication. These theories offer lenses through which the study can analyze the intricate interplay between culture, communication, and media, shedding light on the ways in which culture influences the production, dissemination, and reception of messages in our increasingly interconnected world.

The study of cultural theories in communication and media is not merely an intellectual exercise but a practical necessity. In an era characterized by rapid globalization and the omnipresence of media, comprehending how cultural dynamics intersect with communication and media practices is essential. Whether one is a communication scholar, media practitioner, educator, or an informed citizen, familiarity with these theories equips us to navigate the complex web of messages, symbols, and narratives that permeate our daily lives.

This synthesis paper embarks on a journey to consolidate and synthesize the diverse array of cultural theories within the field of communication and media. It seeks to provide a comprehensive overview that transcends individual theories and, instead, highlights their collective relevance. By delving into the historical development of these theories and assessing their contemporary applicability, the study aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering insights that can inform our understanding of culture in communication and media contexts.

The study navigated through the rich tapestry of cultural theories, exploring their evolution over time and their implications for the way the study perceives and engages

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with the world around us. The study scrutinized the contemporary landscape of communication and media to discern how these theories continue to shape the experiences in a rapidly changing digital age.

Ultimately, this synthesis paper serves as a resource for scholars, educators, practitioners, and students, offering a holistic perspective on cultural theories in communication and media. It is our hope that this exploration will inspire further research, foster critical thinking, and enhance our ability to navigate the intricate cultural landscapes that define our communication and media environments.

Rationale

The study of cultural theories in communication and media is of paramount importance in the field of communication studies. In an era characterized by globalized communication and the proliferation of media, understanding the impact of cultural theories is crucial for effective communication, media production, and consumption. This synthesis paper aims to consolidate and synthesize existing knowledge and insights from cultural theories, offering a comprehensive overview that can guide scholars, practitioners, and students in the field of communication and media. By examining these theories, their historical development, and their relevance in contemporary society, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how culture shapes and is shaped by communication and media.

Problem Statement

Despite the rich and diverse body of literature on cultural theories in communication and media, there is a lack of a comprehensive synthesis that brings together the various perspectives, approaches, and key insights within this field. This absence of a synthesized overview hinders the accessibility of these theories to scholars, students, and professionals who seek a holistic understanding of cultural dynamics in communication and media. Additionally, as communication and media continue to evolve rapidly, it is imperative to assess the contemporary relevance and applicability of these theories. Thus, this research addresses the following problem:

- The absence of a comprehensive synthesis of cultural theories in communication and media, coupled with the need to evaluate their contemporary significance, poses a significant knowledge gap in the field.

Research Question

To bridge the identified knowledge gap and provide a thorough understanding of cultural theories in communication and media, the research will address the following central question:

- How can cultural theories in communication and media be synthesized and evaluated to enhance our understanding of their historical development and contemporary relevance?

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Research Objectives

To address the research question effectively, this study sets the following objectives:

1. To conduct a systematic review of existing literature on cultural theories in communication and media, identifying key theories, concepts, and their historical development.

2. To synthesize the findings from the literature review into a comprehensive overview of cultural theories, highlighting their interconnections and main contributions.

Literature Review

Ideology

The concept of ideology takes its roots from the German ideological tradition in the 18th century where Marx and Engels pejoratively construed it as something out of reality (Strickland, 2017). Ideology, perceived as a false consciousness, magnified reluctance of workers as a form of revolution in a society which established class divisions where material relationships, as dominant ideological expressions in the superstructure, were largely possessed by the ruling class. In other words, ideology as the "production of ideas, conceptions of consciousness, political laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., as ownership" of the ruling class rendered sentiments of the lower class as obscure or obfuscated. Such false consciousness further escalated tensions between social classes as the bourgeoisie (capitalists) asserted dominion of their ideology over the proletariats (laborers).

A more fundamentally human ideological definition was developed by V.N. Volosinov in 1920 who characterized consciousness as material signs, symbols, and interpretations of people in a given social intercourse with communication as its main tool. This explanation has a more robust understanding of human consciousness that is not discriminating but encompassing all forms of subjective interpretations of reality through the use of language. In effect, language ideology is a generative process that forms consciousness out of the social interactions in a given situation. Language, as a socially constructed sign-system, is what allows consciousness to arise and is in itself a material reality (Volosinov, 1920).

