

2 Key Theories and Concepts from Media Psychology.

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Media psychology emerges principally from the disciplines of psychology and communication, both of which contain a large number of theories. This chapter describes theories from each that are relevant to the study of media and the study of psychology as the subjects relate to each other. One of the main purposes of a theory is to guide the course of current research. The social sciences put forward theories that are testable and act as a lens that helps explain as much as possible the phenomenon of interest. More is said about research and how it is conducted in [Chapter 3](#).

Communication Research

We begin with the three most cited theories in communication research between 1956 and 2000: cultivation theory, uses and gratifications, and agenda-setting theory (Bryant & Miron, 2004).

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory asks the question, “What is the cumulative effect of exposure to messages on television?” Television is the emphasis here because even by the 2020s, the biggest teller of stories in Western society is television. In spite of the prevalence of the internet, the average media consumer watched about 34 hours of television a week according to a 2012 Nielson ratings report (Hinckley, 2012), with most of that being programs that tell stories (Morgan, Shanahan, Signorielli, Morgan, & Shanahan, 2014). By 2018, the average American viewer still watched 3.5 hours a day of traditional television and streamed an additional 38 minutes per day using various streaming services (Epstein, 2020).

An analysis of 962 articles on media effects published in 16 journals between 1993 and 2005 found that cultivation was the most cited theory (Potter & Riddle, 2007). In general, these studies seek to discover how various television programs contribute to the viewers’ conceptions of social reality (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). In contrast to other theories that look at specific media effects on the individual, this theory looks at the function of television as a stabilizing force in society that reinforces public perception of various social groups. Stated simply, television has a great deal to do with how we process the day-to-day realities of life in the world.



Figure 2.1 “What is the cumulative effect of exposure to messages?”

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When considering all of television as a whole, what values, images, and realities are portrayed as being commonplace and generally accepted by those in our culture? Have a number of widely held beliefs originated within televised media? An example illustrates how research answers this question. The fear of being the victim of a crime (the Mean World Syndrome; Gerbner & Morgan, 2010) is influenced by watching crime dramas on television that show such risk as being high with frequent viewers perceiving greater risk than do infrequent viewers (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Further analysis of programming over the last few decades shows that about 60% of prime-time programming depicts violence. Research comparing heavy television users with those who watch less television has shown that overall, those who watch more are more likely to think their lives will include brushes with violence, either as an observer or a victim. Those immersed in television are more influenced by its messages (Morgan et al., 2014). This has been a consistent finding over a number of decades. The theory proposes that long-term exposure to messages and values portrayed in the media causes audience members to see the world according to the television view of reality, with this effect being more pronounced for heavy use than lighter viewing (Sink & Mastro, 2017).

Cultivation theory is also applied in the context of specific genres, showing, for example, that beliefs about romantic love are shaped by watching programs like soap operas or romantic comedies. Watching a lot of reality television affected beliefs about materialism, and “just world” beliefs (the idea that people deserve the things that happen to them), while watching medical dramas affected trust in doctors and beliefs about health issues (Chung, 2014; Jonathan Cohen & Weimann, 2000; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2012; Morgan et al., 2014; Segrin & Nabi, 2002).

Cultivation theory talks about “real life” and “television life.” The extent to which our perceptions of real life reflect what we learn through television is referred to as a first-order effect of cultivation. Research in this area seeks to understand what we have “learned” from the television world and compare that to the real world in recognition of the fact that how these relate is crucial if one wants to understand how television cultivates a worldview about what is “real” (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006).

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The uses and gratifications theory (Rubin, 2002) focuses on the audience member rather than mediums and messages. The emphasis is on the viewer as an active participant in choosing to use media that meet personal needs. Older theories (e.g., the hypodermic needle theory, also known as the magic bullet theory) saw the viewer as the passive recipient of media influences. The overriding questions that the uses and gratifications theory suggest to researchers are “Why do people use media?” and “For what particular purpose do people use media?” The origins of this theory can be traced back to the work of Herta Herzog (1940), and it was further developed by Elihu Katz in 1974 (Livingston, 1997). It was conceptualized as a counterargument to theories that emphasized the sender and the message.

This theoretical framework has been used, for example, to explain why social media users engage with Facebook, Twitter, and other similar platforms (Chen, 2011). In one study, a qualitative approach was used to show that young adults use these applications for both entertainment and information. The goal is often to seek approval from and connections with others (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009). Ruggiero (2000) argued that the rise of computer-

mediated communications pointed to an increased need for the uses and gratifications approach to communication research, arguing that for each new communication era, the uses and gratifications theory provided a “cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of that medium: newspapers, radio and television, and now the Internet” (p. 3).

