

Investigating the Formation of Virtual Identity in Media Discourse

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Abstract: This study looked at the construction social identity has on media consumption and how it leads to social identity and media dependency via the uses and gratifications framework. More recent studies have examined identity performance in less anonymous online settings such as Internet dating sites and reported different findings. This research addresses the relevance of context to the study of media effects on individual cognitions-specifically, perceptions of public opinion and political behavior the mass media plays an influential role on individual viewers. Television viewing patterns may have a connection with affective orientation. However, the findings suggest that affective orientation may be more uniquely influenced by media program type viewed. Results showed that perceived public opinion varied significantly across media markets and newspaper use as well as personal candidate preference had a significant effect on construction social identity. An examination of such influences as media context can provide deeper theoretical insights into the analysis of media effects and perceptual processes such as the persuasive press inference, false consensus and social projection.

Key words: Media, social identity, discourse analysis, consumption, projection, Iran

INTRODUCTION

Media and human behavior is a heavily researched topic in the communication field. There is a great deal of interest in empirically verifying media's impact on society as a whole. Research on this topic has been conducted in a variety of fields such as communication studies, social psychology, child development, political science, business and marketing, sociology, psychiatry and gerontology (Abhijit, 2012). Rethinking language and social research has been very much in the air over the past few years. Social identity and discourse analysis is a new collection of work by researchers in the area of social and language. It illustrates how a discourse approach to the study of social and language can facilitate the study of the complex and often subtle ways in which gender identities are represented, constructed and contested through language (Bimber, 2000).

It is a central claim throughout this study that the idea of discourse as social practice over's a way of seeing how researchers experience the world. Aim to clear some theoretical space for thinking about both the terms social identity and media discourse and thus much of the study is given over to a critique of theorizing on this subject. My argument is that we need a more exile and complex model of the relation between social identity and media discourse. I am interested in exploring how arguers construct values and identities through discourse with

constant reference to the immediate and broader sociocultural context of the particular communicative event.

In other words, in addition to the linguistic and rhetorical form and content of arguments, I also focus on the symbolic signiwcance of approaches to argument, particularly how arguments are shaped by the participants' understandings of media and morality. Purpose in study is only one aspect of context which impacts on argument content. The place and time of argument in media and the speakers' roles, attitudes, ideologies and identities are also crucial. Other issues include whether the arguers are being truthful and co-operative whether they have a stake in what is being discussed who is allowed to argue which issues are on the political agenda and which issues are not made available to all participants in a community. Finally, divergent forms of argument in speech and in media will full divergent functions and will impose restrictions on the content and process of argument.

Morris (1971) reported that watching violent television neither stimulates nor retards the aggressive levels of its viewers. His research suggested that TV violence-repetitive or not is not harmful (Morris, 1971). Because violence in society exists, people must utilize their resources for coping with it. Andison (1977) suggested that watching television violence could lead to an increased level of aggression of viewers. He argued

that linking those two variables together should be used as a justification for reducing the amount of violence shown on television (Anderson, 1977). McLeod and Chaffee studied the effects of television on children. They reported that the type of violence displayed is the key factor in determining whether or not the viewer responds in an aggressive manner after watching a violent portrayal (Iyer and Khan, 2012). Additional research has shown that viewers tend to imitate behaviors on programs that contain justified violence than programs that contain unjustified violence. Other research on audience exposure has argued that viewers with high levels of aggression were angry and thus preferred watching talk shows that displayed more sensational topics (Rubin *et al.*, 2003).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study uses a Discourse Analysis Method. Discourse analysis of particular spoken and written texts can illuminate the range of ways in which social identities are represented and constructed, performed and indexed, interpreted and contested (Mehdi and Avati, 2012). Discourse is in fact a highly contested term and like work on identity a basic, linguistic understanding of discourse is that it is language beyond the sentence and most analysts agree that discourse includes the idea of stretches of text, spoken and written (though sometimes the term is used to refer only to speech). From a more interpersonal focus, discourse is not only super sentential but also functional in terms of language use (Edmondson, 1980).

Used in this way, the term points to language which communicates a meaning in a context for example, spoken interaction between people and groups of people in real social situations (Antaki, 1998). It thus takes its meaning from knowledge about that context. More generally, discourse can also be used to refer to language characteristic of divergent social situations such as classroom discourse or advertising discourse. Discourse theories over ways of seeing how researchers give meaning to experience through language by variously treating discourse linguistically as text with patterns and rules of coherence, sociologically as conversational interaction that works as social glue and as the manifestation of cultural ways of thinking and doing and thus fuel for critical theory (Cameron, 1998).