Vulnerability to the various subjective interpretations in semiotic communication can be construed as struggles of meaning construction which can relate to class struggles in Marxist ideology. Having said that, it makes sense that continued interaction should eventually resolve conflicts between classes. Such a statement has currency in a highly communicative society that permits information to flow almost uninterruptedly, especially in social media where communication can be vigorous due to the distance between communicators. Semiotic understanding through signs and language is a point of contention, at times, in divided issues that confront the general public. This pertains to the struggle for meaning as Volosinov explains in his explanation of consciousness. Thus, both Marxist and Volosinov’s views on ideology remain vital for as long as human struggles in different forms afflict every individual no matter what position one has in society.

Another view of ideology was later developed by Louis Althusser in his essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Strickland (2017) implies that ideology has a function of assigning individuals as social subjects that are not inherently chosen by themselves, as in the case of children born to families they didn't choose, or social categories that put them as distinct subjects based on what society recognizes them for who they are and what they ought to do. Ideology proceeds with the notion of general and particular ideologies (Althusser, 1970), which, according to Strickland (2017), the former has the capacity to limit thought processes in a given society while the latter is imbued with individual values, shared understandings of individuals. Tensions and struggles emanate between these two divisions as in the case of particular ideologies that resent general ideologies resulting in meaningful disagreements that will lead to resistance, which leads to a messy system (Strickland, 2017).

In further explaining his ideological concept, Althusser introduces Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) as forms of state control where the former relates to the family, church, educational system, etc., which maintain control in society while the latter constitutes the police, military, and the criminal justice system. RSA cannot function without ISA, and the relationship between the two is a complex scenario aggravated by social reality.

What is strikingly different in Althusser's view of ideology from Marx and Volosinov is that it does not reside in consciousness but resides in institutions and the practices specific to them (Ryder & Goshgarian, 2014). For example, institutions like the church and education have ideologies that define their functions, controlled by the state, and at the same time, together with police forces, military, and the criminal system, are imbued with ideological functions in serving the state as they are called upon. The ramifications of this simply accrue to a state-controlled ideology, not in the realm of consciousness or idea but one that has material existence. However, the inclusion of the family in ISA constitutes a sense of recognition of a social unit within an ideal state that exemplifies family relations and solidarity. What the statement implies is a state's recognition of familial responsibilities as ideological affirmations.

The practicality of Althusser's ideology in today's society is such that even if socialism and communism are not widely practiced as they were during his time, society's institutions such as the church and education have responsibilities toward the state even if they perform independent functions, revolting at times. For instance, even if the church expresses divisiveness and sometimes repugnant views against the government, it remains an institutional arm of the state. This is ingrained in the idea that "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects" (Althusser, 1970). Thus, human values are shaped by the institutions that brought them up, such as social order represented in individual ideology. Even with ISA and RSA maintaining control, the possibility of class struggle will always be there, as in the case of various groups that want to take dominant positions.

For our part, ideology as practiced combines Althusser's materialist ideology through interactive communication between the government and citizens, where the latter uphold institutional ideologies that define them. It also manages symbolic interactions with subjective understanding through the use of symbols and language evident in wide discussions of various social issues on traditional and social media. Finally, social

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struggles in Marxist praxis continue to be felt with new forms of affliction perpetrated by powerful elites suppressing people's rights.

Cultural Narratives

The implications of the foregoing constitute a cultural ideology that envelops a citizenry in a given period. Belief practices, norms, and conduct represent a cultural identity that not only responds to fleeting situations but also forms the core of people's ideology. Likewise, as Althusser puts it, the study represents an ideological form shared by people and that our social categories are pre-assigned so that even with resistance, the study still recognizes that we are a part of a governing institution.

On the subject of culture, the concept of thick description is noteworthy. Developed by Geertz (1973) based on the philosophy of Ryle (1949), thick description is an interpretative approach to studying culture through meaningful symbols, signs, language, performance, etc. This methodological approach to semiotic understanding of culture is a reaction against technical and rational ways of studying culture, which remove the meaningful essence of how we really come to know about other cultures. Instead, researchers should interpret symbolic meanings that are understandable through rituals, jokes, poetry learned from local people, as culture does not have an overarching principle; its meaning rests on symbolic interpretations of particularities.