Agenda-Setting Theory and Framing Theory

In 1922, American journalist Walter Lippman wrote a book about the basics of what is now known as agenda-setting theory when he began to see and understand that what the public knows about the world is what news media tells them (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017). Fifty years later, in 1972, McCombs and Shaw built on Lippman’s work by proposing that news media function as agenda setters, telling readers what the important stories are and to what should be paid the most attention. The original premise was that political candidates, in particular (in addition to other prominent individuals), are no longer presented in person but are presented through mass media. Most people do not actively seek information about candidates but are guided by information to which they have easy access. A key premise of the agenda-setting theory is that media do not tell us what to think but, rather, tell us what to think about.

Agenda setting has inspired many research studies, including McCombs and Shaw (1972). Their specific study looked at the presidential election of 1968 between Nixon and Humphrey and how news coverage set the agenda for discussing Wallace as a third-party candidate and whether he had a chance to win the election. The focus on the campaign and the presence of Wallace served to center discussions around the campaign rather than issues. In addition, they found that media exerted quite a bit of influence over which issues voters considered to be central to the election when issues did come up. While this is a well-established and older theory, it is still in current use (e.g., Sevenans, 2017). A more recent example (Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwo, 2002) showed that what is discussed on “Electronic Bulletin Boards” (an early form of social media) on the internet is well predicted by what had been covered in the preceding 1 to 7 days in the news media.

It is worth noting that with the fragmentation of news coverage and viewers having more choices as to what to watch, the agenda-setting function of news media may not have the power it once had. See later discussion of the reinforcing spirals model (RSM) for an alternate point of view. It is possible that, rather than setting an agenda, the news we watch reflects our existing ideas and interests.

It is important to distinguish between agenda setting and framing. Agenda setting says that “this is an important topic to consider when making your decision.” Framing is more about how to actually think about that issue. For example, you can agree with one candidate on Matter A and agree with another candidate on Matter B. Which candidate do you support? The topic that is higher on the media’s agenda is more important, so it will guide your voting decision. It does not change your opinion on either topic, just influences how you weigh those topics when making your decision. However, in framing, the way a topic is discussed in the media can change your actual beliefs with respect to that topic. The content plus the frame for that content potentially influences attitudes and beliefs about what has happened (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009).

Two media sources might have the same agenda-setting function, for example, a discussion on global warming, but one might present scientific evidence for global warming while the other might feature opinions from climate-change deniers. Which source is being considered is very much influenced by one’s existing beliefs (see the following discussions on cognitive dissonance and RSM).

Social and Affective Theories: Values and Identity.

The next group of theories involve the ways that things like emotions, social identity, or moods influence the ways that media messages affect audiences.

Elaboration Likelihood Model

Social psychologists have always been interested in how people are persuaded to adopt or change an attitude. The Elaboration Likelihood Model explains how persuasive communication leads to attitude change with two routes to persuasion: central and peripheral. With the central route, the viewer is motivated to consider a persuasive message by looking critically at all aspects of the message including aspects such as speaker or message credibility. The peripheral route is less likely to motivate the viewer to look deeply at a message, and instead, the viewer is persuaded by surface issues such as how physically attractive the speaker or message might be (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty & Wegener, 2014). The central route uses logical arguments to influence attitudes and behavior. Messages delivered via the central route are directly communicated and processed by the recipient (Petty, Barden, & Wheeler, 2009).

An example of a central route media message could be observed during the early anxious days of the novel coronavirus outbreak in the United States in early 2020. New York State Health Commissioner Howard Zucker appeared in a public service announcement that explained the state government's response to the national health crisis and urged citizens to stay informed (NYSDOH, 2020). Zucker's words were meant to caution and persuade New Yorkers about the seriousness of COVID-19 and the reasons for the state's decisive response. In addition, Zucker's words conveyed reassurance that leaders were taking action to stop the spread of the virus. Consistent with the tenant of the central route, Zucker's message was clear, logical, and delivered straightforwardly by an

authority figure. Messages such as this one helped New York “flatten the curve” when the state faced the highest number of cases of coronavirus in the country.

The peripheral route to persuasion abandons logic in favor of less relevant elements that persuade circuitously (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Peripheral characteristics of the message and messenger communicate the theme (Petty & Wegener, 2014). Some persuasive peripheral characteristics include attractive models, colors, humor, a dramatic narrative, and celebrity persona endorsements (Petty et al., 2009).



Figure 2.2 Attitudes about things like fast food can be affected by media.

Source: www.shutterstock.com/image-vector/illustration-stickman-kids-watching-commercial-about-1169124166

Motivation and ability can play into whether one uses the central route versus the peripheral route when deciding what to purchase. For example, when buying a new computer, if I do not have a lot of time or the ability to read and absorb all of the available information, for example, do not have the ability to understand specifications such as Core i5 or how much RAM I need, then I am less likely to centrally process the information and instead rely on peripheral cues like a celebrity endorsement or a cute or catchy tag line associated with the computer

chosen. Marketing a computer by providing detailed information about specifications (RAM, type of processor, etc.) versus using a celebrity endorsement, an attractive model, or a catchy tag line speaks to which approach the advertiser deems as more valuable, although both processes can lead to persuasion and are often used together. More is said about this model in the chapter on advertising.

