

ARABS IN HOLLYWOOD: U.S. FILMS' CULTIVATION OF VIEWERS'  
PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ARABS

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ARABS IN HOLLYWOOD: U.S. FILMS' CULTIVATION OF VIEWERS'  
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“La vida es tan corta que una sola palabra puede hacer sonreír a un alma. La vida es tan justa que aquel que dice las palabras correctas convierte un segundo en una eternidad”.

## ABSTRACT

This study examines how U.S. films cultivate viewers' perceptions and attitudes toward Arabs. The analysis builds on the study of media effects and racial stereotyping. The study utilized a convenience sample in a pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design to explore the effects of Arab stereotypes in films, as well as the effect of films' viewing habits on viewers' perceptions and attitudes towards Arabs.

Findings suggest that films containing portrayals of Arabs serve as immediate stimuli and affect viewers' perceptions of Arabs. Participants exposed to negative stereotypes of Arabs in films had higher negative perceptions of Arabs after the films than viewers exposed to positive Arab stereotypes in films. In addition, participants exposed to positive stereotypes of Arabs in films had higher positive perceptions of Arabs than viewers exposed to negative portrayals of Arabs in films.

Furthermore, films' viewing habits of participants showed a significant impact on their attitudes towards Arabs when using pretest perceptions and attitudes as covariates. The findings suggest that viewers' perceptions are stimulated by the messages films send. Then, after viewers are exposed to the same consecutive system of messages, films served as a tool of learning and meaning making on the formation and reinforcement of attitudes. Films cultivate viewers' perceptions and attitudes towards Arabs.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The term “Arab” made reference in pre-Islamic times to the population that inhabited the Arabian Peninsula and the Syrian Desert. The Arab world consists of 22 countries located in the Middle East and North Africa (American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee, 2004). The countries of this region are categorized as Arabic with the exception of Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Israel (Moghadam, 1993). The term Arab is also a reference to people whose native language is Arabic and live in an Arab country (Sergent & Woods, 1992). The Arab nations are characterized by their differences in activities, group membership, history, and geographic location, which cause different economic and social norms (Chafets, 1985; Sreberny, 2001). Regardless their differences, these cultures are generalized and oversimplified into stereotypical images by many Westerners (Said, 1978).

The Arab world is highly related with Islam even though only about 25 percent of the Muslim population in the world is Arab. There are over 300 million Arabs in the world and there are about 1.2 Billion Muslims in the world (American-Arab Antidiscrimination Committee, 2004). Most Arabs are Muslim, but most Muslims are not Arabs. In the United States there appears to be at least 3.5 million people of Arabic heritage; however, the Census Bureau (2000) identifies about 1.5 million people. Islam rates the second most predominant religion for Arab Americans (23%) after Catholicism (42%) (Samhan, 2004).



Middle East/Islam – Western relations have had a story of conflict (Prados, 2001). Furthermore, the current conflict between the United States, Iraq and other Middle Eastern nations presents an open panorama for the study of perceptions and attitudes of Americans toward Arabs. The current thesis explores films' cultivation of viewers' perceptions and attitudes toward Arabs.

Racial stereotypes simplify and homogenize complex realities creating simplistic images of a cultural group. Racial stereotypes are simplifications that often emphasize a culture's traits negatively even if the preliminary motive for the stereotype was positive (Downing, 1995). Various authors argue for the importance of the study of racial stereotypes in films (e.g., Akram, 2002; Shaheen, 2000) as well as the media stereotyping of Arabs in the Gulf War (Muscatti, 2002). These studies analyze how the media overlook distinctions among a racial group by distributing stereotypical representation.

Stereotypes of Arabs have been held for centuries and are created around rumors fantasies termed by Said (1978) the *oriental imaginary*. The stereotypes of Arabs remain static, even though the means of distribution of information and entertainment have changed. In the contemporary era, ideas, values, beliefs, and representations of social reality are transmitted through mediated means. The film industry is an example of these communication media that contribute to the diffusion of stereotypic representations of social reality.

Films accelerate the distribution of stereotypes because film, as a mass medium, allows the circulation of immediate information and facilitates the presentation of portrayals (Butsh, 2001). *Titanic* (1997), is the highest grossing film of all time in the

Unites States, this film generated \$600,743,440 total in box office revenue. *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), which according to Shaheen (2001) presents images of Arabs, is positioned in the 88<sup>th</sup> place with \$165,493,908 generated in box office revenue (Entertainment Insiders, 2003). The leading global provider of in-home movie entertainment, Blockbuster Inc, reported a total revenue of \$2.9 billion for the first six months of 2004 and projects to reach 70% of U.S. households by 2005. This company rents more that 1 billion videos, DVDs, and video games at its outlets every year (Blockbuster, 2004). These numbers support the idea of the film industry as an educational tool and a great medium of entertainment for the American people.

