

# Socially valued role models 25 years after the fall of Communism

a quantitative study on students and mass media exposure

■ ALINA DUDUCIUC

[National University of Political Studies and Public Administration]

## Abstract

*How young people appreciate certain public personalities and interpersonal relations in respect with their professional path have been a topic of interest among social science and communication scholars. The aim of this article consists in investigating the relation between media effects and Romanian students' role models in lines of cultivation theory (G. Gerbner et al., 1977). On this purpose, 188 students respond to a questionnaire regarding exposure to media, the prevalent role models valued by them and their views on life achievements conveyed by the media and society at large: teachers, celebrities, artists, politicians, businessmen, priests, parents. The results showed that students relate more to role models which are contextually close to them (parents, siblings) than those frequently covered by the media (politicians, showbiz celebrities). Based on these results, we stated that 25 year after the fall of communism Romanian young people do not find a contemporary personality to value as a representative for their social identity.*

## Keywords

cultivation theory; mass media effects; students; role models

## Cultivation in theory and media research

The premises of this study were drawn from the cultivation theory<sup>1</sup>. The central hypothesis of the research of cultivation effects is the following: comparing with people who have a low to a medium exposure to TV messages, individuals who spend more time watching TV programs have a greater tendency to perceive social reality through the media messages. The hypothesis put an emphasis on two correlations: the first one, attention paid to media, and the second one, „cultivation” of opinions and attitudes of receivers. Most of the messages that the television conveys to the audience are reinterpretations of social reality<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, rather than a flow of information, television is a medium that structures social reality by the fact that media messages grab the attention on how information should be interpreted rather than on the content itself. Among the narratives of „how things work”, „how they are in reality” and „how certain behaviours and

1 Gerbner, George, Gross, Larry, Elley, Michael, Jackson-Beeck, Marilyn, Jeffries-Fox, Suzanne, Signorielli, Nancy (1977), „TV Violence Profile”, *Journal of Communication* 8 (1977): 171-180.

2 Shanahan, James, Morgan, Michael. *Television and its Viewers. Cultivation Theory and Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2003), 183-190.

choices are valued”, the latter are „moralizing”<sup>3</sup> and are contained particularly in commercial media productions. Media messages do not necessarily transmit what people think or how they behave, but especially how they think and what are the behaviours of ordinary people. In other words, television informs daily about socially approved opinions and behaviours.

The term „cultivation” refers both to defining communication means as *basic cultivation inquiry*<sup>4</sup> and to the conceptualization of communication as an exchange of beliefs on various aspects of social life, from daily routines, to events perceived as „extraordinary”. This is actually the tautological explanation of George Gerbner’s statement, *Cultivation is what a culture does*, because culture is the fundamental environment in which people live and learn<sup>5</sup>.

The time that individuals spend with television – i.e. with the perception of messages and narratives conveyed by media – has an impact on how they think and structure their social reality. Cognitive effects are followed by behavioural effects: media messages remind the public dominant views (regarding the socio-political, economic situation; regarding racial groups, occupations, violence, social class, life-style etc.), and they are acquired by the audience members through learning.

The tradition of empirical research based on the theoretical model of cultivation confirmed the hypothesis according to which television induces compliance of the audience with perceptions, and values, which are generally accepted and thus broadcast by media. Correlations were reported between television consumption, perception of prostitution prevalence, drugs and alcohol consumption in the social life<sup>6</sup>; between high audience of television programs and exaggerated trust in doctors<sup>7</sup> and distrust in interpersonal relationships; between media exposure and the perception of a violent social context<sup>8</sup>. Other results of the research argue that television presents a distorted version of reality. The content analysis conducted by G. Gerbner showed that events with violent content such as murder or rape, and the prevalence of social occupations such as doctors, lawyers, policemen record a higher frequency on TV than in reality<sup>9</sup>. The more people watch television, and therefore are more exposed to this distorted version of reality, the more they function in real life with the cognitions and perceptions provided by television. Perceptions of reality, taken from the media, may influence attitudes (e.g. on violence, alcohol, professional success) and behaviours (e.g., aggression, purchasing behaviour, etc.).

Although these studies have reported correlations between the cultivation effects and variables such as income, education, age, residence, number of hours „spent watching TV,” we cannot talk yet about a causal relation between reception of TV messages and the effects of cultivation on a cognitive level. Therefore, previous studies did not report a casual link between cognitive processes and media messages<sup>10</sup>.