Given the complexity of discourse, discourse analysis can also have divergent meanings. Cameron refers to it as an umbrella term and in her recent working with spoken discourse includes sections on the ethnography of speaking, pragmatics, conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics and critical discourse analysis. Discourse has been theorised as a form of social practice

(Fairclough, 1992) and the sort of language used to construct some aspect of reality from a particular perspective for example the liberal discourse of politics (Chouliaraki, 1999). Discourse in this sense is centrally associated (though not unproblematically) with Foucault, who contrasts discourse with language (Fairclough, 1992).

Discourse can then be a countable noun and discourses now frequent social theory. A discourse is perhaps seen most simply as a recognizable way of seeing the world. This is however to oversimplify since, it allows for neither social change, human agency nor practice. The idea of discourses has been widely taken up by linguists concerned also with social theory. Discourses exist then in relation to other discourses and Foucault refers not only to the great anonymous murmur of discourses held today but also to the set of discourses actually pronounced (Foucault and Lotringer, 1989). This set refers to a complex of related social and discourse practices found in both public and private texts which can be seen as hierarchical. Elatedly, the order of discourse is now an important category for critical discourse analysis (Foucault and Lotringer, 1989). recently conceptualized by Chouliaraki and Fairclough as the specially discourse organizational logic of a *Weld a Weld* seen specially in terms of its discursive practices. Chory-Assad explored the effects of exposure to verbally aggressive media sitcoms on the accessibility of aggressive cognitive responses (Choy, 2004). Another study by Scharrer examined the relationship between television violence exposure and aggression and hostility. Findings indicated that people exposed to a hyper masculine and violent television show had an increase in reports of aggression and hostility.

RESULTS

The same is true of writing though there is perhaps scope for more subtle mediation here. More specially, from Chouliaraki and Fairclough: in communicative interaction people do not represent the world abstractly but in the course of and for the purposes of their social relations with others and you cannot semantically construct (represent) reality without simultaneously identifying yourself and relating to other people in particular ways (Chouliaraki, 1999). As noted earlier, most of the studies of media using the U and G approach (and in communication research in general) were aimed at traditionally mass media channels such as radio or television (Lazarsfeld and Menzel, 1969). As the study of interpersonal communication became more prevalent in the 1970s, the study of interpersonal media channels became an area of interest for communication scholars (Long *et al.*, 2005).

If people believe that the media have effects on others then when they are presented with information on public opinion, they are likely to gather not only concrete information about social reality but they are also likely to infer what the effects of this information will be on others. Thus when asked which candidate will win the race? respondents will likely consider what they have seen in the media. This coincides with the arguments put forth by the persuasive press inference hypothesis (Foucault and Lotringer, 1989) yet the addition of contextual media content can add complexity to these findings by providing a true media context that differs by the information environment. That is one's perceptions of social reality depend on what information is present in one's environment.

Moreover, because people tend to think media are powerful in influencing others and because people tend to update their evaluations of candidates and presumably, their support as new information is received, the simple presence or absence of information about a candidate is likely to influence perceived public opinion. The fact that most political information is obtained through the media (Christen and Gunther, 2003). Further the argument that what is presented in the media is likely to influence the pictures in the heads of social reality. Decades of agenda-setting research add credence to this statement such that attention to media content influences the salience of certain issues and this effect varies by geographic setting (McCombs, 2004).

Research on media and human behavior has taken several approaches. Many studies have looked at media and violence and its effect on the viewing audience. For example, Bandura found evidence that exposure to violent films leads to aggressive behavior. Potter researched the overall findings on the potential effects of media violence. After summarizing seven decades of research data, he found that there are short-term and long-term effects of exposure to media violence (Long *et al.*, 2005).

While short-term effects are usually immediate and occur shortly after one single exposure, long-term effects are a cumulative process. In fact, long-term effects may occur after repeated and consistent exposure to media violence. In addition to short-term and long-term effects, several approaches that long-term exposure to media violence is related to the level of aggression in a person's life. He noted that individuals who watch many hours of media violence tend to be more aggressive. Other approaches also found that situational factors such as viewer traits, demographics, age, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status might influence how audience members receive media violence portrayals. Audience

traits such as personality type, intelligence and cognitive processing can mediate the effects process. Thus, violent media exposure does not affect everyone the same way.

