

Quantitative Study Measuring

The Effects of “Restricted” Film Content on a Biblical Worldview

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Abstract

Film viewing remains a popular pastime among Americans, including Christians. The content contained in films can be contradictory to the values and beliefs that Christians uphold. Continually watching content that is in direct opposition to a Christian's beliefs can affect their view of reality, otherwise known as their worldview. This study applies George Gerbner's cultivation theory to the film medium, to see if restricted content consumption homogenizes Christians worldview towards a secular worldview. The research question advanced in this study looks at the effect of watching "restricted" content on a heavy Christian viewer's worldview. The findings indicate that the more a Christian watches restricted content, the less likely they are to adhere to a biblical worldview.

Key Terms: movies, film, viewing habits, audience preferences, Christian audience, media effects, Gerbner, cultivation theory.

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Introduction

Christians today, by and large, are consuming the same films as the rest of secular society. Frequently, these films are in direct conflict with the values and beliefs that compose a biblical worldview. Portrayals of homosexuality, infidelity, obscenity, violence, and other immoral behaviors pervade the silver screen. Nonetheless, movie-going is listed in the top three favorite entertainment pastimes for most Americans, including Christians (Barna Research Group, 2004).

Spider-Man 3, *Disturbia*, and *Fracture* topped the box office hit list during the first week of May 2007 (“Box Office,” 2007). *Spider-Man 3* marked the beginning of the summer blockbuster season by grossing over \$150,000,000 during opening weekend. While *Spider-Man 3*, rated PG-13, is considered more or less “family friendly,” by emphasizing values such as patriotism, forgiveness, and the power of love, it is still filled with heavy violence and intense action. For example, in one scene, as described by a parental film review website, “during a fight Spider-Man is struck several times with a piece of metal, and the pointed end is raised over him to stab him but someone else is stabbed through the back and we see it poke through his chest with blood on it (the victim dies)” (“kids-in-mind,” 2007). *Disturbia* is a movie about a young man who believes his neighbor is a serial killer and contains explicit sexual content and violence, with scenes depicting young boys watching pornographic television programs, numerous sexual encounters, and serial murder. Several scenes include murdered and decaying bodies, violent, near death experiences, and images of horrified characters. *Disturbia* is rated PG-13. *Fracture*, deals with the issues of infidelity and murder, and contains “8 F-words, 4 sexual references, 5 scatological terms, 5 anatomical terms, 5 mild obscenities, 1 religious profanity, 2 religious exclamations” (kids-in-mind). This film received an R rating.

A study commissioned by the Dove Foundation found that twelve times more R rated films were produced than G rated films from 1989-2003. That is, 1,533 R rated films compared to 123 G rated films. Similarly, PG-13 films outnumbered PG films, 75 to 21 within the same time period. The breakdown of films produced per category between 1989-2003 was: R- 52%, PG-13- 28%, PG- 16%, and G- 4% (Dove Foundation, 2005). The study also found that while Hollywood favored the raunchier films to more family friendly films, audience statistics do not reflect the same taste. G-rated films generated 11 times more profit than R rated films, and the average rate of return on investment (ROI) of G films are three times greater than R rated films. Still, more R rated films are produced than any other category, and young and old alike are watching these films. This study is telling, because it indicates that restricted content is being produced at a disproportionately high rate, and as the current research project will seek to demonstrate, this content may be influencing its audience.

Christians are consuming these kinds of films right along with their secular counterparts. A 2005 MarketCast study looked at whether political or religious attitudes affected what kinds of movies people chose to watch. The study confirmed “that a sharp divide on moral issues exists in the country, it found entertainment choices are largely made separately from moral decisions” (Snyder, 2005, ¶ 8). While 55% of those who considered themselves “very religious” agreed with the statement “the movie industry is partially responsible for the moral decay of our society,” 25% of the same group said that they have viewed R rated movies for sexual content and 19% said they had watched a violent R rated film. This is a narrow margin of difference from the “non-religious” group where 33% reported seeing a film containing sexual content and 28% with violent content. Those who identified themselves as part of a more “conservative” religious segment watched more violent films than “liberal” religious adherents (29% compared

to 18%). The report concludes that religious people are “participating in American culture at virtually the same levels as the rest of society” (Snyder, ¶ 9). This study, co-sponsored by *Variety* (a popular entertainment news source) pointed out the disconcerting truth- there is a disconnect between what religious Americans say they believe, and what they choose to entertain themselves with. Often, the messages in these films are a direct contradiction to what religious America supposedly stands for.

The rationale guiding this study is the idea that this kind of content will ultimately have some measurable effect on whoever consumes it, Christian, or not. This thesis advances the primary research question (RQ): *What effect will films that contain high levels of “smut” have on a Christian heavy viewer’s worldview?* For the purpose of this study, the term “smut” will be used to refer to film content that includes sexuality, violence, homosexuality, profanity, and obscenity. By definition, smut is: “obscene or lascivious talk, pictures, or stories” (Canadian Oxford Dictionary).

Recent studies have shown that the rating system is allowing more indecent content into lower rating categories, such as PG and PG-13, a trend known as “ratings creep” (Leone & Houle, 2006, p. 54). If a movie-goer bases his or her decision of what movie to see on the rating system, they will progressively view more explicit content than would previously have been allowed. A Gallup survey looking at the viewing habits of American teenagers underscores this point. In 1977, Gallup asked teens if they thought there was too much violence in movies, 42% agreed that there was. In 1999, only 23% agreed to the same question. Similarly, when asked if there was too much sex in movies, 44% of teens agreed there was, compared to 28% in 1999. The report concludes that teens “appear to have become considerably more desensitized to graphic depictions of violence and sex than their parents were at their age” (Mazzuca, 2002, ¶ 2).

A similar study by Gallup concluded that 90% of American young people watch movies every year and “the vast majority of them are undeterred by sex and violence” (Kiefer, 2003, ¶ 6). Most would agree that violence and sex is more prevalent in modern movies, and it stands to reason that the more viewers are exposed to graphic depictions of sex and violence, over time, the less they will be bothered by it.

This example illustrates the “frog in the pot” effect, in that as people, specifically Christians, maintain the same viewing habits, the film content is increasingly becoming worse to the gradual detriment of the Christian viewer’s Biblical values and perspective. This study hopes to determine whether or not this content (smut) impacts a Christian’s worldview. Worldview, although it may sound large and abstract, simply means “the sum total of our beliefs about the world, the “big picture” that directs our daily decisions and actions” (Colson & Pearcey, 1999, p. 14). A person’s worldview is adopted, intentionally or not, in advance and is integrated into different aspects of one’s thinking. Although certain central ideas underlie one’s worldview, it can be expressed in many different ways. This framework will ultimately guide a person’s thoughts and actions. For this study, a Christian worldview will be defined as:

...believing that absolute moral truths exist; that such truth is defined by the Bible; and firm belief in six specific religious views. Those views were that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life; God is the all-powerful and all-knowing Creator of the universe and He stills rules it today; salvation is a gift from God and cannot be earned; Satan is real; a Christian has a responsibility to share their faith in Christ with other people; and the Bible is accurate in all of its teachings. (Barna, 2003b, ¶ 5)

This definition came from a Barna Research Group project examining the condition of the church in America. The findings disturbingly revealed that a very small percentage (less than ten percent) of Christians had a biblical worldview as defined above (Barna, 2003b). This definition will later be used in this study, which will be addressed in the Methods section.

However, assuming that most Christians would acknowledge the Bible as at least a guiding body of principles, one must consider the facts that are at hand. Most films contain some elements that do not agree with, or directly contradict the moral standards in the Bible. If these elements are continually presented in a neutral or favorable light in films, then it stands to reason that these elements will become more normalized in the Christian's mind. For an example, in modern day "chick-flicks" such as *Sweet Home Alabama*, *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *Miss Congeniality I & II*, and *Monster in Law*, there is at least one homosexual character. These characters are generally a close friend of the main character, and they are fun-loving, kind, young, and physically attractive. Puns about their alternative lifestyle are always made in a favorable light and they are treated totally and perfectly normal in terms of moral norms. When a person watches films like these, there is a natural tendency to believe that there are many people like this, and that homosexuality is mainstream. This gives the perception that the same proportion of homosexuals depicted in films is a reflection of reality. Author and screenwriter Brian Godawa asserts,

Every story is informed by a worldview. And so every movie, being a dramatic story, is also informed by a worldview. There is no such thing as a neutral story in which events and characters are presented objectively apart from interpretation.

Every choice an author makes, from what kinds of characters she creates to which events she includes, is determined by the author's worldview. A worldview even

defines what a character or event *is* for the writer – and therefore for the audience.

(Godawa, 2002, p. 25)

With homosexuality frequently represented in modern films, this is just one example of the potential homogenization of the Christian worldview to that of the secular.

While films such as the ones described above are enjoyed for their entertainment value, the underlying messages are largely overlooked. Michael Medved, film critic and author of the book, *Hollywood vs. America* (1992) acknowledges this fact, and that his role as a critic is often limited to reviewing a film's entertainment value and technical aspects such as acting, editing, and story line and that the larger issue of a film's message is ignored in a typical review.

Following this reasoning, Medved argues that,

I [as a film critic] must never attempt to evaluate the messages that a film is sending to the movie-going public. In other words, the one aspect of a work of art that is always off-limits for a critic to consider is the one aspect that matters most. This is the very nature of the cultural battle before us. It is, in its essence, a war against standards. It is a war against judgment. In fact, its proponents insist that the worst insult you can offer someone today is to suggest that he or she is judgmental. One of the symptoms of the corruption and collapse of our popular culture is the insistence that we examine only the surface of any piece of art or entertainment... We routinely focus on superficial skill and slick salesmanship, while ignoring the more important issues of soul and substance. In the process, we have abandoned traditional measures of beauty and worth, accepting the ability to shock as a replacement for the old ability to inspire. (Medved, 1992, p. 21)

While films are created for entertainment, the message that the film sends remains important and worthy of consideration. The intention of this study is not to discourage viewing films all together, or “cultural anorexia”. This type of mentality bans film viewing all together because of its negative aspects. Conversely, it is not good to suffer from “cultural gluttony” where one fails to look beyond a film’s entertainment value into the deeper messages (worldview) that is being communicated through the film’s story (Godawa, 2002, p. 18). The optimal outcome of this study would be to create an awareness of one’s film viewing habits and that one would take a “closer look” at what kind of worldview is being communicated through a film he or she is watching.

The main objectives of this thesis are: first, to gain an accurate reflection of the film viewing habits of a sample from the Christian audience, as to date, few studies have explored the film viewing habits of Christians. Second, is to determine the sample’s Christian participants adherence to a biblical worldview. The final objective of this study is to examine the relationship between the apparent homogenization of Christian and secular worldviews and the consumption of films that contain high smut levels. In short, the premise is that if Christians consume the same “entertainment,” their outlook on life will become progressively less distinguishable from the world’s.

The scope of this quantitative study will primarily be directed towards those who identify themselves as Christians, and will measure the amount and frequency of smut consumed in order to see if a relation exists between such consumption and conformity to a secular worldview. A communication theory that explains the tendency to adopt the same view of that which is depicted on screen is George Gerbner’s *cultivation theory*. This study will apply cultivation theory, which has previously been directed mainly at television, to the context of the film

medium. This theory is the under-girding principle of the research question posed previously, which asks how does a high level of smut (content that does not adhere to a biblical worldview) affect a heavy film viewer's worldview.

Literature Review

Cultivation Theory

George Gerbner originated the concept of what has come to be known as cultivation theory in his doctoral dissertation “Toward a Theory of Communication” which he completed at the University of Southern California, Berkley in 1955 (Gerbner, 1955). The term “cultivation” was later coined in studies produced by Gerbner which expounded on the subject of his dissertation. Gerbner’s primary focus was violence on television and how heavy exposure to television programming would affect viewers’ concept of reality. The central idea behind cultivation theory is that television creates another “reality” by its depiction of dramatic “stories” and that the more a person watches these stories, the more likely they are to accept them as reality (Lett, DiPietro & Johnson, 2004, p. 40). The body of works utilizing cultivation theory is extensive and, for the purposes of this literature review, key studies that highlight the main content of the theory will be reviewed in order to give an adequate representation of the theory.

Gerbner had set out to examine the role of television in society, which according to him had successfully pervaded modern life as the primary source of story-telling. Historically, stories have been passed down by word-of-mouth and later in textual form. With the introduction of the television (and possibly earlier with films), these stories became more complex than before and had the potential to be marketed. According to Gerbner (1998),

For the first time in human history, children are born into homes where mass-produced stories can reach them on the average of more than 7 hours a day. Most waking hours, and often dreams, are filled with these stories. The stories do not come from their families, schools, churches, neighborhoods, and often not even from their native countries, or in fact, from anyone with anything relevant to tell.

They come from a small group of distant conglomerates with something to sell.