In view of the semiotic orientation of thick description, studying immediate culture can defy systems thinking in the sense that intersubjective meanings fall under reductionism. Deciphering symbols delves into a detailed understanding of those symbols that can isolate their interrelatedness with other components, as systems thinking implies. However, Geertz (1973) emphasizes that cultural study uses thick descriptions of symbols and meanings perceived in isolation at first, then later establishes connections of symbolic interpretations within their acts as signs.

In discussing culture, the concepts of high culture and low culture are notable. Williams (1974) argues that high culture, perceived as products and skills usually associated with elites, is in danger of eradication as the proliferation of popular culture, associated with the masses, continues to dominate. However, the problem is more rhetorical, as there is no clear definition of high culture and it lacks a defined social structure (Williams, 1974). Talking about skills, there are no specific skills associated with such classification except for some universities and other institutions that mark such products and skills as classics in the realm of high culture. Without social structure, high culture embodies a professional structure and serves social structures in its consumption (Williams, 1974).

The author of this paper adds specifics to high culture apart from its elitist connotation. For instance, the professional structure that it implies should also consider the craftsmanship of the products and skills exhibited, which undergo specialized training and scientific production processes that result in high-quality products and services for a sophisticated audience. However, such an argument displaces popular culture, which can be construed as unsophisticated or unspecialized. In other words, how society views high culture as sophisticated should not mean popular culture is its opposite. The argument is further explained by popular artists, for example, the Beatles and Madonna, who have a

broad audience appreciation that includes both the elites and lower-class listeners. The role of the media is to enrich the understanding of both cultures through dissemination so that demarcation lines between them are blurred. Also, high culture products cannot stay within universities and concert halls only; they need to go out to ordinary places with the same content. Lastly, the notion of high culture is generally not an artist's intent; it is a historical judgment clouded by the social reality of a certain period defined by institutions. Paradoxical meaning is attributed to high culture, as in the case of Mozart's music, which was snubbed by royal courts in his early days but was popular among the masses. Today, his music sits on the pedestal of high culture but is rarely understood by the general audience.

Aside from high culture, the importance of popular culture cannot be undermined. According to Williams (1974), popular culture illustrates two distinct notions: one created by the people that embody ideals and expressions of values and meanings, while the other type is created for the people, which has some difficult interpretations, as in the case of foreign popular culture invading a certain country that will face appreciation issues. The impact of foreign culture can be overwhelming to a colonial country like the Philippines. The invasion of popular music, for instance, can damage the popularity of local artists, but, on the other hand, the general audience has a wider preference. Aside from its commercial appeal, popular culture can also be used to address social issues through various media platforms.

Learning

Education plays a vital role in social transformation that impacts a society. In the words of Williams (1974), "education is ordinary." This, in relation to lifelong learning, asserts that learning resides in everyday life in the pursuit of relevant knowledge and skills that have practical applications beyond an individual's career. Indeed, lifelong learning extends learning beyond the classroom; it is the totality of a person's learning experience. Furthermore, public pedagogy, which projects us beyond the school to a host of other institutions that educate, can also be used as a transformative force.

Using new media, as Williams put it, expands learning to a wider audience, but accessibility issues, like the digital divide, split the haves and have-nots. New media has a powerful impact on the amelioration of deprived public through multifarious information posted on various platforms. Likewise, traditional media platforms continue to affect democratic processes through informative news and talk shows. Thus, culture as a medium for political transformation (Josh, 2008) elevates people's consciousness, encourages critical thinking, and fosters observation of the many issues surrounding society.

Theory of Signs

Alongside cultural signs, semiotics is bound to be an intersubjective interpretation of meanings (Craig, 1999) that occurs in an individual. Such interpretation can be further expounded according to Pierce's Theory of Signs, or Semiotic, which follows a three-dimensional system (triadic/trichotomy) comprising a sign, an object, and an interpreter (Atkin, 2010). According to the theory, signs that signify the object they represent do not really embody the entire features of an object. For instance, a sign of dark water perceived

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only recognizes the darkness of the water, not the entire elements of water that embody signification. These are called sign-vehicles that ultimately register into a person's interpretation. Next, the object, treated the same way as the sign, could be characterized based on the function it exudes to the person. Meaning to say, it is not the entire object (water) that serves as the function for interpretation, but only certain elements of water that serve the sign-vehicle function. Third is the interpretant, which serves the interpretation emanating in the process. Pierce stresses that interpretants can also serve as signs, which explains that the triadic process is continuous. The role of cognition, particularly logic, is the essence of 'semiotic' (Yakin & Totu, 2014).