Cultivation theory/analysis is both an academic perspective and a research method used to explore media effects. According to this theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999), audiences respond to mediated messages and are guided by the information contained in television programming and consequently, film content.

Cultivation research may combine a correlation of data analyses constituted by descriptive content analysis and survey data. This combination of research systems provides the identification of indicators and prevailing images found in the media with the measurements of respondents' viewing patterns to assess their beliefs and attitudes about the real world (Diefenbach & West, 2001; Gerbner, 1998).

The study of media influence on people's conceptions of social reality regarding racial stereotypes is important in order to understand the rationale behind people's social reality of foreign cultures. As well as television, the film industry is a powerful medium

for the distribution of stereotypes of Arabs (Muscati, 2002; Shaheen, 2000). Therefore, the focus of the proposed study is to examine the representations of Arabs in the U.S. film industry as a mass medium and the possible effects of viewers' cultivation of social reality regarding their perceptions and attitudes towards Arabs.

The present thesis is structured in the following matter: Chapter 1 presents important information supporting the rationale behind this study. Chapter 2 provides a literature review including the relevant standpoints of stereotypes, cultivation analysis/theory, and films' stereotypical representations of Arabs. In addition, research questions and hypotheses are presented. Chapter 3 presents the work's methodology used for the study, including its characteristics, study variables, conditions, instrument information, participants, and data collection procedures. Chapter 4 presents the findings and discusses the main results of this study. Finally, Chapter 5 presents a conclusion to summarize the present study, its major findings, limitation, and suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 focuses specifically on the relationship between mediated images of Arabs with audiences' social perceptions and attitudes toward these cultures. The literature review addresses the relevant literature on stereotypes, cultivation analysis/theory, and films' stereotypical representations. The following section summarizes the literature that examines racial stereotypes.

#### Racial Stereotypes

People tend to use categories to classify different types of objects and to maximize what Estes (1993) calls *predictive power*; meaning the chances to accurately predict people's traits by their group affiliation rather than by their individual aspects. Some scholars argue that the use of stereotypes leads to prejudice (Christiansen, Kaplan, & Jones 1999). Gorham (1995) defines *racial stereotypes* as "the operationalization of racial myths as social reality beliefs concerning members of racial groups based on perceived group affiliations" (p.6).

Racial stereotypes are not merely descriptive but exist within a historical context and contain both descriptive and evaluative aspects (Gorham, 1995; Seiter, 1986). They are the products of a long history of thoughts and images created around the margins of situations that influence the perceptions of a given culture. Studies suggest that stereotypes influence how people think and behave in society (e.g., Zemore, Fiske, & Kim, 2000). The study of racial stereotypes in the United States is significant. However, most of the studies focus on a specific racial group such as African Americans (Fuhioka,

1999; Levine, Carmines, & Sniderman 1999; Tan et al., 2001) and Chicanas/os (Yosso, 2002).

There are a variety of perspectives around social creation and the understanding of stereotypes. The cognitive approach claims that people stereotype because the creation of classification facilitates the organization of information and assists judgment by making human reasoning easier (Zemore, Fiske, & Kim, 2000). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) implies that stereotyping is a group process and not an individual creation emphasizing intra-group similarities and inter-group differences. This theory implies that qualities assigned to in-group members are positive and qualities given to out-group members are negative. Another perspective is the power-base approach which claims that stereotyping is used to establish, maintain, and justify superior power and status assigning negative characteristics to out-group members to inhere power (Goodwin & Fiske, 1995).

All these perspectives enrich the understanding of the process of stereotyping as well as enhance the analysis of the creation of stereotypes around Arabs. However, because of its extensive explanatory implications about stereotyping, the sociocultural perspective (Hamilton & Sherman, 1994) is presented on this study for the explanation of the constitution, maintenance, and change of stereotypes around Arabs. The sociocultural perspective argues that stereotypes are learned from socialization agents such as authority figures, peer groups, and media portrayals. The sociocultural model supports Wertsch's (1991) suggestion that human cognitive competence in daily life is heavily dependent on constant interplay with other people and with cultural tools (Wertsch, 1991).