(p. 176)

Gerbner originally hypothesized, and later confirmed in studies, that heavy exposure to violence as well as “reality” as portrayed on TV would cultivate new “basic assumptions about the “facts” of life and standards of judgment on which conclusions are based” (Gerbner, 1976, p. 175). This could be defined as one’s perspective of the world in which they live, better known as their worldview. This worldview had the potential, according to Gerbner’s hypothesis, to be altered by heavy television viewing. This was, and still is, a valid and very real concern, as was evidenced by Gerbner’s longest duration project, the “Cultural Indicators” project.

The Cultural Indicators project (CI) developed out of a study for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence during 1968-69, and continued under the sponsorship of the Surgeon General’s Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, and various other sponsors (Gerbner, 1976). This project consisted of “periodic study of television programming and of the conceptions of social reality that viewing cultivates in child and adult audiences” (Gerbner, 1976, p. 174). The CI gives the numerical data to back up Gerbner’s main assertions and gives “weight” to the cultivation theory.

The focal point of CI was the portrayal of violence on television. Gerbner and his team took regular readings on the amount of violence shown on television by monitoring primetime and weekend daytime broadcast television programming. The purpose was to examine the relationship between television viewing and the audience’s conception of social reality. CI spanned well over twenty years and resulted in archives of over “3,000 programs and 35,000 characters coded on numerous thematic, demographic, and action categories” (Gerbner & Signorielli, 1995, ¶ 7). The CI research was made up of three parts, which are referred to as the

“three prongs” in the text. The first prong was the Message System Analysis, which monitored television drama and helped give insight into the demographics, topics, and type of action portrayed on television. This is the wing that compiled all the information to make “facts” about the TV world testable. The second wing or branch is Cultivation Analysis, which sought to determine the conceptions of reality that television is inclined to “cultivate” in both adult and adolescent viewers (Gerbner, 1978, p. 177). This can be seen as the motivation stage, as in the motivation behind TV. This motivation could be in a broad sense, like TV reinforcing the dominant culture, or in a more specific sense, with advertisers selling a product.

Third, was the Cultivation Differential, which is “the margin of difference in conceptions of reality between light and heavy viewers in the same demographic sub-groups” (Gerbner, 1998, p. 180). The CI researchers obtained this margin by asking both heavy and light viewers questions about their everyday life to determine if those who spent more time watching television were more likely to give an answer that reflected a possible “lesson” from the world of TV (Gerbner, 1998). In plain terms, a subject who was a heavy viewer would normally exaggerate the number of common occupations/proportions found on TV, such as the percentage of men employed as police, in the real world. CI gave numerical and long-term (given the span of time the cultural indicators project covered) evidence of the “reality” and violence depicted on television.

Gerbner and his colleagues correctly asserted that no one, even a network spokesperson or critic of scholarly research, could deny the presence of violence on television (Gerbner & Signorielli, 1995, ¶ 3), which they defined as “the overt expression of physical force compelling action against one’s will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing” (Gerbner, 1980a, p. 705). Gerbner was not merely recognizing that now someone else was telling the

stories that shaped the culture, he was taking issue with the violent stories perpetrated on society, and the effects, both immediate and long term, that violence and fear would have.

Gerbner and his contemporaries were not as concerned about the violence on television's "stimulation of occasional individual aggression" as they were about the "consequences of living in a symbolic world ruled largely by violence" (Gerbner, 1976, p. 178). They believed that TV had small, but snowballing, effects that would be realized over time. They believed that television essentially operated as the "cultural arm" of the ruling class, and that it functioned to reinforce the status quo and resist change (Gerbner, 1976, p. 177). This long-term perspective caused them to hypothesize about potential dangers in the future.

The potential for manipulation and control through the residual deposit of violence - fear, was of great concern. This fear could potentially be manufactured through the ability of the controlling class to portray what happens to an individual when the established rules or norms are broken. The TV already broadcasted the norms of society; if this power was ever manipulated, it was possible, in theory, to dominate a society with little or no resistance. This would be conceivable, because according to Gerbner, the system might work so well that it would cultivate "uniform assumptions, exploitable fears, acquiescence to power, and resistance to meaningful change" (Gerbner, 1976, pp. 177-78). If we consider that this research began during the cold war, and followed the not so distant "red scares" of the 50's and early sixties, and that the long term effects of TV were not yet known, then this seems like a reasonable concern for the day.

Over time this stance, the concern for the entire populace, seems to have distilled back down to concern over the misperceptions that TV violence was spreading, or, in other words, the "homogenization" of incorrect views into an inaccurate perception of reality. The later articles

and studies done by Gerbner focused on such things as the amount of needless violence, the high percentage of both viewers and TV industry insiders who wanted lower levels of violence, and the disproportionate amount of violence perpetrated on women and minorities in comparison to the dominant class. These disproportionate occurrences of violence was found to increase the likelihood of apprehension and false perceptions about crime and personal safety in all groups, but especially in heavy viewers and minorities (Gerbner, 2002, ¶ 11). The two main effects of cultivation, which cultivation researchers use to explain discrepancies between subgroups, the development of general concepts of reality and the intensifying of issues chiefly related to minorities or other sub-groups, were later labeled. The cultivation of a TV “social reality” is now referred to as the mainstreaming effect, or simply *mainstreaming*, and the “amplification” of relevant issues to subgroups was labeled *resonance* (Gerbner, 1980b, p. 11).

Mainstreaming is an observable effect that explains how television ceases to be a reflection of the world and becomes its own “world” itself. Several effects researchers, including Gerbner, have come up with an interesting picture of this “television world” where men outnumber women three to one, children make up one third and the elderly one fifth of their real world numbers, and where the leading cause of death - car wrecks and industrial accidents, happen only infrequently (Gerbner, 1980b, p. 11). This “world” may influence children and those who view it alone more than others (Van Evra, 1990, pp. 167,171), and to top it all off, most heavy viewers are unaware that they are being influenced by these fictional images.

Resonance, however, has a more depressing effect on an individual if they happen to belong to a subgroup like the poor, the elderly, women, or Hispanics, who often have a disproportionate (to the real world) run in with violence on “TV”(Gerbner, 2002). To be a member of one of these groups on TV is “bad trouble” according to Gerbner, because these

subgroups are victimized most often. Interestingly, heavy viewers from these subgroups tend to be more paranoid of crime and more concerned about personal safety than light viewers in the same groups (Gerbner, 2002). This same effect is observed in most heavy viewers (a tendency to overestimate crime rates and violence in the world), and is known as the *mean world* syndrome (Gerbner, 1994).

Gerbner and his various Cultural Indicator researchers supplied much of the groundwork, information, and ideas from which today's research projects spring and several studies have uncovered captivating relations between heavy viewing and various negative social behaviors. More recent studies show that the mean world syndrome might have more than just an impact on people's perception that they are more likely to be on the receiving end of violence; it may also help explain the link between heavy television consumption and violent acts. A seventeen-year study culminated in 2002 by reporting its findings regarding the viewing habits and associated "aggressive acts," of over seven hundred families in upstate New York. The study used crime statistics from the state of New York and the FBI, and was statistically controlled for low income, unsafe neighborhoods, childhood neglect, psychiatric disorders, and IQ levels (Johnson, Cohen, Smailes, Kasen & Brook, 2002). Yet, the researchers still found that there "was a significant association between the amount of time spent watching television during adolescence and early adulthood and the likelihood of subsequent aggressive acts against others" (Johnson, et al., 2002, p. 1).

Interestingly, another study on the causes of violence in America by a researcher named Leonard Eron, found that up to ten percent of all violence was directly related to television viewing (Eron, 1996). Although this means, by default, that ninety percent of violence springs from other sources, ten percent of all violence in the country is no insignificant figure. In other

research dealing with youth, Judith Van Evra, who researched the effect of TV commercials on children, illustrated that the resonance effect could explain the impact of advertising on children. Specifically, a commercial that had personal meaning, for whatever reason, would be more effective in implanting and maintaining its intended message with a viewer (child) (Van Evra, 1995). Further research work suggests a phenomenon called the “Third Person Effect” which is a tendency for people to “attribute greater media effects of television violence on other people than on themselves” (Salwen & Dupagne, 2001, p. 211). In other words, people think that violence on TV doesn’t have as much effect on them as it does on others. With the third person effect, people have a biased optimism and do not see themselves as vulnerable to media influences (Salwen & Dupagne, p. 214).

Another study titled “Television Viewing, IQ and Academic Achievement” found further negative effect from the quantity of television consumed. This study was conducted with research that was incidentally uncovered by the CI project and was used to help clarify the debate about whether heavy TV viewing affected IQ and academic performance in general (Morgan & Gross, 1980). Among the findings was the fact that most students are watching TV before they could read or speak, and because of this TV “may well claim a status equal to traditional demographic variables such as parental education and occupational status” in IQ scores (Morgan & Gross, 1980, p. 118).

All of these studies are disturbing, but there are those who say that the original findings of Gerbner have been shown to have some evidence of distortion (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006). Hetsroni & Tukachinsky (2006) suggested some modifications to the cultivation theory. They proposed that,

...a new scheme for cultivation based on measures of television viewing and the relationship between TV-world estimates and real-world estimates as they are examined in three topics—criminality prevalence, the share of violent crimes, and the number of old people. (p. 133)

Simply put, Hetsroni & Tukachinsky held that cultivation had been shown to work, based on numerous studies in many countries, but that the levels of correlation between heavy viewing and subsequent estimations of reality are flawed. Their new plan was to use the old cultivation to arrive at the cultivation differential, but to add something that had only been done in a limited manner by others. They would measure viewer's estimates of both real world "criminality prevalence, the share of violent crimes, and the number of old people", as well as viewer's estimates of the TV world's instances of the same (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006, p. 133). They would then compare the findings to see if both were exaggerated, one or the other were exaggerated, or if neither were exaggerated, and then track the correlation between these answers and the subjects viewing habits (heavy or light). Hestroni and Tukachinsky did find that their results concurred with the general idea of cultivation theory in that "a misguided perception of the social world is statistically related to television viewing." However, they pointed out that adding the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of the TV viewers estimates of the world of television "reveals a picture that is far more complicated than the one traditional cultivation suggests" (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006, p. 147). Indeed this is the case.

Other critics, such as Michael Hughes, see much more fundamental flaws in both cultivation theory and in the work and conclusions of Gerbner and the Cultural Indicators project. In his critique entitled, "The Fruits of Cultivation Analysis: A Reexamination of Some Effects of Television Watching," Hughes took issue with both the methodology and the analysis

used by CI. His first complaint was a lack of “controls for the available variables which might reasonably be expected to produce spurious relationships between television watching and the dependant variables” (Hughes, 1980, p. 288). Or, more simply, he didn’t think that Gerbner allowed for enough “other” reasons why people might answer questions either pro or anti TV reality. His second problem was that the variables he did allow for, such as age, sex, and education, he allowed for on an individual and not simultaneous basis (Hughes, p. 289).

The critiques Hughes leveled do seem reasonable, and he re-analyzed the data from some of the CI reports using more controls simultaneously. According to his re-analyses, “Only one of the five relationships claimed by Gerbner holds up after controls” (Hughes, 1980, p. 295). Finally, he concludes that cultivation theory may be “a gross oversimplification of how television affects behavior through culture” (Hughes, p. 300). Although some of his objections have merit, the conclusion of Hestroni and Tukachinsky, as opposed to Hughes, having the vantage point of time, and the benefit of various national studies on television in many countries, is the more balanced response (Hestroni & Tukachinsky, 2006, p. 134).

One war of pens that cannot fail to be mentioned when discussing critiques of the cultivation theory is the extensive rounds of debate between Gerbner and the man who appears to have been his number one critic, Paul Hirsch. These two scholars had at least four critique/response exchanges over the years beginning with Hirsch’s “On Hughes’ Contribution: The Limits of Advocacy Research.” In this first article criticizing Gerbner’s work, Hirsch asserted that the reason the CI conclusion had not been challenged immediately was that it “is bound up with our own culture’s predisposition to embrace it” (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Hirsch, 1980, p. 411). He further praises Hughes for his study that “reasserts

scholarly standards” and goes so far as to say that the only problem with the study was that it did not go far enough. He ends his diatribe with a rather inflammatory quote:

Considering the number of questionable statistical procedures and interpretations on which the Annenburg group’s findings are based, the assertions of cultivation analysis should be transformed from the status of a scientific finding to an interesting speculation lacking empirical support. (Gerbner, et al., 1980, p. 413)

His scathing article got the response it deserved from Gerbner and associates, and they all squabbled over the details of who was wrong about what for several more articles. However, Hirsch made the same mistake as Hughes by abandoning the entire theory. Since the time of their debate, other studies, such as the ones referred to before in Hetsroni and Tukachinsky, have shown similar relations between TV viewing and change in perceptions of social reality in foreign countries (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006).