In an extension of this theory, the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model, or E-ELM, suggests that it is the tendency to become immersed in story characters or a narrative that is the key variable in this model, replacing the emphasis on central and peripheral routes of message processing with character identification and being absorbed in a narrative. The quality of the message and subtlety of the persuasion predict the likelihood that the viewer will be persuaded (Green, Bilandzic, Fitzgerald, & Paravati, 2020).

Reinforcing Spirals Model (RSM)

This model serves to explain how social identities can be reinforced through shared media that reinforce the beliefs of that social identity. Durable attitudes are maintained within a group, pinpointing selective exposure to content consistent with the present attitudes of the group in question. Both mediated and interpersonal communication are differentiated to send messages consistent with a subgroup of an overall population based on things like religious beliefs, lifestyle focus, or ideologies. RSM leads not to a *change* in attitudes or beliefs but, rather, reinforces preexisting beliefs. With cultivation theory, exposure shapes and reinforces beliefs, making everyone the same (a mainstreaming effect) whereas with RSM, there is more polarization due to “echo chambers” (where persons encounter only beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own). RSM is about more targeted and focused media within a specific group. Media content is chosen based on social identity (Slater, 2015). Communication on global warming has been given as an example of RSM with climate-change deniers seeking out media that reinforces the already held belief (Feldman, Myers, Hmielowski, & Leiserowitz, 2014; Zhao, 2009).



Figure 2.3 An “echo chamber” occurs when someone surrounds themselves with only ideas that agree with their own and opposing viewpoints are filtered out.

Source: www.shutterstock.com/image-illustration/danger-filter-bubbles-only-receiving-personalized-1583468602

This model is most likely to be active in times when one’s identity feels threatened. For this reason, the model is often observed during adolescence when one’s identity is actively developing. Politicians may use perceived threats to identity to reinforce their own political positions, particularly if those positions seek to reinforce tradition and the status quo. Major shifts in social norms may signal instances when this happens, such as recent changes in laws surrounding marriage and the threats felt by those who fear change (Slater, Shehata, & Stromback, 2020).

Research has shown that this model emerges during times of political polarization that results from differences in affective partisan attitudes. Central to this is the theory of cognitive dissonance that says people strive to maintain equilibrium in their attitudes and engage in behaviors that reflect an underlying consistency in their attitudes and opinions (Festinger, 1957). Polarization in a group results from discussions, both mediated and individual, that are carried on

with respect to divisions in emotionally charged political beliefs (Hutchens, Hmielowski, & Beam, 2019).

A related concept, selective exposure, recognizes that when viewers make choices among available media, they gravitate to media that reinforce their previously existing beliefs, whether attending to news, comedy, or other entertainment (Knobloch-Westerwick, Westerwick, & Sude, 2020).

Mood Management Theory

As just noted, Festinger (1957) proposed that media consumers seek to have equilibrium in their attitudes and opinions because disequilibrium causes unpleasant psychological tension and distress. The mood management theory also suggests that media is used in order to enhance one's own feelings and decrease anxiety and tension. People avoid messages that are not consistent with currently held attitudes and beliefs. Therefore, the core tenet of mood management theory is that people seek out media that improves mood in spite of the fact that dissonant information may be an important source of exploration and growth (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2006).

There are two goals for mood management theory. The first is to maximize positive mood and minimize negative mood. The second, homeostasis, is the maintenance of an ideal and moderate level of arousal which for each person is different. High sensation seekers need more arousal to feel good compared to people who want less. Each person needs to find an optimal arousal level and can use media to achieve it. Media is a tool for coping with emotions, thus contributing to a sense of well-being (Nabi & Prestin, 2017; Zillman, 2000).

In an example of this concept, 5-year-old boys were placed into experimenter-created environments that were either nurturant, neutral, or hostile. They were then able to watch either a nurturant or a neutral television program for as long as they liked. The boys who were exposed to the hostile environment (an experimenter who was not nice to them) watched *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*, a soothing and kind program, longer than the boys in the nurturant or hostile experimenter condition (Zillman, 1988).

Henri Tajfel and Social Identity Theory

Henri Tajfel (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) developed the “social identity theory” that addressed the origins of prejudice and stereotyping, explaining why people see themselves as members of various in-groups, resulting in corresponding out-groups. His research established the homogeneity of the out-group, the idea that individuals tend to see the members of groups of which they are not a member as being “all alike” while they see the groups within which they are members as varied and diverse. To apply that, as a woman, I might think that women are each a unique individual while “those men are all alike.”