The mass media are one set of the cultural tools that present mediated images of social reality (Cole, 2001) and display essential elements for the constitution and change of stereotypes (Tan et al., 2001) in order to facilitate group identification and membership maintenance. The sociocultural perspective (Atlttheide, 2003) is interpreted in this study as the process where meanings are derived through the interaction between the media and the viewer. In this way, the mass media influence social interaction because the media have become part of the identity of their audience and influence perceptions of social reality.

Given the broad circumstances surrounding stereotypes, general statements about the structure and prevalence of racial stereotypes can be difficult to make. However, according to Sergent and Woods (1992) the lack of knowledge people have about a foreign culture is an important factor that affects the stereotyping of a foreign group. Levine and colleagues (1999) propose that racial attitudes toward a group are bipolar. This concept means that positive and negative stereotypes are highly correlated. Although positive and negative stereotypes are not polar opposites, they have a bipolar structure.

The current literature implies that negative stereotypes are those stereotypes that oversimplify the complex realities of a racial group but concentrate on increasing the negative aspects of a group (Levine, et al., 1999; Shaheen, 2001). Some authors claim that stereotypes are simplifications that often emphasize a culture's traits negatively even if the preliminary motive for the stereotype is positive. (Gorham 1995; Downing, 1995). For the purpose of this study, negative stereotypes will be defined as a set of categories that imply a negative connotation toward the subject issued in this specific analysis-- the

negative connotation toward Arabs. On the other hand, Shaheen (2001) defines positive stereotypes as the perception of a particular group of people as normal without specific negative aspects. Positive stereotypes include the perception of Arabs as common people with values and beliefs. After analyzing the relevant literature about racial stereotypes, the following section will examine the media effect approach of cultivation theory.

Research shows that regardless the differences in sociocultural activities, economic status, geographic location, or specific background, Arabs are categorized and oversimplified as terrorists, wealthy, female oppressors, unreasonable, and religious fanatics. Arab women are stereotyped as passive, veiled, oppressed, and belly dancers (Mowlana, 1995; Shaheen, 2001; Wilkins, 1995). Arabs are associated with characteristics that generalize them in stereotyped categories created in the eighteenth century and that still persist today (Ahmed, 1992; Kahf, 1999; Little, 1998; Moghadam, 1993; Said, 1978). Shaheen (1984) identified four myths evident in media portrayals of Arabs: (a) Arabs are fabulously wealthy, (b) Arabs are barbaric and uncultured, (c) Arabs are sex maniacs with a penchant for white slavery, and (d) Arabs revel in terrorism.

Arab women, predominately Muslim, are perceived as a mystery; they are viewed as people with no rights and waiting to be protected by external forces that are going to save them from their evil oppressors (Kahf, 1999). People in the United States associate Arabs with feelings of fear, lack of safety, tension, anger, and suspicion (Sergent & Woods, 1992).

## Cultivation Analysis/Theory

This section includes relevant literature of cultivation analysis/theory in relation with stereotypes. Cultivation theory primarily looks at the contribution of TV drama to viewer conceptions and assumptions about reality in conjunction with other sources of knowledge such as education (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). However, for the purpose of this study, cultivation theory is used to explain films' effects on viewers' perceptions and attitudes towards Arabs.

The importance of cultivation analysis/theory relies on the high number of television viewers and media users. Television is a powerful mass medium that has a great number of the population exposed to its messages before they learn to read or even talk (Condry, 1989). Household viewing has increased by 23% over the past 35 years about 3-7 hours more per week than it was in 1965 (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999). This increase means that contemporary households watch television an average of 7 hours daily (Perse, 2001) and the actual viewing by people over two years of age averages more than three hours a day (Gerbner, 1998).

Cultivation theory proposes guidelines to study media effects on viewers' perceptions of social reality. Its aim is to study what, if anything, viewers absorb from "living" in the world of television (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Cultivation analysis investigates the assumptions that television cultivates about the facts, norms, and values of society. Its methodology usually emphasizes the distinction among viewing categories. A three-way split of viewers' daily television exposure is used to classify data on viewing categories (i.e., "light," "medium" and heavy") (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Then it



compares between heavy and light viewers within and across groups indicating the conceptions about social reality called the cultivation differential (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

A variety of studies have been conducted on the resultant attitudes and behaviors of the audiences on media effects within stories presented through television. Hence, it is important to note that cultivation analysis builds on the notion that most of the media programming is designed to be watched by almost everyone. In addition, cultivation analysis suggests that the most popular media materials tend to present consistent and complementary messages to target heterogeneous audiences because of the close relations among the various enterprises involved in the making and distribution of media content (Signorielli & Morgan, 1996; Gerbner, 1998). Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli (1980), as well as Diefenbach and West (2001), have analyzed the cultivation effects on heterogeneous audiences; whereas, there are also studies that emphasize the analysis of cultivation effects on specific demographic groups such as children (Hawkins & Pingree, 1980).