In summary of the cultivation theory, it seems that it is still regarded by most scholars as a valid communication theory. The majority of critics merely suggested changes in the approach or analysis of the research gathered. In addition, the various negative effects catalogued by other researchers seem to substantiate the claims made by cultivation analysis, to what degree is a matter of opinion. The harsher critiques served a valuable purpose in that they inspired Gerbner and his associates to defend and explain variation within their subgroups and findings, leading to valuable clarifications like mainstreaming and resonance.

Media Effects

The debate over the validity of the cultivation theory is in some ways reminiscent of the debate over the *powerful effects* and *limited effects* paradigm. Gerbner and his associates take a powerful effects stance based off the findings of the Cultural Indicators project, asserting that

media (in their studies specifically the television) have a powerful effect on its audience, thus altering the audience's perception of reality. Conversely, Gerbner's critics lean toward the limited effects perspective pointing out that the media are one of many influences on the audience, and that one cannot conclusively argue that the media are the primary or sole influence of its audience (society). This debate however, is not an isolated discussion between Gerbner and his critics rather it is a debate that has been raging for decades, and deserves careful consideration.

The discipline now known as "communication" has been a subject that has occupied many scholars because human communication is at the heart of so many fields of study. Wilbur Schramm, author of *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*, concludes, "...every discipline concerned with human society and human behavior must necessarily be concerned with communication" (Schramm & Roberts, 1974, p. 6). There are two main types of communication: oral and (mass) media (Lerner, 1960, p. 131). Though mass media had been present since the introduction of printing with the Gutenberg press, diversification into different media is something that is relatively confined from the late 19th century to the present. Media are defined as communication in which, "The main flow of information is activated by a professional corps of communicators, skilled in producing descriptive messages ("news") for transmission through impersonal "media" (print, film, radio) to relatively undifferentiated mass audiences" (Lerner, 1960, p. 132).

The growth of mass media prompted a small amount of psychologists, sociologists, and social psychologists to examine media specifically. This came at a key time when mass media had begun to develop into industries, such as film and later radio. These scholars began to look at

the possible effects of the emerging media on both the audience and society (McDonald, 2004, p. 184). Their writings set the groundwork for the area of research known today as media effects.

The development of media effects research did not occur in a vacuum. Rather, the theories created in many ways reflected the time and place in which they were developed (McQuail, 2000, p. 417). From the polar positions that the media exert a very powerful influence, to studies that conclude the media has little to no effect, the nature of media research has shifted in concert with historical events. These changes in media effects research can be seen as stages in which the theories were developed, revised, or challenged in favor of newer theories.

Denis McQuail (2000) categorized the development and changes in media theory into four phases. Phase 1: the *all-powerful media* extends from the beginning of the 20th century to the late 1930s. Phase 2: *theory of powerful media put to the test* covered the late 1930s to 1960. Phase 3: *powerful media rediscovered* began in the 1960s and lasted until 1980. Phase 4: *negotiated media influence* started in the 1980s through today (McQuail, 2000, pp. 417-22). Each of these phases represents the development of media effects research and the theories that resulted from these studies. Though perhaps not all-inclusive (there is likely some overlap in powerful/limited effects theories during the phases), McQuail's phases do provide insight into the development and growth of the study of media effects. For the purpose of this review, these phases will be used to categorize the development of research and theories. Key theories in each phase will be reviewed in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the powerful and limited effects debate.

Phase 1: The All-Powerful Media

The emerging new media (film and later the radio) and the development of social theory helped spark initial interest in media effects around the turn of the 20th century. One of the

dominant perspectives on social theory, known as the “mass society” perspective was developed as a means of explaining what happens to a society when it encounters industrialization, urbanization, and modernization. The social order, according to this line of reasoning, breaks from “tradition” into one of conflict (over norms and values), isolation, and change as a byproduct of modernization (Lowrey & DeFleur, 1983, p. 10). The mass society perspective was influential in the development of early media effects theories (which are sometimes collectively called mass society theory).

Near the turn of the century, social psychologist Charles Horton Cooley (1956) asserted that this new era of communication (mass media), ushered in a different kind of change in society. This change, Cooley contends, would have two major effects. The first would foster individuality, by allowing one to withdraw from an environment and find another that is more “congenial”. In other words, a person could now pursue information, groups, and people that are significant to them. The second effect would be what Cooley called a “leveling of ideas”, in that media would transcend social and cultural boundaries, making everyone uniform. Individuality, in this theory, would diminish in favor of uniformity. Cooley saw the latter effect as more likely, using the words of John Burroughs to highlight this, stating, “Constant intercommunication, the friction of travel, of streets, of books, of newspapers, make us all alike; we are, as it were, all pebbles upon the same shore, washed by the same waves” (as cited in Cooley, 1956, p. 93). Cooley pointed to the diminishing lingual accents and similarity in fashion as examples of this assimilation into a whole. In short, he saw the media as promoting both individuality and conformity at the same time, with the result being two types of individuality: isolation (one is isolated and therefore unique) and the other: choice (one can seek out information that helps reinforce or maintain individuality). While the media may help someone overcome isolation by

putting them in touch with the rest of the world, because of the magnitude of the information being relayed, a person is likely to have a superficial understanding of issues and people. Cooley foresaw this underdeveloped understanding of the world as the primary negative effect of media.

The negative effect foreseen by Cooley however, is offset by Walter Lippmann (1921). Lippmann maintained that the media aids in understanding the world around us and that it is impossible for man to fully understand the “great society” that he is in because his view of this society is limited. That is to say, it is too complex for any one person to fully understand each area. Because of this, according to Lippmann, the world has to be “explored, reported, and imagined” to help make sense of the environment. Man does this by creating pictures in his head so that “he is learning to see with his mind vast portions of the world that he could never see, touch, smell, hear, or remember. Gradually, he makes for himself a trustworthy picture inside his head of the world beyond his reach” (Lippmann, 1921, p. 18). These pictures comprise notions about the outside world, other people, and of himself. The media, then, act as a mediator between the complex world outside and the pictures in people’s heads. The media might also help create these pictures of the environment. Because of this limited scope (simplified pictures) of the environment man finds himself in, “what each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him” (Lippmann, p.16). Lippmann uses the metaphor of a map to illustrate how man uses the pictures in his head to make sense of the complex nature of the environment and navigate himself in it (Lippmann, p.11).

The media is an integral part of the mass society, because it relays information and is a source of entertainment (Bauer & Bauer, 1960, p. 3). The immense popularity of the newspaper, film, and radio with the public led some researchers to conclude that since media had such a vast

audience it had to be powerful. This belief that media had power led to a generally pessimistic view of media. One account, describes early sentiments toward media this way:

As each new medium came into the society and was adopted for widespread use, there was an increasing level of concern about the influences of the mass communication process. As the newspaper and, later, films and broadcasting were increasingly criticized for their presumed undesirable influences, the idea that members of the mass society could easily be controlled by powerful media troubled critics... The media were thought to have great power because of the absence of other competing social and psychological influences on people.

(Lowrey & DeFleur, 1983, p. 10)

Early studies focused on media effects on children and what they learned from the media content. The assumption during early media effects studies was that media content had an effect (bypassing what kind of content lead to such effects and the magnitude of such effects), and focused on the audience attendance, social aspects of attendance, and parental preconceptions of media effects (McDonald, 2004, p. 185). These early studies lacked empirical evidence, but the events taking place during that time seemed to support these preconceptions about the media.

One such event was the World Wars. Heavy propaganda by the Allies along with the Communist and Nazis were used to maintain fear and control over its audience. Such content and the potential for manipulation of the audience lead to the conception of a powerful effects paradigm, one that ascribed the media ultimate control- the power to manipulate its audience.

Schramm and Roberts (1974) describe the prevailing notion of media effects, stating:

At the time, the audience was typically thought of as a sitting target; if a communicator could hit it, he would affect it. This became especially frightening

because of the reach of the new mass media. The unsophisticated viewpoint was that if a person could be reached by the insidious forces of propaganda carried by the mighty power of the mass media, he could be changed and converted and controlled. Predictably, propaganda became the hate word and the media came to be regarded with fear, and laws were passed and actions taken to protect “defenseless” people against “irresistible” communication. (p. 8)

Known as the mass society theory, the hypodermic needle, or the magic bullet, these early powerful effect theories maintained that the audience was passive and susceptible to media control. That is, the communicator could literally transfer “ideas or feelings or knowledge or motivations almost automatically from one mind to another” through the media (Schramm & Roberts, 1974, p. 8). One of the primary concerns in relation to the mass society (the populace) and the media was the potential for those in control of the media to eventually control the mass society (because of its popularity with the masses). This perspective saw people as susceptible to powerful stimuli, including media messages, and predicted that they would respond immediately and behave consistent with the intent of the producers of the message (Perse, 2000, p. 24). The focus of the mass society theory was on the short term, immediate effects. People were believed to have little power over the effects media messages had on them. Due to these fears of potential manipulation through external forces, many studies during this time focused on propaganda.

Theorist Harold D. Lasswell dedicated many of his works to the issue of propaganda. Rooted in Freudianism, Lasswell focused primarily on the potential influence of propaganda, which he maintained, was a long-term effect. Lasswell contended propagandistic messages did not have to have an immediate appeal to the audience; rather, if it were played over a long period of time, it conditioned the audience to associate certain emotions with particular symbols

(Lasswell, 1965, p. 87). These collectively shared symbols are what Lasswell called the “master symbols”, which have strong related emotions. For an example, Lasswell points to the sentiment of “nationalism” that is evoked when presented with a combination of religious, cultural, state, and democratic patterns (like the American flag, and what qualities the flag represents). While some identify with these symbols, others may still reject it. That is because repetition does not guarantee the desired effect, but it does make it more likely to be perceived (Doob, 1948, p. 318). The more the symbol is repeated (therefore reinforced) the more likely it is to be perceived by the masses. The overall impact of the symbol is a general pattern of nationalism (Lasswell, 1965, p. 33).

Lasswell contends that these master symbols could be used by those in power to manipulate the masses to do or feel what those in power want them to. Because of the potential for abuse of power, Lasswell recommended regulation of the media by an elite who would protect the masses from harmful propaganda. Instead, this elite would use propaganda for “peaceful methods” (Lasswell, 1965, p. 181).

Though not propaganda, an event that seemed to prove the powerful effects hypothesis was the War of the Worlds radio broadcast in 1938. A dramatization that sounded like an interruption of a typical radio broadcast to bring a series of news bulletins was aired reporting on a supposed Martian invasion. The result was hysteria, and some estimates state as many as six million listeners believed “Martians” were invading the earth (McDonald, 2004, p. 185). Later studies examined what psychological factors prompted some to believe the hoax (Cantril, Gaudet, & Herzog, 1940).

Though later theorists (Klapper, 1960) would eventually discredit these early media effects theories as “oversimplified”, they do provide insight into the thoughts and concerns of

that time. The unprecedented growth of the media, powerful propagandistic messages, and societal change (such as the moral decline starting in the 1920s, otherwise known as the flapper era) seemed to lend power to the media to control its audience. In this phase of media effects research the reality of a media effect was assumed, even though little empirical evidence had been gathered to support this assumption. The events surrounding this time served as “proof”, even though a direct correlation had yet to be established.

It wasn't long before scholars began to take a closer look at these theories, desiring some proof to back up the powerful effects claims. Some foundational studies were conducted during this phase, including the Motion Picture Research Council's “Payne Fund Studies”, which examined potential effects of motion pictures on children. A similar study was conducted for the radio, known as the “Recent Social Trends”. Some contradicting evidence began to emerge where the audience didn't respond as was predicted by the mass society theories (the assumption that the audience is completely passive, having no way to withstand the control of the media) (Schramm & Roberts, 1974, p. 9). This would eventually lead to a change in approach in studying media effects and the resulting theories. There was a call for a more “scientific” approach to account for such effects. This led a number of researchers to look for empirical evidence, ushering in a new phase of media studies.

Phase 2: Theory of Powerful Media Put to the Test

McQuail's second phase, *theory of powerful media put to the test*, was a time period ushered in with mounting calls for evidence of the power of the media. As stated in one account, it was during this time that scholars and researchers “were beginning to turn from mere speculation about their effects to systematic studies of the impact of particular communication content upon particular kinds of people” (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1982, p. 164).

In 1940, a study was conducted in response to the Orson Wells radio broadcast (Cantril, Gaudet, & Herzog, 1940). The purpose of the study was to analyze what led to the mass panic. Cantril and his associates interviewed one hundred and thirty five people who were frightened by the broadcast. Contrary to prevailing “magic bullet” notions, Cantril found that there was no single factor that led the nation’s audience to react in fear. Instead, there was a series of factors, including the threat of war, the Great Depression, and other aspects that led to a “widespread feeling of insecurity” (Cantril, et al., p. 203). This insecurity is what made some predisposed to react in panic to the broadcast. Cantril concludes,

It is not the radio, the movies, the press or “propaganda” which, in themselves, really create wars and panics. It is the discrepancy between the whole superstructure of economic, social, and political practices and beliefs and the basic and derived needs of individuals that creates wars, panics or mass movements of any kind. (Cantril, et al. p. 204)

Cantril concludes that education and a greater critical ability would help avoid future panics. This study was influential because it took into account other factors besides the media (in this instance, the radio) that led to media effects. From this study and other studies conducted during this period, one important factor became evident- that there was no easy answer to media effects. Starting in the 1930s, empirical inquiry into media effects began to grow, lasting until the early 1960s. It was during this time that the concept of media effects shifted from the powerful effects model to limited effects.