A second aspect of social identity theory says that we derive our personal value from our group membership and thus are fundamentally motivated to be members of esteemed groups (which we can achieve by degrading other groups). In Tajfel’s model, intergroup conflict begins with an unbalanced division of resources with one group being dominant over the other. When the less dominant group rejects its lesser status, that group works to develop a positive group identity. This results in the development of the already mentioned in-group bias wherein the out-group is stereotyped as all having shared characteristics, presumably negative, and the in-group is seen as being a diverse and nuanced collection of heterogeneous individuals. We simplify out-groups into categories in order to make processing information about those group members easier (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).



Figure 2.4 In-groups are people like me whereas out-groups are all the groups that contain people not like me.

Source: www.shutterstock.com/image-illustration/ingroups-outgroups-type-discrimination-word-cloud-1306621666

Within the context of the previously discussed uses and gratifications theory, it has been proposed that one way social groups use media is to build positive images for their in-group. The fundamental motivation for engaging in this process is to build self-esteem for in-group members. Research has shown that media preferences are guided by social identity. Choosing programs that are salient to one's group identities is a common process in media selection. For example, a middle-aged woman might seek out programs that relate to her as a member of both middle-aged individuals and women (Trepte, 2006). Ethnic minorities gravitate to media featuring ethnic minorities (Ward, 2004), while LGBT youth are more likely to indicate that their favorite character is LGBT than are cisgender straight teens (Bond, 2018).

Social creativity is a strategy used in order to distinguish one's own social group as better than another. "We may not be strong, but we are creative" is an example of a way to try to enhance the perceived status of the in-group. Social change is a second strategy whereby group members attempt to alter the status quo of their own group, thus making their in-group more desirable. The women's movement could be considered an example of this strategy. Social mobility means that a person might decide to try to leave a group in favor of a higher status group such as what happens when someone who was born in a lower socioeconomic group endeavors to "get ahead" through various means (Harkwood, 2020).

Minority depictions in media have the power to influence positive social mobility. For example, if Black youth perceive that a number of well-paid athletes are Black, the potential to emulate role models from that perceived in-group can influence those youth to aspire to those kinds of achievements, a finding that is also consistent with social learning theory (Trepte, 2006).

Evolutionary Psychology and Attachment

Evolutionary psychology is the study of how the human species has evolved and how that evolution has affected the mental, social, and physical responses that individuals have to the environment. This includes the study of psychological

adaptations that evolved in order to solve problems that our human ancestors encountered. The intersection of media psychology with evolutionary psychology then involves the way that we respond to media in ways that are inherent to humans as they have evolved over the life of our species. Further explanation and examples will hopefully make this clearer as all this is rooted in biology and the process of natural selection.

Natural selection is the process by which specific genes are passed from one generation to the next through mate selection and reproduction. If an individual's genes are not passed down to offspring, either directly or indirectly, then those genes cease to influence the way our species adapts to life around us. We usually think of this involving having one's own offspring, but an indirect way for our genes to make it to the next generation is for our close relatives to have children. This is why aunts and uncles, for example, have an evolutionary investment in the survival of nieces and nephews.

Because this involves characteristics that are considered to be desirable in the process of mate selection, individuals who possess desired characteristics are more likely to have the opportunity to reproduce and have their genes passed on. Also involved are any characteristics that make an individual more likely to survive in the native environment. If the individual does not survive, they do not have the chance to reproduce. For example, if the ability to run fast makes it more likely that an individual will be able to escape predators, the faster runners are more likely to survive long enough to reproduce in that environment. If the environment is unusually cold, then those who are best able to preserve their own body heat are less likely to die from exposure, and they will live to reproduce. This could be why groups who live in colder climates tend to have more body fat while those who live in very hot climates are more likely to be lean.

Relating this to media psychology, because our species has not had time, in an evolutionary sense, to adapt to media, we process mediated stimuli as if they were real (Reeves & Nass, 1996; Stever, 2020). Natural selection is a process that takes many centuries, if not millennia. Because mass media has only been a factor in human life for, at most, several hundred years, the natural selection necessary to make fundamental changes in the genetic makeup of the species has not yet had time to happen.

We respond to the faces and voices of familiar others such that with increased familiarity, we are more likely to form social connections with those individuals. Our minds have a difficult time differentiating between those we know from our day-to-day and face-to-face lives and those only known via television and other media, particularly visual media. We form attachments to those familiar people, with attachment being defined as proximity seeking for the sake of safe haven and felt security (Stever, 2013). We seek closeness with those familiar others who give us comfort and a sense of safety. Virtual proximity through media is a substitute for some people who have formed such attachments to media personalities. More is said about attachment in the chapter on audiences and parasocial theory ([Chapter 9](#)).