The principles of cultivation theory emphasize the analysis of media effects regarding television programming in general. This theory builds on the analysis of television as the viewers' heartland of the symbolic world, which illustrates how society works by dramatizing its norms and values (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). However, there are researchers who emphasize their studies in a specific television format or genre such as soap operas (Carveth & Alexander, 1985). Perse (1986) also extends the research on soap opera viewers' cultivation as well as viewers' motives, attitudes, and behaviors.

Several other studies have examined viewer's cultivation targeting specific formats or genres such as crime-adventure programs and cartoons (Hawkins & Pingree, 1980). Cultivation analysis has been also used to analyze the relationship between local television news and the increase of concern and fear about crime (Romer, Hall & Aday, 2003). Woo and Dominick (2001) explore daytime television talk shows cultivation effects in relation to perceptions and attitudes of interpersonal relationships among U.S. and international students.

The most popular area of cultural analysis addresses the influence of violent programming on viewers' perception of violence (Diefenbach & West, 2001; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Gerbner, 1998; Hawkins & Pingree, 1980). Recently, scholars have incorporated cultivation theory/analysis in areas besides viewers' perceptions of violence. These studies include the infrastructure of cultivation theory on the construction of social fear between ethnic groups (Matei, Ball-Rokeach, & Qiu, 2001; McQuivey, 1997), audience reception analysis on broadcasting news (Domke, 2001; Dworkin, Foreman-Wernet, & Dervin, 1999), and advertising (Pérez, 2003).

Other studies include cultivation in relation to the assessment of viewers' materialist values (Harmon, 2001) and cultivation effects on viewers' compulsive buying tendencies (Kwak, Zinkhan, & Dominick, 2002). Scholars have also explored the role of source confusions in the cultivation of social reality judgments (Mares, 1996), and the prediction of social judgment in relation to viewers' perceived realism (Busselle, 2001).

Cultivation analysis categorically looks at mass media as a specializing agent and investigates whether television viewers tend to believe the television version of reality. Domke (2001) states that racial stereotypes are mentally available for most individuals by adulthood and are present in long-term memory. They can be retrieved and used in applicable contexts. Thus, viewers enter into a symbolic environment where the cultivation they receive from the mass media is blended with life experiences and are applied to various contexts.

Cultivation theory is grounded in the exploration of whether and how watching television may influence viewers' ideas of what the everyday world is like (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Nevertheless, cultivation theory/analysis allows the study of cultivation effects that different media may have over their audiences. Vergeer (2000) and colleagues look at the newspaper cultivation of readers' perception of ethnic minorities. This study is important because it explores another medium and its relation to cultivation besides television.

Even though television and film share similar characteristics, and are classified as having similar traits and social influence, cultivation research concerning film is limited (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Numerous developments in technology, such as the VCR, cable TV, and the Internet have altered the marketing and distribution of films (Gerbner, 1998). The film industry has become an important medium that goes side by side with the television industry. In order to establish the relevance of the study of film, vis-a-vis cultivation analysis, it is important to define the similarities between television and film.

Like television, film is a significant medium for the transmission of messages. The distribution of images is more efficient than the print media and radio because television and film allow the circulation of immediate information and facilitate the presentation of images. Film and television contribute to the construction of stereotypes and their permanence in the audiences' mind. Television and film share similar purposes and qualities. Both are designed to inform and entertain viewers, and neither requires consumer literacy (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Perse, 2001).

The portrayal of Arabs in the film industry has been explored by other authors (e.g., Shaheen, 2001). However, the cultivation effects on viewers regarding Arabs have not been explored. The influence of media, including film, in viewers' reinforcement of social reality is relevant because the information distributed by the media becomes a popular representation of foreign societies. Shaheen (2001) identified more than 112 films presenting images of Arabs that have been produced since the Gulf War in 1991. These films present the same stereotypical images identified by Shaheen (2000). After the analysis of the relevant literature about cultivation theory, the following section reviews material about films' usage of stereotypical images.

#### Film's Stereotypical Representations

The mass media represent the primary portal through which the U.S. is exposed to world issues (Rossides, 2003). The media describe and distribute information that becomes stereotype-based via an ideology of “us” (Western cultures) compared with “them” (Eastern cultures) (cf. Said, 1978). It is the media that cultivate society's perceptions, resulting in attitudes toward different ethnic groups by presenting