One of the first empirical studies was conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld, who studied media effects on voting behavior. During the 1940 presidential elections, a group of social scientists went to Erie County, Ohio from May to November to observe change and development in public

opinion. Interviewing a large number of people, the focus of the study was on those who had “shifted” their opinion. The focal point of the study was not how people voted, but why they voted the way they did (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1968, p. 10).

Among other things, they found that media exposure aroused interest in the campaign, and that interest brought increased exposure to media. Still, people were selective to what media content they were exposed to, meaning that they tended to listen to their “side” (Republican or Democrat). One of the most important findings was that the opinions of those interested became “crystallized” meaning that they were less likely to change their opinion, and that they were ready to vote (Lazarsfeld, et al., 1968, pp. 75-76). From this, it was deduced that media was being used to confirm previously held viewpoints, rather than change them (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1974, p. 655).

It was from this study that the *two-step flow* theory was developed. According to this theory, in every area and public issue, there are people who are very interested in an issue and are able to articulate it. They are called “opinion leaders”, and these opinion leaders are subsequently sought out for advice on particular issues. Consequently, opinion leaders hold a position of influence. Those who seek the opinion leaders out are called “followers”. The opinion leaders are in all occupation groups, not just prominent roles or wealthy. In the study, the opinion leaders identified the media as more of an influential role than personal relationships. The resulting idea was that the “ideas often flow *from* radio and print *to* the opinion leaders and *from* them to the less active sections of the population” (Lazarsfeld, et al., 1968, p. 151). The person-to-person influence, in turn, reaches those who are more susceptible to change, and serves as a “bridge” over which the media can exert influence.

Lazarsfeld concludes, "...more than anything else people can move other people. From an ethical point of view this is a hopeful aspect in the serious social problem of propaganda" (Lazarsfeld, et al., 1968, p. 158). This study demonstrated the media are not the sole influence on society; rather, interpersonal relationships (among other factors) play key roles in influencing people. In other studies, Lazarsfeld expounds on the two-step flow, studying opinion leaders in different fields (fashion, marketing, public affairs, and movies), the "flow" of information and the effect the media has on the opinion leaders (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, p. 316). Lazarsfeld's two-step flow theory concludes that the media have a limited effect on society, and other factors, including interpersonal relationships, have more influence.

Another influential figure in the development of the limited effects paradigm was Carl Hovland. He designed and implemented a series of experiments to test the effectiveness of the World War II documentary films series, *Why We Fight*, created by Frank Capra. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, millions had joined the military to help in the war effort. With scores of new military personnel, many lacked knowledge of the motivations behind the war, as well as the nature of the enemy. The *Why We Fight* series was created to help indoctrinate the soldiers on the justness of the American cause. The primary purposes of the film series were to increase the willingness to serve, and to give factual knowledge of the war and enemy (Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949, p. 21).

Hovland carried out a series of experimental studies to evaluate the effectiveness of each of the films within the series. What he found was that the films were not as powerful in their influence as previously thought. The films did provide factual information concerning the events leading to the war, and small changes in opinion were noted in the interpretation of the events. In other words, opinion changes were only noted in areas that the films specifically address. These

opinions were more on the interpretation of the facts. Still, no changes in general attitudes concerning the war were noted, which were the primary purpose of the films (Hovland, et al., 1949, p. 55). In addition, there were no effects on the soldier's willingness to serve, which was another one of the primary purposes of the films.

One significant outcome of the study was the recognition of possible long-term effects. Hovland noted that the experimental measurements were conducted four to seven days after the subjects viewed the film, in which the select point of the "forgetting curve" where long-term effects were thought to have been measured. Hovland thought that perhaps a longer period of time was needed in order to truly measure long-term effects. He called this the "sinking in" period, where the store of knowledge gleaned from the film would affect subsequent learned facts. As Hovland noted that "...films may have delayed or "sleeper" effects that require a lapse of time to become evident, and this may be particularly true of opinion changes of a more general nature such as were involved in the orientation objectives" (Hovland, et al., 1949, p. 71). In other words, in order for the more general attitude changes to take place, more time may be needed for the facts to sink in and affect further knowledge and opinions regarding the issue of war.

Hovland and his associates developed a new kind of research design where they varied certain factors while controlling others (known as controlled variance experiments). By doing this, it made it possible to "determine the effectiveness of the particular factors varied" and allowed greater degrees of generalization (Hovland, et al., 1949, p. 179). Using this method, Hovland addresses the short-term versus long-term effects on opinion, as well as presenting one or both sides of the argument. Hovland's subsequent studies (Hovland, 1957) continued to

research on the area of persuasion, and demonstrated the complexity of attitude formation and change.

A new paradigm began to emerge based on Hovland's studies called the *uses and gratifications* approach. This perspective looked at why audiences use the media to satisfy certain needs and obtain goals. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) described this perspective as one that is concerned with:

(1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement on other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones.

(p. 510)

In this perspective, audiences are seen as “active” in that they choose what media content they want to consume. This is in stark contrast to the previous powerful effects paradigm, which saw the audience as “passive” and susceptible to media manipulation. On the contrary, the uses and gratifications model saw the audience as active in choosing what it wants, and making sense of the media messages. The choice (of what to consume) lies in the audience member, thus limiting the direct-influence of the media. The media compete with other sources for the need gratification. The uses and gratifications approach did have some theoretical and methodological shortcomings (Katz, et al., 1973), but still provided a useful means of explaining why the audience sought the media, and what use they made of the messages gleaned from it.

The combination of the studies conducted during this phase provided subsequent empirical evidence that contradicted early powerful effects assumptions that the media were all powerful and the audiences were uniformly influenced by it. These studies helped show that

there were other variables that have to be taken into consideration when determining possible media effects. Lazarsfeld theorized that there was more than the one-step flow (that is, the media directly influencing the audience). Instead, Lazarsfeld advanced the two-step flow, where the information flowed from the media, to the opinion leader, and then to the rest of the public. Interpersonal relationships (the opinion leader) had more of an effect than the media. Hovland, through his studies on documentary films effect in indoctrinating soldiers, concluded that media were not as effective in persuading its audience as originally thought, and that long-term studies were needed to identify any media effects. In short, during this phase, the media were thought to have a limited effect on its audience, and other mediating factors had more influence on the individual (education, interpersonal relationships, etc.). Similar empirical studies were conducted by other scholars during this phase, and additions to these groundwork studies were made by these and other scholars.

Joseph Klapper (1960), a proponent of the limited effects paradigm describes the new approach to media effects as

...a shift *away* from the tendency to regard mass communication as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, toward a view of the media as influences, working amid other influences, in a total situation. The old quest of specific effects stemming from the communication has given way to the observation of existing conditions or changes, followed by an inquiry into the factors, *including* mass communication, which produced those conditions and changes, and the roles which these factors play relative to each other. (p. 5)

Klapper called this perspective of media effects the *phenomenistic* approach (now known as the reinforcement theory), which did not deny the presence of effects; rather, media effects were

seen as one of many influences. Sometimes, Klapper maintained, the media itself is sufficient cause for an effect. Other times, it works in tandem with other influences to necessitate an effect. More often than not, the media, according to Klapper, reinforce preexisting attitudes and behaviors.

Klapper's well-documented work seemed to sum up the limited effects paradigm. The media, though not completely without effects, are seen as only one of many influences. If there were any effects they were thought to have reinforced existing ideas, or cause minimal change. These influential works seemed to disprove the early powerful effects theories, which lacked the empirical evidence that the limited effects had. These early theories were "put to the test" by empirical observation, which at the time made them appear to be false. It was during this time that researchers distinguished possible media effects with different characteristics. In other words, researchers looked at different variables that could lead to media effects. Still, these effects were seen as minimal, with maximum effects seen as rare.

The presuppositions during this phase led to disillusionment in media effects. To some theorists, the effects research had come to a dead end. Bernard Berelson (1964) expressed this sentiment stating,

...it seems to me that "the great ideas" that gave the field of communication research so much validity ten and twenty years ago have to a substantial extent worn out. No new ideas of comparable magnitude have appeared to take their place. We are on a plateau of research development, and have been for some time.
(p. 508)

This perspective of minimal to no effects was not the end of media effects research. Some researchers were unwilling to accept the seemingly premature assumption that the media had

little to no effect. The next phase, would bring the whole issue of media effects into question again.

Phase 3: Powerful Media Rediscovered

Though contemporary studies at the time seemed to support the limited effects paradigm, not all researchers or the public were convinced of the impotence of media. This stance would eventually make way for the third phase of media effects research, *powerful media rediscovered*. McQuail describes the conditions that led to the third phase, stating, "...it should be admitted that neither public anxiety about the new medium of television nor professional opinion in the field of advertising and mass communication was much changed by the verdict of science" (McQuail, 1977, p. 73). McQuail adds, by the time "no effects" gained acceptance, it was already being re-examined by social scientists.

Lang & Lang (2006) were one of the primary researchers who were skeptical of the limited effects claims. They maintained that the popularity of the limited effects paradigm was prematurely accepted and was advanced by only a handful of studies (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, Hovland et al., 1949, Klapper, 1960) which set precedent in their methodology, but were not the conclusive answer to media effects that some were looking for. Still, these influential works whether intentionally or not, diverted the social scientists' attention away from media effects for a number of years. The studies seemed to disprove powerful effects theories, and the evidence gleaned from the studies pointed to a less powerful media. Some critique the limited effects proponents for misinterpreting the early powerful effects models, and for using them as "straw men" to whom the limited effect model could be contrasted (Chaffee & Hochheimer, 1985, pp. 290-291). That is, by oversimplifying the powerful effects models, the limited effects theories appear to be a more "balanced" view of media.

Both Lang & Lang (2006) and Chaffee & Hochheimer (1985) point out several flaws in the early limited effects studies, including the pre-occupation with short-term individual effects.

Lang & Lang assert:

In changing the focus away from influences that occur en masse and over time toward the concrete responses of individuals, assessments like the above undercut a long-standing concern, dating back to the early 1920s, and even before, about the role of mass circulation newspapers, of film, and of radio. It put into question the value of further inquiries into the new worlds these media had opened. (Lang & Lang, 2006, p. 167)

One reason for the reluctance to accept the limited effects model was the growing popularity of the television. It was during this time that the television became the dominant medium for news and entertainment. Some studies during this phase (Lang & Lang, 1966, 1974) focused on the television and its impact on society. They found that the television has a way of giving its own perspective of an event (Lang & Lang, 1966, p. 287). In this way, the television did exert some influence on the audience, because of what it did or did not show. That is, there is a selective process of what to show the audience, and what not to. In that way, the television viewer is limited by what he or she is allowed to see, and the media help guide viewers' perception of an event. These findings would later be expounded upon in subsequent studies, leading to the *agenda-setting* hypothesis.

During this phase, media effects were still being sought out, but according to revised conceptions of social and media processes that were thought to be involved (McQuail, 2000, p. 420). The debate over media effects was, in essence, over the level or magnitude of the effect and who was affected. The limited or "no" effect was being called into question, as new media surfaced and new studies would challenge that assumption. It was Noelle-Neumann (1973) who

finally called for the “return to the concept of powerful mass media.” This would bring in the final phase, which leads up to modern day research.

Phase 4: Negotiated Media Influence

The final phase of media effects research, *negotiated media influence*, started in the late 1970s through today. This paradigm of media effects, according to McQuail, has a two distinct features: the first, is that “media ‘construct’ social formations and even history itself by framing images of reality (in fiction as well as news) in predictable and patterned ways.” The second feature is when “...audiences construct for themselves their own view of social reality and their place in it, in interaction with the symbolic constructions offered by the media” (McQuail, 2000, p. 421). This phase, according to McQuail, is best described as “social constructivist,” in that the most significant media effect is in constructing meanings. The audience, receive these meanings from the media, where they are in turn, negotiated into their repertoire of symbolic meanings. The media then, are seen as powerful in that they have the ability to shape meanings people use to navigate life. This phase of media effects is “negotiated” in that the audience receives the meanings sent by the media, and negotiates the meanings with their own meanings, in order to reference them in the future. Several studies explore this effect, including Gerbner’s cultivation theory, the agenda-setting hypothesis, and Noelle-Newman’s spiral of silence.