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3 Gerbner, George, „On content analysis and critical research in mass communication”, *AV Communication Review*, 6 (1958): 87.

4 Gerbner, „On content”, 86.

5 Gerbner, George, „Divergent psychological processes in constructing social reality from mass media content”, in N. Signorielli, M. Morgan (eds.). *Cultivation analysis: new directions in media effects research* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1990), 249.

6 Shrum, L. J., „Psychological Processes Underlying Cultivation Effects: Further Tests of Construct Accessibility”, *Human Communication Research*, 22 (1996): 490.

7 Volgy, Thomas, John Schwarz, „Television Entertainment Programming and Socio-political Attitudes”, *Journalism Quarterly*, 57 (1980): 153-154.

8 Gerbner, „TV Violence”, 176.

9 Gerbner, George, Gross, Larry, Morgan, Michael, Signorielli, Nancy, „Political Correlates of Television Viewing”. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 48 (1984): 291.

10 O’Guinn, Thomas C., Shrum, L. J., Wyer, Robert S. The Effects of Television Consumption on Social Perceptions: The Use of Priming Procedures to Investigate Psychological Processes. *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 24 (1997): 280.

## Methodology

To say that television has effects onto the level of valuing cultural, political and social life of certain personalities and celebrities means to place this premise within the lines of the cultivation theory. We assumed thus a cultivation effect between receiving certain TV shows and students' opinions about ways of achievement in life. The main research questions guiding this study are the following: Are celebrities, businessmen or politicians valued more intensely by students than people coming from interpersonal context (parents, friends, teachers, priests, etc.)? Are personalities of Romanian history more strongly praised by students as identity references than the contemporary ones? Is there any correlation between intense media coverage of celebrities, public display of their life styles in media and students' opinions on social success?

## Sample and instruments

The research sample included 188 students from the Faculty of Political Science („Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University – UCDC) and the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations (SNSPA) (Table 1). Subjects were asked to fill in a questionnaire on the three dimensions of cultivation, namely regular exposure to media, successful role model valued by students and their views on social success ways conveyed by the media and society at large: teachers, celebrities, artists, politicians, businessmen, priests, parents. However, the questions included in the questionnaire also measured intrinsic motivation *versus* extrinsic motivation regarding the option to enrol in faculty, ways of spending free time, the historical and contemporary personality valued. Socio-demographic variables were also collected: age, sex, college, residence environment.

**Table 1.** Distribution of investigated group according to faculty.

Faculty	N	%
Political Science (UCDC)	96	51
Communication and Public Relations (SNSPA)	92	49
Total	188	100

Methodologically, in order to measure the effects of cultivation in causing the valuation of certain role models, we mainly formulated open questions. In doing so, we assumed that the cultivation effect is cognitive, therefore, if the interviewed subjects share views consonant with the media messages they watch, and if they have major effects in terms of opinions and attitudes, then they verbalize it. However, if a particular socially valued role model is highly appreciated by young people, we expect a consonance between how a role model is considered worthy and subject will speak out about it. The data was processed using SPSS.

## Results

*Valuing role models.* According to the results obtained, students valued mostly businessmen (77%) (Figure 1) and artists (63%). To a large extent, half of the teenagers surveyed (56%) admire athletes and politicians for their achievements (46%). Showbiz celebrities recorded the lowest rate of appreciation, as 68% of the students believe that they have succeeded in life to some extent (41%) and little / not at all (27%).

*Exposure to media.* As expected, staying connected to the Internet is the most frequent leisure (94%). 70% of the respondents have limited exposure to TV messages. The radio is neither a communication medium used frequently, only 36% of respondents stating that they spend their free time listening to the radio. More than half of the students (59%) turn to reading books as a means of recreation: a very large extent (35%) and large extent (24%).

*Socially successful role models for young people.* According to the results of this research, the persons that young people believe to be a role model they identify themselves with come from the interpersonal relations (42%): the mother / the father (36%), brothers / sisters (6%). Young people relate to models in the education system at a rate of 5 percent (5% of the respondents identified themselves with high school or university teachers).

*Cultural consumption versus socially valued role models.* In terms of cultural consumption, there were no significant correlations between variables such as „I watch TV“, „I listen to the radio“, „I surf the Internet“, „I go to the theatre and opera,“ „I read books“ and the appreciation of students regarding social success of politicians, businessmen, show-biz celebrities. In order to check the relation between the aforementioned variables, we performed the *chi-square* test and we obtained a statistically significant value (Table 2) between the admiration of businessmen as successful models and spending free time at the theatre. In conclusion, young people who spend more time at the theatre have a greater tendency to appreciate the social success of business people ( $\chi^2 = 39.583, p = 0.001 < 0.05$ ).