The importance of Pierce's Theory of Sign rests in an individual's audacity in indulging internal meaning that is selective and authentic. Its purity is accentuated in cognitive processing that carefully categorizes signs according to their interpretative function. When an interpretant employs signification, it transcends positive vibes to the culture. Meaning to say, thick description of culture reconciles with internal, subjective meaning, a kind of concurrence that, if practiced well, culture achieves a certain degree of equilibrium.

Progressing through an individual's interaction with people in a society, the concept of symbolic interactionism that emphasizes the use of language in communication exchange between people becomes important, including media applications and face-to-face communication as articulated in media ecology, the study of environments (Postman, 1970). The paper, "Media and Symbolic Interactionism," underpins Mead's theory of the self in the process of interaction where, for instance, holding an object identifies it as an inner experience of the person holding, which later transcends to his relationship with other objects in the environment.

The Self

In connection with Mead's theory of the self, how one projects himself in digital technology is a serious matter for media ecologists to consider. The paper mentions a case of a homosexual who uses different names to hide his identity in the online world, a strategy used not just by homosexuals but true to many persons using fake identities. The problem is continually affecting many people who become victims of cybersex, money laundering, scams, among other crimes committed as a result of virtual conversations in social media. This is not only an issue of media ecology but a behavioral issue as well. While there are laws that punish the culprits, solving the problem requires everyone's commitment. However, not all communications that transpire in media are problematic. Benefits of online education, globalization in banking, finance, trade, communication, and arts, etc. are attributed to mediated communication.

Social relationships developed through communication are also explained in a theory of social interaction called the dramaturgical model of social life (Groffman, 1959 & Crossman, 2018). In this theory, social interaction is seen like in a theater where actors perform roles with the audience observing those roles similar to human conversations where listening and observing take place. The stage comprises the front stage region where actors perform and the audience responds, forming communicative interaction. The other side of the stage is called the backstage where performers can relax and be their real selves, without an audience watching.

According to Groffman (1959), six elements comprise the dramaturgical model. First is performance where an actor performs on stage with the audience watching. Communication emanates from various interactions with the audience, such as the latter giving impressions about acting, which can provide cues to the performance in the same way as the actor creates character interpretations based on audience perceptions. Second, setting provides stage scenery that influences how an actor performs. Third, appearance is associated with a performer's social status through costumes that assign symbols of social status. Other social indicators such as gender, age, etc. can be construed based on how an individual appears on stage. Fourth, manner evokes a performer's portrayal of character, which has a direct link to appearance. In case of inconsistency between social status and role performance, it can lead to confusion in audience perception. Fifth, front expresses one's image seen on stage. In social interaction, the front can be a 'persona' or a representation of something else other than the real self. Sixth, front, back, and off stages represent three regions that affect performance as discussed.

In totality, Groffman's dramaturgical model explains that social interaction is just like a performance where an actor is engaged with the audience. Establishing rapport, listening to applause, and other reactions while performing provide cues for actors to improve upon performance. This is the same in social interaction where individuals listen to others and react based on those perceptions. Also, role performance highlights different roles we portray in life. It is closely linked to the setting such that when, for example, a nurse wearing her uniform can be seen in a hospital where patients will immediately recognize her roles and responsibilities the same way as a priest in a church is construed as someone to preach. Of particular note in the theory is the idea of the front that can be construed as an individual wearing a mask to hide their true character and identity. In social interactions, people do not necessarily express their real identity at all times. They put on a mask to hide what is real underneath. Likewise, 'generalized other' comes about when roles and attitudes of surrounding people are known – an indication of a social community, a social system one is part of.

Social Contract Theory

In furthering the discussion of social interaction, Social Contract Theory (Berger, P.L. & Luckmann, T., 1966) has a connection with symbolic interactionism and semiotics as people create mental images of reality based on patterned behavior derived from habitual practice. Such a notion instigates social acceptance of reality since the practice has been done before which leads to its institutionalization. Socially constructed reality as connections of representations from previous associations explains that if we see a school, for example, it is easily recognized because of the pattern of constructed images of the school already done before. Thus, the construction of reality is influenced by our symbolic interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Media Ecology

In media ecology, time is an important factor in the human communication process. Synchronous interaction has immediacy of feedback compared to asynchronous conversations mediated by technology, which can have issues of delayed response due to distance. Even though written responses, for instance, can be more organized and reflective, another factor considered in media ecology is systems theory, which also

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underpins the symbolic interactionism model. This model emphasizes the interrelatedness of components between communicators, physical settings, and society.