As discussed earlier, the cultivation theory is the culmination of Gerbner’s work on the Cultural Indicators project, which analyzed the reality set forth by the television, and how heavy viewers project this “television reality” on the real world. In the words of Gerbner (1980b),

Television is the central and most pervasive mass medium in American culture and it play a distinctive and historically unprecedented role...the individual is introduced virtually at birth into its powerful flow of messages and images. The

television set has become a key member of the family, the one who tells most of the stories most of the time. Its massive flow of stories showing what things are, how things work, and what to do about them has become the common socializer of our times. These stories form a coherent if mythical “world” in every home.

Television dominates the symbolic environment of modern life. (p. 14)

The media (in this instance, the television) are influential, starting at birth, in making and sustaining meanings of reality. Gerbner takes the cultivation process one step further, adding that the media help make and sustain common outlooks among media users. That is to say, since the audience consumes the same content (thus receiving the same messages) their views are “mainstream” or the same. In some cases, the mainstreaming effect of media can go one-step further, when what is portrayed through the media is congruent with reality, it can have a “double-dose” cultivation effect, heightening the media effects, what Gerbner calls “resonance.” Thus, when the meanings portrayed in the media reflect that of reality or perceived reality, it reinforces the meanings handed down by the media. Gerbner’s findings support this premise (Gerbner, 1978, 1980b). According to Gerbner’s theory, the media are powerful because the meanings it communicates impact the audience’s perception of the world around them.

On a similar strain, the agenda-setting theory holds that the media are powerful because they help shape the audience’s agenda, or what they deem as important. A series of important empirical studies were conducted to help validate the agenda-setting theory. These studies looked at the

...correspondences between the amount of attention an event or issue receives in the media and the importance members of the audience assign to it. Content is usually measured by the emphasis (amount of time and space) on some issue or

issues in the news; response by the perceived importance of the issue among the public. A high correlation between the two suggests that the media, collectively, steer attention to certain issues, events, and personalities. (Lang & Lang, 1983, p. 7)

One influential empirical study on the agenda-setting power of the media was conducted by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw during the 1968 presidential campaign. Building upon Cohen's (1963) idea that the media tell people what to think about, McCombs and Shaw hypothesized that "the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177). To investigate the agenda-setting capacity of the media, McCombs and Shaw tried to match what voters said were the main issues of the campaign with the content on the media they used during the campaign. What they found is that the media appeared to exert considerable influence on what the voters considered major issues of the campaign. The data they collected suggested a very strong relationship between the emphasis placed on different campaign issues by the media and what the voters said were the most important issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Lang & Lang (1983) built upon the agenda-setting concept and formed a model called *agenda-building*, which is "a collective process in which media, government, and the citizenry reciprocally influence one another in at least some respects" (p. 59). The media play a key role in the agenda-building process by highlighting only events and activities that concern the most amounts of people, which in turn, gain the most attention. These events and activities are then "framed" by assigning meaning to them (in short, letting people know why they should care) and then that meaning is shaped by the language that is used. Thus, the media once again have the power to set the public agenda. In short, the agenda-building process gives the audience the

reason to rate an issue as a primary concern, because the audience understands the meaning behind it and once this occurs, the issue has a higher threshold to withstand competing issues.

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) supported the agenda-setting hypothesis, and another feature that they called “priming.” They utilized psychology’s perspective of information processing, which presumes that human cognitive processes are relatively simple when compared to the complex environment they live in, and they therefore selectively simplify what to focus on by clumping them into “themes.” In essence, priming takes agenda-setting a step further by not only telling the audience what to think about, but giving the audience a quick (simple) frame of reference in which to make judgments.

In recent years, the agenda-setting theory has expanded some of its key concepts. The core of this expansion is what is called framing, another addition to the agenda-setting theory. This occurs when the media not only focus on certain issues, but also focus on certain attributes of that issue. By “framing” the issue in a particular way, the media are, in effect, telling the audience how to feel and even *think* about a given issue. This marks a significant shift toward a more powerful effects model, as the media are seen as not only telling people what to think about, but how to think about it. Agenda setting has moved past the original research question, “Who sets the public agenda?” to “Who sets the media agenda?” This question has connected agenda-setting research to a number of social science, journalism, and communication subfields (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 60).

The *spiral of silence*, set forth by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1973) is a theory that explored the effects of opinion influence. According to this theory, when the one perspective is perceived to be the dominant one, it gains more acceptance because it is seen as stronger. The seemingly weaker or less popular perspective is scrutinized, and those who hold this opinion

become more and more silent about their position. This is the spiral of silence. Sometimes, even if positions have equal support, if one side is more vocal about their opinion than the other is, it can be perceived as weaker.

In the case of the media, if one side is represented more than the other is, it will be perceived as the dominant opinion. Those who hold a contrary position will be seen as the minority opinion, because it is not represented in the media. Those who hold to the perceived minority opinion may be forced into the spiral of silence, because they believe they hold an unpopular view, and are thus less willing to express their true opinion. Noelle-Neumann maintains that the motive to hold back one's opinion is out of fear of isolation, and this fear is what sets the spiral of silence into motion (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 40).

The media, according to Noelle-Neumann, serve an articulation function, by providing words and phrases to which people can use to defend their point of view (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 173). If the media does not provide expressions of opinion, then the audience holding that opinion will fall into silence. The media, if it indeed does serve the articulation function, is powerful because it gives the audience what they need in order to articulate their point of view. In this way, the audience is dependent on the media. In addition, if the spiral of silence is true, then the media are more powerful because they have the choice of what to or not to show, thus alerting what the audience perceives as the dominant opinion. Noelle-Neumann's studies supported her spiral of silence hypothesis, adding to the contemporary view of the powerful effects model and reviving interest in public opinion research.

All three of these theories place the media in more of a powerful effects model, contending that the media serve what Lippmann (1921) called the "map-making" function, or how a person makes sense of the world around them. The media provides symbols, which are

negotiated into a person's frame of reference, or how they interpret reality and their place in it. The critical implication of this idea is that over time, *media shape worldview*, which theoretically in turn, promotes certain behaviors that are a function of one's worldview (Sire, 2004). The powerful/limited effects debate has come full circle, from initial fears of the omnipotence of the media, and the audience at the mercy of the manipulation of the media. These concerns were not unwarranted, however, they lacked the empirical evidence to support such strong claims. The focus then shifted to empirical research, to which they found little to no supporting evidence. This caused some researchers to come up with a limited effects model, where the media were seen as one of the many societal influences on an individual, and had little power on its own. As social scientific research methods were refined, some researchers revisited the powerful effects models from decades past, as new media gained wide spread acceptance. These findings revealed that the media are influential, but not to the degree once feared. The audience was seen as active, making and negotiating meanings from the symbols sent through the media. Still, the media had the power to set the public's agenda, by showing them what to consider important, and provided a reference of "dominant" (or what is perceived as dominant) public opinion. If people perceive that their opinion is not dominant, they may forgo what they know to be true, in order to conform to the popular opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 38).

In addition, the messages sent through the media, were no longer seen as without effect. Gerbner's twenty-plus year study of television content proved that the people can and do take the "reality" set forth by the media, and apply it to their view of life, whether it is accurate or not. Once again, the media are viewed in a position of powerful, whether deserving or not. The statistics gleaned from the decades of empirical research verify that the media do have an effect. The effects vary depending on other intervening variables, but the fact remains that the effects

are still there. Perhaps the current scholarly perspective of media effects can best be described as “moderate”, as scholars analyze both the power and limitations of the media (Greenberg & Salwen, 1996, p. 71). Gerbner’s cultivation theory supports this view of media effects, and provides a valuable guiding body of research for this study.

Method

This quantitative study advances the primary research question (RQ): *What effect will films that contain high levels of “smut” have on a Christian heavy viewer’s worldview?* The reasoning behind this question is the fact that watching films remains a popular American pastime, even with the Christian audience. Most of the films produced today contain elements that are contrary to the biblical worldview that Christians claim to uphold. Films that contain these offensive elements are frequently rated R and PG-13. The term “smut” is used to describe the content that is prevalent in these films, including sexuality, violence, homosexuality, profanity, and obscenity. Therefore, this research question attempts to examine the relationship between Christians who frequently watch films with high smut content, and their adherence to (or departure from) a biblical worldview, as defined by the Barna Research Group (2003b).

For this study, a descriptive research design was chosen, as it lends itself to examining the relationships between variables, without needing to control the environment in which the study is conducted or the independent variables (Keyton, 2006, p. 156). In order to obtain the information desired, a self-administered survey was taken, which allowed the participant to choose which answer best represented their views and preferences.

In order to gather questions that will properly reflect one’s film viewing habits, extensive research was conducted to find previously administered surveys as a guiding research design. While many film surveys exist, none of the surveys reviewed had the questions that are applicable to the topic of this study. That is, the questions in other surveys, while they did provide insight into people’s film viewing habits, did not examine what kind of content the movies contained, or what kind of film content the viewers preferred. The film questions were

concerned about general viewing behavior, rather than specific aspects of film preferences and behavior.

Because of this, the film questions for the survey were created based upon the definition of “smut” provided in the Introduction (see Appendix A). The same question was posed, asking, “How often do the movies you watch contain any elements of _____?” Each of the elements in the definition (sex, violence, homosexuality, profanity, and obscenity) was placed in the blank, so that each factor was expressly addressed in the survey. In order to obtain data tailored to each of the elements in the definition of smut, the questions were designed on a Likert-type scale. The response set was a 5-interval format, with the answer choices being: (5) very often, (4) fairly often, (3) occasionally, (2) rarely, and (1) never. The resulting interval data was used during analysis. The design for this portion of the survey was based upon a survey from Keyton (2006) that utilized a similar Likert-type format (pp. 176-177).

Similarly, questions relating to film ratings were included asking, “On average, how often are the movies you watch rated _____?” Like the questions relating to specific elements of film content, the rationale for including rating questions was to reflect what kind of content the participants generally consume. That is, rated R and PG-13 films contain more “smut” than rated PG or G films. In addition to the questions relating to specific elements in a film and film ratings, questions about film viewing frequency and genre preferences were included. In sum, all but one of the questions related to film viewing behavior were based on a Likert-type scale, so corresponding numerical values could be assigned to the answers.

The second topic of the survey relates to one’s worldview. The questions used for this portion of the survey were created by the Barna Research Group and used in their measurement of the Christian worldview reported in the book, *Think Like Jesus* (2003a). Permission was

granted to the principle investigator to use the Barna survey in its entirety in this study. This sixteen-item survey measures the scope of the worldview held by an individual and its adherence to that of the defined biblical worldview (the definition used in this study). The survey uses a combination of Likert-type scale and closed questions. For the closed questions, the response set contains categorical answers, and the participant is instructed to choose the answer that best describes their beliefs.

Finally, the last part of the survey asks basic demographic questions that allow the answers to be put into context. These questions include: gender, race/ethnicity, and age of the participant. The formatting and wording for this section of the survey was based upon the examples provided from Patten (2001). To read the survey in its entirety, please see Appendix A.

After the survey was compiled, a pilot study was conducted with five individuals, in order to see if the participants understood the questions and to see how long it took to complete the survey. After the survey was completed, the participants had the opportunity to voice any questions or concerns about the survey. The questions were then addressed, and revisions to the survey were made. The length of time it took each participant to finish the survey was recorded and then totaled to determine the average amount of time it took to complete the survey. The average came out to be approximately six minutes. Though portions of the survey were quite in depth, the questions relating to film viewing habits were simple and took little time to complete. This time fit well within the estimated time constraints. Following a successful pilot test, it was determined that the full survey test was ready to be conducted.

The subjects for this study were students in the Liberty University Communications program. Specifically, the subjects were students enrolled in a Communications course (COMS 101). The rationale for this selection was that it was an appropriate convenience sample and the

assumption that these participants frequently watch films. The sample size was 233 students. Though the total number of participants was 233, 14 of the participant surveys were not used in analysis, because they did not consider themselves Christians. This study specifically looked at the Christian population, and those who stated that they did not adhere to the Christian faith were not included, because the scope of this study dealt with the Christian audience.

All of the students were administered the survey on the same day. A script was prepared by the principle investigator for the class instructors to read aloud once the survey was passed out. The script included a short introduction about the nature of the study, and instructions on how to answer the questions. To read the script in its entirety, please see Appendix B. The reason for this was so all of the participants had equal knowledge of the survey contents and understood how to complete the survey. All of the participants retained complete anonymity during the study.

For this study, the independent variables (IV) are: the content of film and viewing behavior. The content refers to the level of smut contained in the films viewed. The basis of measurement is “lo” and “high” levels of smut. What is considered lo and high is based upon a Likert-type scale. That is, answers that rank on the higher-end of the scale (4 = fairly often, 5 = very often) are considered as having viewed higher amounts of smut. Those who rank on the lower-end of the scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely) are considered to have viewed lower amounts of smut. The second IV is viewing behavior, or frequency. Viewing behavior will be categorized as “heavy” and “light” based upon the response on the Likert scale, with (4 = fairly often, 5 = very often) being considered “heavy” viewers and (1 = never, 2 = rarely) being considered “light” viewers. For the purposes of this study, the focus was on the effects of smut content on heavy viewers.