In this discussion about evolutionary psychology and mass media, it makes sense to include social presence and media richness theories (Kock, 2004, 2012) as each proposes that face-to-face communication was the type of communication most affected by evolution. Because humans have evolved to be good at face-to-face communication, media that best approximates face-to-face communication is the most engaging. Daft and Lengel (1986) argued that richness was dependent, in part, on the medium's ability to convey nonverbal information as

24 a part of the communication. Written communication has no nonverbal cues whereas traditional face-to-face communications have rich cues. Between those two extremes are a continuum of various forms of mediated communication that might have either more or fewer nonverbal cues available as a characteristic of that form. Social presence theory conveyed a similar distinction between face-to-face versus written communications (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Other aspects of social presence or media richness include the availability of immediate feedback from the communication partner, as well as the ability to convey aspects of one's own personality (Kock, 2004).

In 2012, Kock proposed the media naturalness theory as an alternative to media richness theory after research evidence did not completely support the earlier theory. The media naturalness theory contends that reduction of cognitive effort is the more important factor in explaining the greater effectiveness of media forms that best approximate face-to-face communication. Because humans evolved to communicate in person and in a manner that is most often synchronous, to the extent that these aspects are employed, communication takes less cognitive effort (Stever, 2020).

Exemplification Theory

This theory reflects both an emphasis on emotions and underlying cognitive structures that organize those emotions. As such, it belongs in both this category and the one to follow. Studies have shown that the reporting of events that arouse strong emotions in the viewer is more likely to have a lasting impression compared to reports that do not elicit such strong emotions. Concrete events in this example are more influential than are abstract ideas (Zillman, 2002). For example, conveying the information that the rate of murders in a certain area is rising is not as memorable as a report detailing a particular murder or murders. In the May 2020 murder of George Floyd by a police officer, which was reported by almost all news media and which almost single-handedly energized the Black Lives Matter movement, that murder was not an isolated incident either for Minneapolis or for the rest of the country. The impact of the video that was taken by a bystander created an intense emotional reaction in viewers of all races, indeed of all nationalities, and the impact of this single event became a defining exemplar of “police brutality.” Whether it was accurate or representative necessitated an exploration of similar incidents, considering how the incidents were the same and how they were different, how frequently they occurred, and how accurate were those reports. The power of a visual exemplar that all could “experience” over the factual report of such an incident is clear.

Tamborini (2011) developed MIME (the model of intuitive morality and exemplars) as an application of exemplification theory. In order to understand MIME, one must first understand the moral foundational theory (MFT).

MFT (Haidt, 2001) identifies five areas in which individuals and cultures have deepseated beliefs about what is “right” or “wrong” These are “care and harm,” “fairness,” “loyalty,” “authority,” and “purity” Care (and harm) involves the belief that one should relieve the suffering of others. It is what happens when you are in a public place and you see someone who is injured or lost (particularly in the case of a child). One does not go through a complex set of rational logical thoughts in order to decide to help. The instinctive and instant response to a moral situation is at the heart of MFT. In a like manner, fairness involves the individual and cultural belief that people ought to be treated equitably and in a way that ensures justice for all people. Loyalty is based on the need to promote the common good, particularly for our own in-group. Authority is the recognition of those who

are in legitimate possession of power (so long as that power is not misused). Purity refers to the desire to avoid contamination, including that created by animalistic and carnal desires. An example of purity could be the nearly universal taboo against siblings engaging in sexual relationships. There is more about these theories in [Chapter 4](#) on positive psychology and prosocial media.

Cognitively Based Theories

Some theories focus on the way messages influence thinking in addition to emotions.

Third-Person Effect, Fundamental Attribution Error, and First-Person Effect

The third-person effect (TPE) says that most people estimate a larger media effect for others than for themselves (Davison, 1983). Viewers might be asked how much they are influenced by a commercial, and a person might say the commercial does not affect him or her at all but *would* affect most other people. This effect has been noted in a number of studies (e.g., Jeremy Cohen & Davis, 1991; Perloff, 2009), in fact, a meta-analysis of 32 studies (Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000) found that this is a medium to large effect in studies in which participants were asked about the effects of a message on others versus themselves. A later study (Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008) did a meta-analysis of 106 studies looking at a variety of different contexts/topics from health to media violence to marketing, coming to a similar conclusion. This is clearly a robust finding.

Beliefs about media effects on others have implications for people's actual behavior. Assuming that others are being impacted by media, media users change their own behavior. Tsfati and Jonathan Cohen (2003) found that people would move to another town if they believed that the media depicted their town in a way that affected others' perceptions of this place. In other words, beliefs about others' perceptions influenced a desire to move in spite of what the actual living conditions were in the current place of residence. In another example, looking at the H1N1 pandemic, Liu and Lo (2014) found that TPE decreased people's intention to engage in precautionary actions with minimal information exposure. If they did not know much about H1N1 and all they knew was just from media,

the TPE was greater. If information exposure was greater, then TPE was reduced, and people were more likely to engage in taking precautions against H1N1.