**Table 2.** *Chi-square* test value for the variable „I go to the theatre“ (N = 187).

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	39.583	16	0.001
Likelihood Ratio	15.980	16	0.454
Linear-by-Linear Association	.022	1	0.882
N of Valid Cases	187		

*Valued contemporary personalities.* As mentioned previously, the question in the questionnaire was supposed to record students' opinions about the contemporary personality that could be considered a model for young people. Of all investigated group, more than half of the subjects (N = 114, 61%) did not answer this question.

*Admired historical personalities.* Students included in this research relate to the personalities of Romanian history to a very low extent: 7% of them value Vlad Ţepeş, while a third of people surveyed said they do not value any character in the history of our country.

*Extrinsic motivation versus intrinsic motivation to attend university.* Subjects chose a faculty because, to a large extent (64%) „it is good to have a degree“, because it was the desire of their parents (15%), to get a job (70%), to earn money (64%), to develop their knowledge (94%), to get promoted in their careers (86%), to socialize (34%), to be independent from parents (60%).

## Discussion

Based on the results obtained, we consider that the following questions could be raised in „socially successful models – media consumption“ relation: How do we explain that most young people appreciate more the success of their interpersonal relations than the public ones? What explanations could we have for the fact that

young people do not find a contemporary personality to value as a role model of their age? How does a TV celebrity get to be a successful role model only for some young people? Why do young people admire a historical figure remembered by the collective memory of the Romanians for acts of social justice? Why the theatre consumption correlates with the appreciation of social success of businessmen? Why statistically media consumption (radio, TV, internet) correlates with the students' views on social success of businessmen, politicians, teachers or parents?

A possible explanation for the fact that students choose, in particular, successful models of social contextual proximity (parents, siblings) can be attributed to the homogeneity of the investigated group, composed of students of the same age, with similar interests in spending free time, who have not yet completed their education path or labour market insertion process, and who do not yet earn their own income. A new stage in the process of socialization of students, namely the graduation will likely be accompanied by other social and cognitive „adjustments“ on the choice of socially successful models.

We could advance the same explanations for the fact that young people do not find a contemporary personality to value as a representative for their age identity: research subjects are still at the stage of transition to adulthood. On the other hand, relating to the answers on their desire of independence from parents, more than half of the respondents (60%) say they enrolled in college to stop living off their parents. Based on these results, we can say that starting university studies nevertheless caused a change in the development of their autonomy.

The outcomes of our research showed a positive correlation between spending free time at the theatre and the appreciation of social success of businessmen ( $\chi^2 = 39.583$ ,  $p = 0.001 < 0.05$ ). In other words, students who go to the theatre often have a greater tendency to value businessmen's success. Overall, these results indicate that students who spend their free time at the theatre are moving towards models that are based on promotion based on competence criteria.

The data also showed that there is no historical figure to represent a role model. Of the total group investigated, 30% (N = 55) did not have a model in Romanian history. A small percentage considered that (7%; N = 55) Vlad Țepeș, the prince of Wallachia (1448, 1455-1462, 1476), also known as „Dracula“, can be considered a model personality in the Romania history they could identify themselves with. We explain these results by the fact that the sentence to death by impaling is perceived by the general public, and therefore, by the subjects included in the research, as an act of social justice by which „many“ are protected from the „excesses“ of the political class.

As previously stated, the present research results do not show statistically significant correlations between media consumption (radio, TV, internet) and the opinion of students on the social success of businessmen, politicians, teachers or parents. Not surprisingly, the research carried out in the cultivation process of the audience opinions via media messages succeeded in revealing that the average symbolically gratifies certain behaviours, facilitating their imitation, but has not explained yet how the same structures the cognitions of individuals.

However, in the lines indicated by the results of our research, the main conclusion related to media consumption and valuing of role models is the following: research subjects do not have high exposure to TV and do not make common cause around contemporary reference models, the non-responses to the question that we refer to (open question „Currently, who is the personality that could be considered a role model for young people of your age?“) being prevalent. It should be mentioned that a part of this research is subject to the limit of homogeneity of the investigated group, not very diversified in terms of socio-demographic characteristics. However, the research that we have set out in this article allows drawing

conclusions on the direction of opinions and attitudes cultivated by certain socializing agents: students relate more to social success models which are contextually close to them than those presented by the media.

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