The first IV, film content, was compiled into a composite for analysis. Specifically, for each question (questions #2 - #8) the Likert-scale number that the participant chose as the best representation of their viewing habits was added to an overall “smut score”. The lowest possible score was seven, meaning that the participant never consumes any smut. The highest possible score was 35, which indicates that the participant consumes large amounts of smut. This smut score was then used for analysis. The second IV, frequency, was then added. The frequency scores “fairly often”(4) and “very often” (5) were combined into a heavy viewer score. These scores were also used in analysis, as a means of separating the heavy viewers from the light viewers. Each of the two IVs help categorize the participant’s film viewing habits and help identify the participants that are the focus of this study: heavy viewers, that watch large amounts of smut.

The dependent variable (DV) is the Christian worldview. The worldview was measured by the portion of the survey that was dedicated to the analysis of one’s worldview. The basis of determining the status of one’s worldview was based on the correct answers to the questions, as supplied in Barna’s book, *Think Like Jesus* (2003a). Due to the fact that the primary RQ is concerned with the degree of the participants’ adherence to, or departure from a biblical worldview, the data will also be examined to see the level to which the participants hold a biblical worldview. Each of the questions on the worldview portion of the survey was assigned one point for each question answered correctly. If the participant did not answer the question correctly, then they received a zero for that question. The scores were then tallied for a composite worldview score for each participant. The lowest possible score was zero, and the highest score was a ten. This score was then used in analysis, as the DV.

The continuous level data gathered from the surveys was then used for statistical analysis. The statistical test chosen for this study was the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, otherwise known as correlation. This was conducted to determine if there was a relationship between the variables. The relationship between the variables was then inspected, to see if when the IVs increased, the DV decreased, remained the same, or increased. In short, it was used to see the degree in which the variables are related (Keyton, 2006, p. 217). That is, what kind of effect will viewing high amounts of smut, with greater frequency, have on the participant's adherence to a biblical worldview? The rationale for using this method of analysis was so that the correlation between the IVs and DV could be determined, and the effects of IVs on the DV could be better understood in relation to the research question posed in this study.

In summary, the survey method was chosen because of its ability to ask in depth questions that allow the respondents to choose the answer that best represents their views. The participants in the study were Communication students from Liberty University. The data obtained in the survey was then used for statistical analysis, specifically, correlation. The results from these tests are reported in the following section, Results.

Results

In this chapter, the statistical results from the survey are reported. First, a description of the participants' demographic make-up and film viewing habits, which include: viewing frequency, film genre preferences, and the ratings most frequently watched, are disclosed. Next, the state of the participants' worldview are shown, including the overall percentage of biblical and non-biblical worldviews, as well as the overall respondent adherence to a biblical worldview. Finally, the results from the research question for this study are reported.

Participants

The participants for this study were Liberty University students enrolled in a Communications course (COMS 101). The total number of the participant's surveys used in this study was 219. The following is the demographic make-up of the sample. The racial/ethnic breakdown of the participants was: Asian 3.7%, Black/African American 19.6%, White/Caucasian 68.9%, Native American .9%, Hispanic/Latino 4.1%, and Other 2.7%. The dominant age group of the sample was 18-25, accounting for 95% of the sample. The other age groups were as follows: .9% (ages 26-35), .5% (ages 36-50), and 3.7% (under 18). The age group of the sample size was expected to be below 25 years of age, since most Liberty University students take the COMS 101 course during their freshman year. In regards to gender, 55% of the sample size was male and 45% female.

Film Viewing Behavior

Concerning the frequency which the participants watch films per month, most of the participants ranked toward the "heavy viewer" end of the scale, with 34.7% stating that they watched films "very often", and 29.2% stating "fairly often". For the purposes of analysis, these two categories (4, 5) were combined, and classified under "heavy viewer", resulting in a total of

63.9% qualifying as “heavy” viewers. In addition, 28.3% of participants reported that they watch films “occasionally”. A significantly smaller portion of the sample ranked as a “light viewer”; with .9% stating they never watch films and 6.8% stating that they rarely watch a film. This means that 35.7% of the sample were “light” viewers. Thus, most of the respondents ranked as moderate or heavy viewers. This was expected, since watching films remains a popular pastime among young adults.

The film genre popularity levels are as follows: comedy (91.3%), action/adventure (90.4%), suspense/thriller/horror/mystery (69.4%), drama (67.1%), cartoons (37%), and anime (12.8%). The mean for each ratings category, which averages each ratings category on the 5-point Likert-scale of “very often” (5), “fairly often” (4), “occasionally” (3), “rarely” (2), and “never” (1) are as follows: rated R ($M= 2.9, SD= 1.2$), rated PG-13 ($M= 4.2, SD= .80$), rated PG ($M= 3.2, SD= 1.0$), and rated G ($M= 2.3, SD= 1.1$). Thus, the ratings that were most popular among the participants were PG-13, PG, R, and G, in that order.

Worldview

The state of one’s worldview, which was analyzed using the Barna Group survey, was determined by how the participants answered certain questions. To read the questions that pertained to the biblical worldview measurement, please see Appendix A. In order for the participant to be categorized as having a biblical worldview, all of the questions had to be answered correctly in accordance to the answers provided by the Barna Group. Out of the 219 participants, 28.8% had a perfect biblical worldview as defined by the Barna Group, and 71.2% of the participants had a non-biblical worldview. However, a large portion of the participants were close to having a biblical worldview, with the mean score being an 8.54 (10 being a perfect score). The percentage breakdown of the participants worldview scores were: (2) .5%, (3) .5%,

(5) 2.7%, (6) 5.5%, (7) 11.9%, (8) 17.4% (9) 32.9%, (10) 28.8%. For the purposes of this study, the degree to which the participant adhered to a biblical worldview was examined to see if the amount of smut viewed had a significant effect on their worldview. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the state of Christian respondents worldview. A score of ten indicates that the respondent answered every worldview question from a Biblical perspective (as defined by the Barna Group), while lower scores reflect that some questions were not answered from a Biblical perspective.

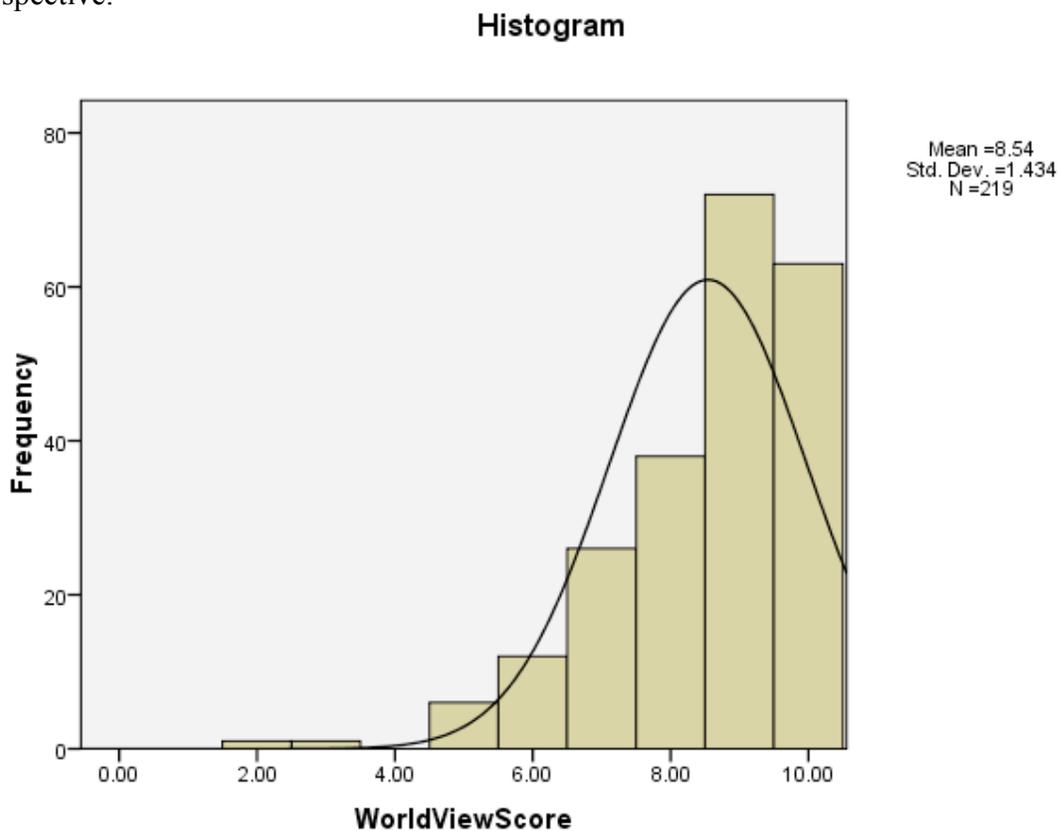


Figure 1. Distribution of Worldview Scores

Note. This histogram is a visual representation of how many worldview questions out of ten Christian respondents answered correctly. It is intriguing to note that many of them scored close to a biblical worldview. The proper interpretation of the histogram is that the vertical side is the number of Christian respondents per level of correct answers (left side, labeled “Frequency”) and the horizontal side is the number of questions answered correctly out of a possible ten (bottom, labeled “Worldview Score”).

Research Question

The research question posed in this study is as follows: *What effect will films that contain high levels of “smut” have on a Christian heavy viewer’s worldview?* To answer this question, the respondents were sorted by the criteria within the research question (i.e. Christian, heavy viewer). Statistical analysis was then conducted using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (correlation) to compare their levels of smut consumption with the state of their worldview. A two-tailed test was used, so that the direction of the correlation, whether positive or negative, could be determined. The results are as follows: $r(140) = -.171, p = .043$. These results indicate that there is a significant negative relationship between the variables. That is, as the heavy viewers’ smut content increases, the likelihood of adhering to a biblical worldview goes down. For a visual representation of this data, please see Figure 2.

Figure 2 is a scatterplot demonstrating the linear correlation (relationship) between the paired x and y coordinates represented by the circles on the plot. In this case, the x coordinate is the heavy viewers worldview score, while the y coordinate is the heavy viewers smut score. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to determine the strength of the linear relationship between the paired x and y values. As previously stated, the negative relationship was significant ($*p < .05$). Thus, the answer to the research question, which examined the effect of watching films that contain high levels of smut on a Christian heavy viewer’s worldview, has been determined. There is a significant negative relationship between the amount of smut that a Christian heavy viewer consumes, and their lack of adherence to a Biblical worldview, in that when the IVs (smut content and viewing frequency) increase, the DV (state of worldview) decreases.

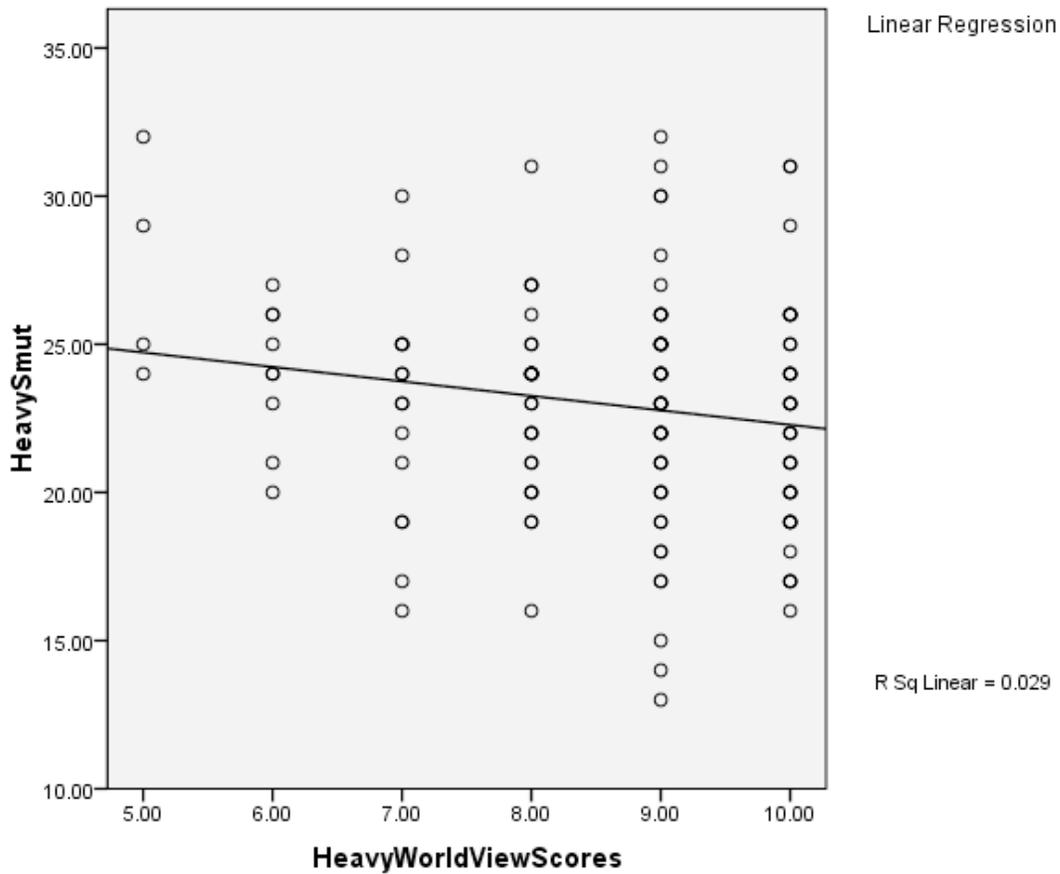


Figure 2. Total Smut Scores and Worldview Scores of Christian Heavy Viewers

Note. This scatterplot shows the negative relationship between the two variables, namely, heavy viewers consumption of smut content (left side of the table, labeled “Heavy Smut”), and heavy viewers worldview (bottom of table, labeled “Heavy Worldview Scores”). The worldview decreases as the smut content goes up. This correlation test was significant, $*p < .05$.