Related to TPE is the fundamental attribution error, which says that an individual is more likely to attribute human behavior of others to stable internal characteristics but one's own behavior was caused by something that happened. They may think that other people respond to media advertising because they have weak cognitive skills and are vulnerable to persuasion, but they responded to the advertisement in order to make a needed purchase. Even if the purchase were a mistake, this reasoning would prevail according to the fundamental attribution error (Jones & Harris, 1967). Using the same reasoning, I get angry at the end of a long day because I am tired and I have had a difficult day, but others get angry because they are angry people!

TPE increases with social distance. People say they are a little less influenced by media than close others but say they are *a lot* less influenced than strangers. We like to surround ourselves with sophisticated, smart, and not-brainwashed people. TPE occurs because in our culture, we think that being influenced by media is a negative thing. We understate the effect on ourselves to make ourselves appear in a more positive light. While most people harbor the belief that others are affected more than they themselves are by media, an exception to that is the first-person effect, which says that when the media effect is deemed positive (e.g., public service announcement for water conservation) people say they are MORE impacted by it than others are. Both the TPE and the first-person effect are related to ego-defense mechanisms such as rationalization or denial, whereby people cultivate beliefs that support a positive view of the self (Sharma & Roy, 2016; see the section on psychoanalysis).

[Social Learning Theory and Social Cognitive Theory](#)

Bandura (2001) developed two main concepts that have been influential. The first was the **social learning theory**. While behaviorists thought that direct reinforcement was necessary for learning, Bandura illustrated through various experiments that it was possible and even likely that learning would take place when a model is observed exhibiting the behavior of interest.

In the original Bobo doll experiment (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961), 72 children, 24 in each group, observed an adult model playing with a doll. In one condition, the model played aggressively with the doll, hitting it with a hammer and throwing it up in the air and pretending to shoot at it. In another condition, the model was not aggressive in their play with the doll. The third group had no model at all. The children had been rated ahead of the study for their aggressive behavior, and the samples were matched so that the original aggressive behaviors before the experiment were the same. The models and children contained equal numbers of boys and girls. A second experiment consisted of three experimental groups which represented the continuum of physical-world, film, and cartoon violence and one control group that had no aggression stimulation. The children were exposed to either a physical model acting out aggressively with a mallet toward a large doll, a filmed version of the aggression, or a cartoon version in which a cat struck the doll repeatedly. After viewing the respective violent simulations for 20 minutes, study participants, children aged 2 to 5 years old were led to another room where various toys were located, including the same type of Bobo doll and mallet featured in each of the experimental groups. Researchers then introduced an element of frustration to participants by restricting certain toys from play. Many subjects then proceeded to violently engage with the Bobo doll with the provided mallet. Overall, participants in the experimental groups demonstrated almost twice as much hostility than the control group did.

Bandura's (2001) second contribution was called the **social cognitive theory**. In this theory, he emphasized the role of cognition in social learning and employed a concept called triadic reciprocal causation. This was in direct contrast to behaviorism that had conceptualized behaviors as occurring in a linear cause-and-effect fashion of stimulus–response–reinforcement. For example, if a child picks up their toys and is given a reward, behaviorism says that the child will be more likely to pick up their toys the next time they are finished playing with them. Triadic reciprocal causation says that there are three aspects of this behavior that interact in both directions: personal determinants, environmental determinants, and behavioral determinants. A personal determinant might be the personality of the child and how orderly they are in their day-to-day behavior. An environmental determinant might be how orderly the environment tends to be on a usual day. The behavioral determinant might be the result of the picking up behavior, the reward.

A key tenet of Bandura's theory is that behavior is more likely to be shaped internally through cognition rather than externally through influences. So, in the toy example, the external influence is the reward, but the internal influences are related to personality, both the child's own and that of the parents, as well as other characteristics that would influence "toy picking up" behavior. Does the child have a proclivity for being orderly and neat, or is the tendency more to be random and cluttered in the preferred environment? These kinds of factors are as likely to influence the behavior as the reward.

Bandura (2001) suggested that the ways that people learn from the media are very similar to the ways they learn from other models in their face-to-face lives. Observational learning is affected by such processes as attention, retention, production, and motivation. When the model is both attractive and similar in salient characteristics to the viewer, the effect is particularly powerful. It is so powerful that it forms the basis for entertainment education, a communication strategy used in more than 40 countries to learn about and create social change through entertainment media (Brown & Singhal, 1999).