Communication via email messages, for instance, can have issues with how persons perceive each other when they have not met personally. Both parties may have wrong notions about each other because all they have are messages to read. The possibility of creating a "fantasy" over reality is likely in email messages due to the absence of audio components. The presence of symbols such as emoticons can help understand how one reacts to messages, but it is insufficient. With traditional media such as television, some means of developing interaction with the viewers can include images and sound where the viewers can react, although feedback is absent, especially in newspapers where messages project finality.

With the ubiquity of internet technology, digital communication has reached greater heights, as in the case of highly interactive communication on Messenger, Viber, Skype applications, to name a few, that include video calls. The presence of the audio-visual component of many technologies today enhances symbolic interactions between people, allowing them to decipher emotions, movements, and other symbols in communication.

Finally, the question of how media create reality needs pondering. In brief, the phrase "media create reality" can be concurred with for many reasons. For one, media undergoes constructive transformation before "reality" is shown on television or in some other form. Weber (2002) explains the concept of empirical constructivism that does not assume the dualism of media (as a reality-generating and/or depicting agent). What this means is the argument on the constructivism of media should not be based on the idea of who constructs reality and who observes it. Furthermore, Weber (2002) argues that media has always constructed reality, whether it is empirically or ontologically grounded.

Practically speaking, constructive transformation happens during the camera's actual shooting of a scene, which undergoes editing, framing, and so on. Another similar example is illustrated in the article where a camera shoots a video footage on terrorism, which in itself is construed as constructed reality with the intervention of media apparatus. Increasing distance in focus alters construction, creates a new perspective and emotion with captured footage, indicating further construction. Likewise, the article's mentioning of infotainment, advertisement, etc., are forms of media constructions that are presented to the public but are not necessarily desired by the audience when watching news, for example. In effect, media create infotainment for commercial reasons. Reality shows that showcase spontaneous footages of actual events are also constructed by media when actors take cues from the director or in the case of talk shows on television where the audience is engaged in live conversation with the host and fellow audience members, all of whom follow cameramen and directors, such as when to clap or when to stop for commercials. These are all aspects of constructed reality. Finally, media create images, nuances of perceptions, and many forms of conscious construction of reality that are fed to the audience. The article argues that media construct reality, but it does not argue that the audience does not create it. There is no assumption that the 'other' does not participate in this process simply because someone else does.

Conclusion

In the journey through the rich terrain of cultural theories in communication and media, the study has uncovered a tapestry of insights and perspectives that illuminate the complex relationship between culture, communication, and media. This synthesis paper has endeavored to provide a comprehensive overview of these theories, spanning their historical origins to their contemporary relevance.

The exploration has revealed that cultural theories in communication and media are not static frameworks but dynamic lenses that adapt to the evolving landscapes of technology, globalization, and society. These theories have empowered us to understand how culture informs and is informed by the messages and narratives the study encounters in the everyday lives. They have demonstrated that culture is not a monolithic entity but a mosaic of meanings, symbols, and practices that shape the way we communicate and consume media.

As the study reflects on the multifaceted insights offered by cultural theories, the study recognizes their profound implications for both theory and practice. Scholars and educators can draw upon these theories to deepen their understanding of the cultural dimensions of communication and media. Media practitioners can apply these insights to create more culturally resonant content, fostering greater audience engagement and empathy. Students can use these theories as tools for critical analysis and reflection in an increasingly mediated world.

Furthermore, the exploration has underscored the ongoing relevance of these theories in the contemporary digital age. In an era of rapid technological advancements, social transformations, and global interconnectedness, the study of culture in communication and media remains as pertinent as ever. Understanding how cultural dynamics intersect with communication and media practices is not a matter of academic curiosity alone; it is an essential skill for navigating our complex and culturally diverse world.

This synthesis paper serves as a steppingstone for further inquiry into the intricate interplay between culture, communication, and media. It is a testament to the enduring significance of cultural theories in helping us decipher the codes of meaning that permeate the mediated environments. As the study continues to grapple with the challenges and opportunities presented by the ever-evolving landscape of communication and media, these theories stand as beacons guiding our path toward a more culturally informed and inclusive future.

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