Additional Analysis

In light of these findings, additional statistical analysis was conducted to see if there was a positive correlation between light viewers presumably less amounts of smut consumption, and the resulting effect on their biblical worldview. The rationale prompting this analysis was, if heavy viewers, which watch large amounts of films that contain smut, are less likely to have a biblical worldview (negative correlation), then will light viewers who watch less amounts of

smut, have a stronger worldview? In other words, this test was run to determine if the opposite of the research question was true (lower smut content equals a higher worldview).

The results are as follows: $r(79) = .013$, $p = .911$. The results indicate that there is no relationship between the two variables. That is to say, there is not a significant relationship between total smut scores and worldview scores of Christian light viewers. Please see Figure 3 for a visual presentation of the data.

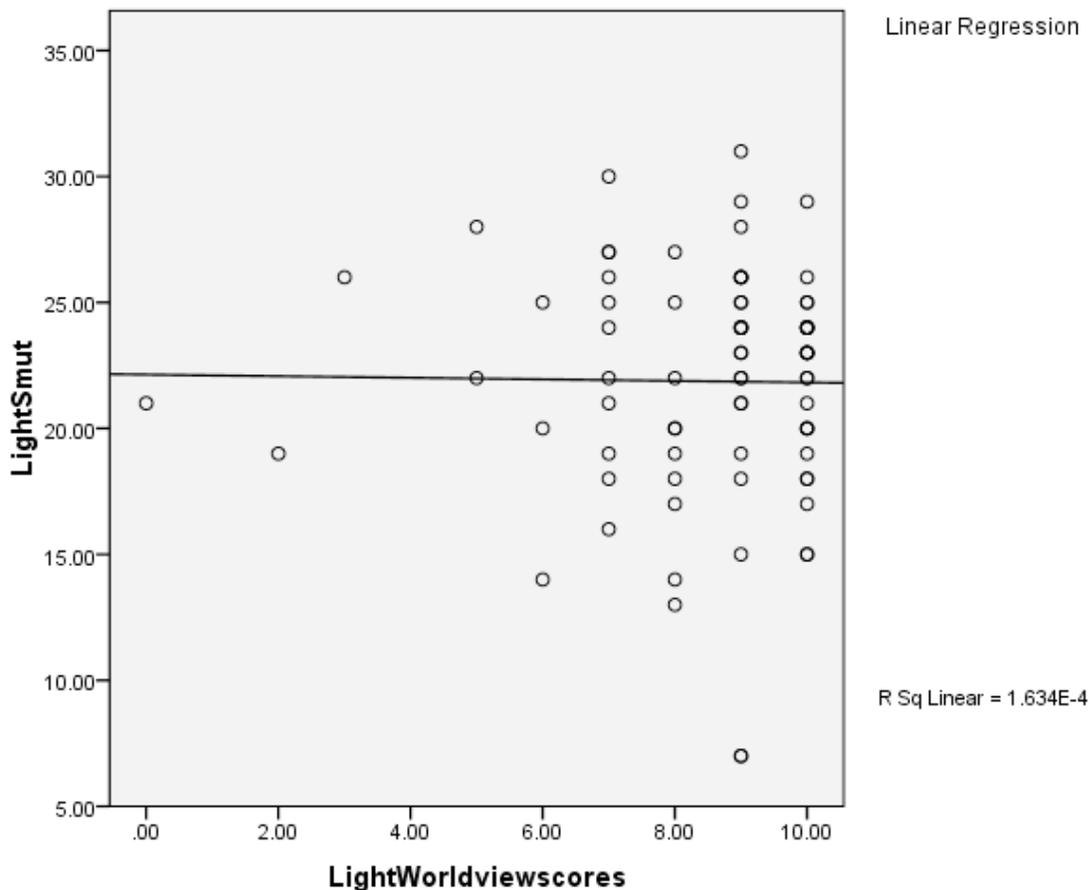


Figure 3. Scatterplot of Total Smut Scores and Worldview Scores of Christian Light Viewers

Note. This scatterplot shows there is no significant relationship between the two variables, namely, light viewers consumption of smut content (left side of the table, labeled “Light Smut”), and light viewers worldview (bottom of table, labeled “Light Worldview Scores”). There is no trend or relationship in this data. This correlation test was not significant, $*p = ns$.

This data indicates that the opposite of the research question, that light viewers are more likely to have a biblical worldview, is not supported through statistical analysis. However, this study's primary research question was answered, and sufficient data was gathered to be able to accurately depict the state of the respondents viewing habits and worldview. These factors were then used as variables for correlation analysis. As the correlation test was significant, the negative relationship discovered between the variables was the primary results of this section. The interpretation and implications of these findings in regard to the primary research question will be explored in the following section, Discussion.

Discussion

Implications of Findings

The suggestion that Christians watch movies at the same rate as their secular counterparts has been one of debate because the implications of such behavior are significant due to the fact that the content in most modern rated PG-13 or rated R movies frequently have elements that are divergent to the Christian faith. The issue is that this content, over time, could conceivably erode a Christian's fundamental beliefs. In order to have a better understanding of this topic, this study examined the viewing habits of a sample from the Christian audience, and compared it to their adherence to a biblical worldview. Overall, the findings suggest that a significant portion of the Christians surveyed do watch films of all ratings and genres quite frequently. Because of this, it is evident that they do consume smut, which includes sexuality, violence, homosexuality, profanity, and obscenity, on varying levels. This study looked at the viewing habits of Christians who consumed high levels of smut on a frequent basis, and examined the effect this had on their biblical worldview. The findings strongly suggest that the more smut is consumed by heavy viewers, the less likely it is that they adhere to a biblical worldview. This was determined by questions that dealt with key aspects of the Christian faith, and the way the participant answered these questions reflected their worldview.

In this chapter, the results of this study will be reviewed in detail. Implications of the results will be drawn, and what these implications mean for the Christian audience will be discussed. The overall objective of this study will be revisited, in an effort to see if the results of this study did indeed answer the questions advanced. In addition, the relationship between this study and that of the guiding theory, Gerbner's cultivation theory, will be analyzed. The limitations of this study will also be addressed, specifically, how these may have influenced the

results of the study. Finally, suggestions for future research will be developed, how in light of this study, additional studies can be conducted to further investigate the relationship between the viewer's consumption of media content, and their adherence to their religious beliefs, as well as their view of reality in general.

There were three main objectives of this study. The first objective was to gain an accurate reflection of the film viewing habits among the Christian audience. The first part of the survey administered to the participants of this study was designed to produce an indication of the frequency, content, ratings, and genres the participants view on a regular basis. The data that was gleaned from this portion of the survey indicated that a majority of the participants could be qualified as heavy viewers (63.9%), while light viewers accounted for 35.7% of the sample. In addition, the ratings that contained the most amount of smut, PG-13 and R, place first and third among the most popular ratings. The genres most preferred were: comedy, action/adventure, suspense/thriller/horror/mystery, and drama, which are the most likely to be rated R or PG-13.

The data gathered from the film portion of the survey confirmed one of the initial assumptions of this study: that movie-going remains a popular pastime among Christian young people. Furthermore, the data reveals not only the popularity of movie watching, it also indicates that the Christian audience, at least in this case, tend to watch the same movies as their secular counterparts. Most of the participants were classified as heavy viewers, which means that they are watching films with regularity. Based upon the ratings and genre preferences, not only are the participants viewing films frequently, but the films they are viewing likely contain a substantial amount of smut. This was an anticipated finding in this study, and thus is the focus for the primary research question. From the perspective of Christian Theism, this is a troubling finding. The fact that young Christians consume copious amounts of smut on a regular basis

cannot bode well for future generations of Christians who are quite likely to follow and even surpass this trend.

This leads to the second objective of the study, determining the Christian participants adherence to a biblical worldview. The second portion of the survey administered for this study related to the participants' belief system, what they believe would happen to them when they die, and the basis in which they make moral decisions and determine right from wrong. The resulting data indicated that 28.8% of the participants had a biblical worldview as defined by the Barna Group. This is a noteworthy percentage, since the study conducted by Barna (2003a) indicated that only 9% of born again Christians in the United States had a biblical worldview. Perhaps the reason for the discrepancy in the percentages of biblical worldviews is that the participants in this study are students of a major Christian university, Liberty University. Though not conclusive, it is plausible that biblical training, such as that taught in the required foundational worldview and philosophy classes at Liberty University, could be a key factor in supplementing, creating, or maintaining a biblical worldview.

Even though 71.2% of the participants had a non-biblical worldview, meaning they did not answer the worldview questions flawlessly, it is important to note that this study sought to measure the degree to which the participants adhered to a biblical worldview, not necessarily if they answered the questions perfectly. The mean for all of the participants was ($M= 8.54$, $SD= 1.43$), indicating that most of the participants, though not receiving a perfect worldview score, still answered a high percentage of the questions correctly (8 out of 10). Thus, 79.1% of the participants were very close to having a biblical worldview. These scores were used as the DV, to determine the relationship between watching high levels of smut, with greater frequency, and the worldview score.

The final objective of this study was to examine the correlation between the consumption of high smut levels and the participant's worldview. This led to the primary research question of this study, which is as follows: *What effect will films that contain high levels of "smut" have on a Christian heavy viewer's worldview?* The premise was that if Christians consume the same "entertainment", which includes elements of smut that are in direct opposition to fundamental Christian beliefs, their outlook on life would become progressively less distinguishable from that of secular society. In order to answer this research question, statistical analysis was conducted using the heavy viewer's surveys, and correlating their film viewing habits, specifically, how much smut they consume, and their answers to the questions pertaining to a biblical worldview. The results indicate that there is a significant negative relationship between the level of smut watched and adhering to a biblical framework. That is to say, the more amount of smut a person watches, the less likely they are to have a biblical worldview. In contrast, the reverse of the research question, which would be: *What affect will consuming low amounts of smut have on a Christian light viewers worldview,* was not supported through statistical analysis. This statistic was run to see if there would be a positive correlation between low smut scores and higher worldview scores. However, there was no relationship between these variables. Upon closer inspection, this finding makes sense, because a person who does not watch heavy amounts of smut will not necessarily have a stronger biblical worldview.

The results of the primary research question confirmed that, as suspected, watching films with content that is contrary to one's beliefs is likely to eventually erode or inhibit the development of said beliefs. In summary, these findings not only relate to the study's main objectives of gaining insight into Christian film viewing habits and their state of worldview, but also reveal how these two factors relate to each other.

The data garnered in this study supports Gerbner's cultivation theory, which was the guiding theoretical framework for this study. The cultivation theory was the culmination of Gerbner's twenty yearlong study of the effects of watching television on a viewer's perception of reality. Gerbner asserted that the more a viewer watched television, the more their perception of reality would become homogenized with the reality that was portrayed on television. Gerbner specifically focused on violence, and how the viewers would project the violence that was depicted on television shows onto reality, by over-reporting the amount of violence that occurs in the real world. This is what Gerbner called the "mean world syndrome". That is, the viewers saw the world as more "mean", worse, or violent, than it really was, as a result of what they had frequently seen portrayed on television.

Gerbner's work on the Cultural Indicators project was influential in turning the tide of scholarly knowledge regarding the debate between the validity of limited and powerful effects models. During the time in which the Cultural Indicators project was being conducted, the limited effects paradigm was the prevailing notion regarding media effects. That is, the media were thought to have a limited effect on its audience. It was Gerbner's cultivation theory, and other influential theoretical frameworks including the spiral of silence and the agenda-setting hypothesis, which initiated a shift back toward a powerful effects model, with some revisions. The current state of media effects research could best be described as negotiated media influence, where the audience is seen as active (no longer as targets of media manipulation), negotiating the meanings that are sent through the media. The media are seen as one of many influences on a person. Still, this is not to say that the media are without effect. As Gerbner demonstrated, the media are powerful in shaping a person's perception of reality, in that they tend to extend the reality portrayed in the media onto their own life.