Social cognitive theory illustrates the mechanisms whereby vicarious learning takes place through media. The first part of learning is attention. We must pay attention to a mediated message before we can learn from it. Attention is a function of a number of factors including the attractiveness of the model and similarity of the model to the observer. In order to model the observed behaviors, they have to be remembered, and the individual has to be able to reproduce those behaviors. Motivation is important in vicarious learning and motivation can be created via a variety of reinforcers. A key factor is self-efficacy, the belief that one is capable of producing the observed behaviors (Pajares, Prestin, Chen, & Nabi, 2009).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

The self-determination theory describes three primary needs of all people that drive the various positive processes that occur throughout growth and development. These are competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Each of these is employed in order to explain self-motivation, and personal

well-being. Even those factors that hinder growth and development can be understood best in terms of how they work against the three primary needs.

When understanding how media affects the individual, it is important to understand motivation. A primary motivation for media use is entertainment, well illustrated through the use of video games. Unfortunately, “the gratifications that entertainment media provides may too often be, in terms of psychological nourishment, the mental equivalent of sugared soft-drinks” (Rigby & Ryan, 2016, p. 35). Even so, such media can also create a sense of happiness or mood elevation that is, in itself, beneficial. By way of contrast, Ferguson, Gutberg, Schattke, Paulin, and Jost (2015) talk about how social media can inspire the support of various charitable causes. Clearly, when talking about motivation, media can support a number of decisions from those that are self-serving to those that provide benefits to societal causes.

Going beyond entertainment, SDT demonstrates that technology and media have the capacity to promote healthy psychological growth and operations in areas such as personality and social identity development and overall well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Meeting the primary needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy creates intrinsic motivation that prompts behavior. Intrinsic motivation occurs when an individual is motivated by internal factors. For example, a child playing a video game is intrinsically motivated to play because of an appreciation and enjoyment of the game. Indeed, one factor that has made modern video gaming so popular is that it has been shown to satisfy the primary needs asserted in SDT and thereby continually fuels the intrinsic motivation to play (Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006; Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, & Organ, 2010).

Built on the premises of SDT, the Temporarily Expanded Boundaries of the Self (TEBOTS) Model suggests that individuals seek to meet their primary needs through the vicarious experiencing of the lives of others through narrative entertainment media such as stories, films, or video games. TEBOTS recognizes that individuals are severely limited in what they can personally experience by their own abilities and characteristics as well as being situated in a particular time, space, and social situation. Stories are a good way to expand the limits of the self and are motivating for that reason. More is explored on this topic of audience motivations in [Chapter 9](#) (Johnson, Slater, Silver, & Ewoldsen, 2021).

[Information Processing and Meme Theory](#)

Information processing, while sometimes referred to as a “theory,” is more accurately a model based on the metaphor that the human processing system is analogous to the workings of a computer whereby data input is via the sensory register (the five senses), the workspace is the short-term or working memory, and the hard drive is the long-term memory (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968). This model has been applied within the cybernetic tradition wherein researchers look at audience members as “processors” who interpret media in both intentional and unintentional ways (Lang, 2000). Said another way, they can be either automatic or controlled by the viewer. In the information processing theory, encoding, storage, and retrieval are the three main components of the model. When looking at this from a communication perspective, encoding can be thought of as “exposure,” storage is via memory, and later retrieval is accessing the information via a set of associational cues that prompt recall.

Sometimes we intentionally set up retrieval cues (called mnemonics) in order to assist access to our long-term memories. But sometimes the process is more automatic such that we remember things perhaps because they were particularly interesting to us during exposure. The variable of interest in this case is “attention,” as we tend to remember the things that catch our attention and then hold our interest. In this way, attention is either “automatic” or “controlled.”

All of this can be related to meme theory, the term *meme* coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976). It refers to units of culture that act like genes, morphing or spreading quickly and without notice. Xiao Mina (2019) observed, “Memes are a media strategy above all, and like all media, they can be used to communicate different kinds of messages” (p. 97). For example, the user-generated memes portraying George Floyd’s death (discussed in [Chapter 13](#)) and final words were employed by outraged citizens to decry racism and police brutality. Memetic transfer of ideas allows for swift transmission of persuasive content through images with minimal words (Mielczarek, 2018).

The idea was modified by countless others until it became Internet Meme Theory (Castaño Díaz, 2013). By both definitions, memes are units of understanding that are replicable and transmittable in a way that causes them to move quickly through a social group, creating a social understanding of a basic unit of information. Related to meme theory is the idea of perception, which

recognizes that perception is a filter through which ideas are interpreted in such a way that the idea (or meme) can be understood (or misunderstood) in a myriad of ways. Stories of messages that get misinterpreted are rife, particularly within the context of cultural/ class/gendered/generational messages or norms as perceived by members outside the group. Visceral reactions to political messages, in particular, are problematic. See [Box 2.1](#) for a discussion of one way memes are used.