Consumption and identity formation: Social identity theory and their numerous concepts provide the theoretical framework for analyzing enduring and momentary identity salience in individuals. The theory of social identity based consumption articulates a useful framework for examining when and how social identities influence the development of consumer attitudes and behaviors. Oswald argues that the above account illustrates the complicated nature of symbolic consumption among ethnic consumers. This symbolic consumption often externalizes overlapping cultural contexts and group memberships and illustrates the concept of straddling the boundaries between several cultures at once (Reed, 2003). Hong *et al.* (2000) make a similar case for frame switching among bicultural consumers by proposing a dynamic constructivist approach. The authors argue that bicultural individuals incorporate more than one culture in their minds and constantly shift between multiple interpretive cultural frames in response to social cues in their environment.

Within their dynamic constructivist analysis, the authors firstly posit that cultural knowledge is organized in domain-specific knowledge structures such as categories and implicit theories and not as a generalized structure such as an overall mentality or a worldview (Hong *et al.*, 2000). LeBoeuf argued and demonstrated that these multiple identities have differential salience at different points in time and implicit and explicit cues can switch on any of the multiple social identities momentarily. A logical question that arises is why are these salient social identities so important to consumer behavior research? In the domain of consumption, investigators have proposed that consumers enact these salient identities through products and brands that they consume (Long *et al.*, 2005). Situational influences on consumption behavior have been argued for and demonstrated by numerous researchers.

Social structures can either enhance or impede individuals' behaviors by motivating action and making that action more or less doable. Research in political science and political communication has explored both individual and macrolevel variables that influence political participation. Institutional, historical, demographic, psychological and social explanations have been sought to uncover why people do or do not get civically or politically involved. For instance, at the macro level, one institutional explanation for voter turnout has been that some registration laws either inhibit or promote voting

and these effects differ by state context. Other macro explanations for political participation have been linked to historical events that affect nearly all individuals in a society such as the watergate scandal of the early 1970s (Scheufele and Ostman, 2001).

More recent research has demonstrated that perceptions of others' opinions can have significant influence on not only voting behavior but other forms of political activity. For instance, Scheufele and Ostman (2001) examined differences between perceptions of state and national contexts in influencing political behavior and found a significant difference among individuals who displayed opinion incongruity (operationalized as a comparison of one's own opinion compared with perceptions of others' opinion) for their state versus the nation. Their results demonstrated that differing perceptions of public opinion do indeed influence political behavior in varying ways. The present study builds from the conclusions of Scheufele and Ostman (2001) and asks but what drives those perceptions that ultimately influence participation?

A logical argument for the above effects would be that strength of ethnic identification reflects the extent of ethnic identity commitment in the individual which can influence the enduring salience of a cultural identity in an individual's self-concept. In the hierarchy of multiple identities, the relative salience of ethnic identity may be greater for an individual with higher strength of ethnic identification than lower. This enduring accessibility or salience of the ethnic identity would therefore guide the attitudes and consumption behavior for consumers with higher as compared to lower strength of ethnic identification.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to assess the effects of media content on both perceptions of public opinion and individual social identity accounting for the context of the media market in which individuals live. Such an assessment takes into account that media content varies by geographic location and tests whether the effects on perceptions and behavior differ as a consequence of this varying content. As a result of new understandings and theoretical developments on which these and other studies draw, social identity is seen as profoundly variable and even within an individual, multi-faceted and shifting.

The shift in conceptions of language and gender that I referred to earlier in this study would support a focus on highly contextualized research intended to document the localized working out of social identity or an aspect of

social. Viewing the government as a conscious actor, responding to incentives, gives mass media a prominent role in the solution of political agency problems. In particular, it can enhance the responsiveness of government to citizens' needs.

I have deliberately downplayed the central role given to the media in identity formation in order to provide a corrective to those media-centric approaches discussed at the start of this study. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that media are being used undemocratically within the walls of many prisons. Media, especially personal media are highly effective devices of social and behavioral control. Even family viewing is governed by rules, both implicit and explicit and is used as a reward or punishment as a bartering tool and as a conduit of power so, it is not difficult to imagine how in the prison environment, the introduction of personal media like letter writing and visits in an earlier era have become part of the state's armory in the struggle to maintain order and achieve compliance in prisons. In conclusion, this study has argued that to understand the complexity of discourses that exist within media texts, a dialectical approach is required.

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