Box 2.1 Counterculture Memes

As discussed, memes are ideas or graphics that can become like viruses and spread. Memes are sometimes used in support of a group or movement in order to influence followers. For example, the antigovernment movement known as “Boogaloo” began appearing in late 2019, the name taken from the movie sequel *Breakin’ 2: Electric Boogaloo*. It is composed of extremists boasting tens of thousands of adherents that support a sequel to the American Civil War (Wiggins, 2020). Donning trademark Hawaiian shirts and ballistic vests (Gray Ellis, 2020), Boogaloo members have been observed at pro-gun rallies, anti-quarantine protests, George Floyd rallies, and, more recently, in the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol (Hesson, Parker, Cooke, & Harte, 2021).

Memes allow groups such as Boogaloo to covertly organize and antagonize one another to action (Goldenberg & Finkelstein, 2020). There are always serious messages carried in the seemingly silly memes. For example, “Pepe the frog” was conceived by artist Matt Furie in 2005 and went viral 3 years later on the imageboard website, 4chan (Echevaria, 2020). In time, the irreverent amphibian slacker was adopted as the 4chan political mascot. Most of 4chan’s posters are anonymous and posts are typically in images.

It took the 2016 presidential election to transform Pepe into a swastika-wearing anti-Semitic Nazi embraced by White supremacists and eventually other groups such as Boogaloo.

Wearing Pepe insignia and sharing his memes demonstrate an air of cartoonish playfulness that hides a dark, disturbing agenda. Singer and Brooking (2018) observed that “Pepe formed an ideological bridge between trolling and the next-

generation white nationalists, alt-right movement that had lined up behind Trump” (p. 188). Authorities discovered Pepe prominently and repeatedly featured on the Facebook page of White nationalist James Fields, who drove his car into a crowd of peaceful demonstrators killing one in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 (Glum, 2017).

Social Information Processing

Social information processing (SIP) has been used to talk about computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the ways that personal cues would be transmitted via communications that were void of nonverbal cues. Would this cause the messages to lose social and personal richness? Email, text messages, and posts on social networking sites were all potentially affected. This theory was developed within the context of organizations and attempted to explain the social contexts within which media choices were made and then applied to organizations. It was developed well ahead of the internet and the ubiquitous use of the personal computer (Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz, & Power, 1987; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). SIP was originally developed to explain the ways that individuals interpret social information in an organizational context.

In response to concerns raised by SIP, the hyperpersonal model of CMC was conceptualized to explain how characteristics of these communications could be an advantage and actually cause written communication to be more positive (Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007; Walther, 1996). Both SIP and the hyperpersonal model propose that those who communicate via text are motivated to convey messages that reflect their own personal and affective qualities. When nonverbal cues are not available, other means are used to convey the same information. Early work suggested that perhaps this was the origin of the use of emoticons to convey feelings, but subsequent work suggested that messages convey emotions through the use of the style and content of language and that these are even more important in conveying affect than are simple emoticons. Research has supported the presence of such verbal cues in conveying emotion through printed words (Scott & Fullwood, 2020; Walther, Van Der Heide, Ramirez, Burgoon, & Peña, 2015).

Neuroscience and Its Place in Information Processing Theory

A theory that has its basis in information processing is the Limited Capacity Model of Motivated Mediated Message Processing Theory, which later became known as the Dynamic Human-Centered Communication Systems Theory. This theory uses factors like attention, memory, and aspects of messages that affect attention such as novelty, relevance, or attractiveness to determine what creates the motivation to pay attention to and remember a media message. This approach is grounded in psychophysiology, where physiological responses are captured in order to understand the ways that the mind and body interact. Research in this area has looked at cognition, emotions, and fight or flight responses relative to various kinds of messages (Clayton, Lang, Leshner, & Quick, 2019; Huskey, Wilcox, Clayton, & Keene, 2020; Lang, 2000, 2014).

This is part of an important trend in media psychology research, the enthusiastic recognition of the contributions that brain science can make to media psychology. The newest waves of research look at physiology and indicators related to media effects. Neuroscience is being applied, offering a valuable framework for researchers seeking to understand the ways that the brain responds to media consumed. This reflects an ongoing shift in emphasis from behaviorism to information processing in the study of media effects (Bolls, Weber, Lang, & Potter, 2019).

Other neuropsychological models are used to explain things such as the emotional responses people have to fictional events told in stories. The activation of the emotional system is similar to the emotional reactions to real events. Much new research is being pursued in this area, for example, the effects of social media use, or the study of emotion bias, the way one frames an understanding of media as filtered through the emotions triggered by that media, by looking at the neural pathways involved (Konijn & Achterberg, 2020).



Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. With which of these theories were you already familiar, and which were new to you?
2. Consider one form of media (i.e., television, talk radio, film, graphic novels, blogging, news, social media) and decide to which theory you think it is most closely tied and by which it is best explained. Try to focus on just one theory.
3. If you were going to design a research study, which theory would you want to use in order to develop your research question? Why?
4. Is there one of these theories that you think best explains media as it is today?



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