It is at this point, that the media are powerful in shaping the viewer's perception of reality, where the current study relates to Gerbner's cultivation theory. This study takes the film medium, which remains a popular pastime and viable industry, and analyzes the effect of the content frequently portrayed in films on its audience. Similar to how the television helped shape the viewer's perception of reality, by projecting the reality that is portrayed in television onto the real world, this study examined if the frequent watching of films with heavy smut content could negatively effect a Christian's adherence to a biblical worldview, that is, the reality they claim to believe in. The rationale is, if elements that are contradictory to dominant Christian beliefs (homosexuality, promiscuity, obscenity, violence, etc.) are continually presented in a neutral or favorable light in films, then it stands to reason that these elements will become more normalized in the Christian's mind. The difference between secular values and biblical values becomes marginalized in the viewer's mind, thus homogenizing the Christian's worldview to that of a secular worldview. If this is true, then similar to Gerbner's theory, where the viewer has the tendency to adopt the reality presented by the media, so too the Christian audience will adopt the worldviews that are frequently presented in the media, at the forsaking of the worldview founded upon biblical principles. This finding is a deeply troubling one for those in the Christian community who seek to promote an unfettered Christian view of life and culture. It cannot help but stand as a wake-up call to that community, and especially for the ways in which parents raise their children.

The research question presented in this study attempted to gain insight into this possible relationship. The results indicate that in the case of the participants of this study, there was a relationship between the frequency they watched films that contained elements of smut and their worldview. The more they watched films with this type of content, the less likely they were to

adhere to a biblical worldview. In short, their worldview was more aligned to that of the secular, rather than the biblical. Though other factors could be involved in influencing the participant's adherence to the fundamental Christian beliefs, the media (in the case of this study, the film medium) can be seen as one of the possible factors of influence. Thus, this study would be aligned with the dominant position on media effects, negotiated media influence. That is, media are seen to have some influence over its audience, though it is not all-powerful. In the case of this study, films that are laden with smut can have a negative effect on the participant's application of their belief system, because the messages communicated in films and the dominant Christian beliefs are often in direct conflict. Hence, the participant is receiving mixed signals of what is true and what is the dominant belief.

The findings of this study suggest a disturbing trend, that the values and beliefs Christians hold are being negatively influenced by the media content they consume. Though the findings cannot be conclusively applied to the Christian audience at large, this study shows that for a small sample of the Christian audience, this seemed to be the case. In consideration of this, it is the informed opinion of this researcher that the trends observed may well intensify in the future. It stands to reason then, at the very least, caution must be exercised in what kind of media content a Christian chooses to use. Content that is contrary to foundational Christian beliefs can negatively impact adherence to these beliefs. In addition, this type of content can lead to the foundational Christian beliefs becoming marginalized to that of dominant secular beliefs in the Christian mind. Exercising discernment between the two may be a challenge. It is important for the modern Christian to realize that there is a risk of negative influence on their beliefs and hence exercise discretion in what they choose to watch.

Several leading contemporary conservative film critics and experts, including Baehr (2003), Johnston (2000), Godawa (2002), and Medved (1992) all suggest the necessity of moderation when watching films. Rather than avoiding the medium all together, they suggest that the Christian become aware of the messages being sent through film, and determine whether they are true or not. This way, the Christian audience is actively engaging in discerning between what is true and aligns with their worldview, and what is not. If the film does not align with Christian beliefs and values, then the viewer can actively engage in determining why it does not, and reach a consensus about what he or she believes. This way, Christian viewers are not a passive audience, but rather an active audience, discerning the messages, recognizing truth, and distinguishing right from wrong. This can be a helpful way in which the Christian audience can avoid such negative influences on their own worldview. This is not a call for isolation, but for balance and discernment.

In addition, exercising discretion in watching films can be a means of influencing the culture at large. By choosing to watch films that support the correct ideology, it sends the message to the film industry leaders that these are the type of films viewers prefer. It is a way of “voting with dollars”, because whichever films make the most profit, similar films are likely to be produced. This is a way in which Christians can begin to stem the tide of films that are opposed to the values and beliefs that many Americans hold dear, whether they consider themselves religious or not. This can aid in fighting the culture war that is raging in America. Granted, media content is one of many issues challenging this country’s mores and values. Still, it is an important step in the right direction. Christians cannot claim to abhor smut, and still choose to watch it in the theater. They must choose to start acting according to how they believe, even in the area of entertainment. This can have a ripple effect into larger areas of societal

conflict (other areas of the culture war). In the words of Medved (1992), “ The struggle for the soul of the popular culture promises no quick or easy victories; all progress will be measured in subtle increments” (p. 345).

The results from this study, which involved a small sample of the Christian audience, has implications for Christians as a whole, which is why these results should matter to Christians and hopefully make them reflect on their own media usage. The born-again populace makes up a significant portion of the American population, and if asserted, their influence can be a great catalyst for change in both the entertainment industry, and other areas. The media are here to stay, and the Christian audience has a decision on how to counter the negative influence the content may present, and positively influence the industry by supporting quality films.

Limitations of Study

This study, though it did successfully answer the primary research question, does have limitations that must be taken into consideration. Most of the limitations regard the survey, which was administered to Communication students during a class period. These limitations were later discussed among the class instructors, who administered the survey. The concerns expressed by the class instructors provide insight into how the execution of this test may be improved in the future. It is important to note that some of the limitations were beyond the principle investigator’s control, which tried to anticipate any misunderstandings regarding the nature and administration of the survey. The first limitation was the length of time it took to complete the survey. In the pilot study, it took an average of 6 minutes for the participants to complete the survey in its entirety. In contrast, it took an average of 15 minutes for the student sample to complete the survey during class. Because the survey was administered during a normal class session, the class instructors had a scheduled lesson plan and subsequently rushed

the students to complete the survey in order to move on to the planned teaching. The students may or may not have had enough time to complete the survey without being rushed.

The second limitation of this study was clarity of directions for the participants. Question #12, which instructed the participant to skip the next question if he or she answered “yes”, confused some students, which were not sure which question they should skip or if they should answer the next question. In short, the directions for how to navigate the survey from question to question were not easily understood. The worldview portion of the survey was a direct adaptation of the Barna Group survey, and it was the principle investigator’s intention to try to replicate Barna’s study as much as possible. Confusion regarding the question layout was not foreseen other than by one person during the pilot study, and was thus not anticipated during the actual study.

The third limitation was the clarity of one of the terms used in the survey, question #5 that asked, “How often do the movies you watch contain obscenity?” This confused some of the participants, who were unsure what obscenity meant. The intention of the principle investigator was to insinuate the number of curse words contained in a film, but the students were unsure if it meant obscene material, such as all smut content, or just curse words. The pilot test did not indicate that there would be any misunderstandings regarding the vocabulary used in the survey. Another discrepancy regarding the survey was the question regarding how often a participant watches rated R movies (question # 7). Many of the participants were apprehensive about answering this question, since it is against Liberty University rules to watch rated R films while attending school. The participants were concerned about getting in trouble since watching R rated films can be penalized with a large fine. While the class instructors assured the participants the survey was completely anonymous (the survey also stated twice that it was completely

anonymous), the participants were still anxious about honestly answering the question. Thus, the number of student that self-reported the frequency that they watch R rated films may or may not be an accurate reflection of the students actual consumption of R rated films (although it would seem that, if anything, this statistic would more likely increase than decrease).

The final limitation of this study was one of social desirability. Due to the fact that the participants were Christians who were asked to self report their viewing habits, they may or may not have been inclined to answer the questions with complete honesty, since the questions asked about specific elements of smut and ratings. The participants may not have wanted to admit what they watch, as it can be self incriminating, and the most desirable answer would not be to admit that one frequently watched rated R movies, or movies that contain high elements of any type of smut. Hence, the participant might have been inclined to provide an answer that reflects how they would like to think of their viewing habits. This is one of the limitations of the survey method, since the participants are self-reporting their behavior, which may or may not be an accurate reflection of their actual media consumption.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research using the survey utilized in this study should be conducted in light of the limitations stated previously. This would be necessary in order to avoid the shortcomings of this research project. Other considerations are as follows: first, a larger sample size would give a better indication of the viewing habits and worldview of the population of Christians, allowing for broader generalization about the audience as a whole. Second, any future studies should be both demographically and geographically diverse. This would allow Christians from all age groups, denominational affiliations, ethnicities, and regions to be included in the sample. Third, Gerbner's cultivation theory should be applied to other media, specifically film. The scope of

this study was limited to the Christian audience, however, the general public may also be affected by smut in the films they consume. The results of watching restricted content should be measured in future studies, preferably longitudinal in nature, in order to ascertain the long-term implications of such consumption. Gerbner's theory has already demonstrated that similar content in television has a measurable impact on its audience; film should likewise be studied for possible cultivation effects.

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Appendix A

Quantitative Study Measuring the Effects of “Restricted” Film Content on a Biblical Worldview

This survey is part of Stephanie Mast’s Masters Thesis. The purpose of this survey is to gain insight into people’s movie viewing behavior and preferences. Please answer the questions as candidly as possible. Your anonymity will be maintained.

Instructions: The following questions relate to movie viewing frequency and content. Please indicate what kind of content is prevalent in the movies you watch by circling the appropriate number below.

| | 1 <i>Never</i> | 2 <i>Rarely</i> | 3 <i>Occasionally</i> | 4 <i>Fairly Often</i> | 5 <i>Very Often</i> |
|-----|--|--------------------|---|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. | How often do you view a movie per month (Theater/TV/Internet/DVD/etc.)? | | | | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 2. | How often do the movies you watch contain any elements of sex? | | | | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 3. | How often do the movies you watch contain any elements of violence? | | | | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 4. | How often do the movies you watch contain profanity? | | | | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 5. | How often do the movies you watch contain obscenity? | | | | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 6. | How often do the movies you watch contain any elements of homosexuality? | | | | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 7. | On average, how often are the movies you watch rated R? | | | | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 8. | On average, how often are the movies you watch rated PG-13? | | | | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 9. | On average, how often are the movies you watch rated PG? | | | | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 10. | On average, how often are the movies you watch rated G? | | | | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 11. | What type of films do you usually watch? (Please check all that apply) | | | | |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Action/Adventure | | <input type="checkbox"/> Drama | | |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Anime | | <input type="checkbox"/> Suspense/Thriller/Horror/Mystery | | |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Cartoons | | <input type="checkbox"/> Comedy | | |

12. Have you ever made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in your life today?

1. Yes. GO TO NEXT QUESTION
2. No. SKIP NEXT QUESTION
3. Don't Know. SKIP NEXT QUESTION

13. The following statements are about what will happen to you after you die. Please indicate which ONE of these statements best describes your own belief about what will happen to you after you die. Which comes closest to what you believe?

1. When I die I will go to Heaven because I have tried to obey the Ten Commandments.
2. When I die I will go to Heaven because I am basically a good person.
3. When I die I will go to Heaven because I have confessed my sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior.
4. When I die I will go to Heaven because God loves all people and will not let them perish.
5. When I die I will not go to Heaven.
6. I do not know what will happen after I die.
7. Other (explain):
8. Don't know.

14. Changing topics for a moment, think about the choices you make every day. People make their decisions in different ways. When you are faced with a moral or ethical choice, which ONE of the following statements best describes how you decide what to do? In other words, which one statement best describes how you usually make your moral or ethical decisions?

1. I do whatever will make the most people happy or create the least conflict.
2. I do whatever I think my family or friends would expect me to do.
3. I follow a set of specific principles or standards I believe in that serve as guidelines for my behavior.
4. I do what I believe most other people would do in that situation.
5. I do whatever feels right or comfortable in that situation.
6. I do whatever will produce the most positive outcome for me personally.
7. Other (explain):
8. Don't know.

****IF THE ANSWER TO QUESTION # 12 WAS “Don’t Know,” CONTINUE; OTHERWISE SKIP THE NEXT QUESTION.****

15. What is the basis or source of those principles and standards that you take into consideration? In other words, where do those standards and principles come from? What would you turn to in order to discover the appropriate principles?

1. The law
2. The Bible
3. Values taught by your parents
4. Golden Rule
5. God- speaking directly
6. God- other: _____
7. Personal feelings
8. Lessons learned from past experience
9. Other (explain):
10. Don’t know

16. Some people believe there are moral truths that are absolute, meaning that those moral truths or principles do not change according to the circumstances. Other people believe that moral truth always depends upon the situation, meaning their moral and ethical decisions depend upon the circumstances. How about you? Do you believe there are moral absolutes that are unchanging or do you believe moral truth is relative to the circumstances? Or is this something you have never really thought about? If so, is that because you have thought about this matter and have not arrived at a conclusion, or because you have not really thought about this matter? Which statement below best describes your view?

1. Moral truth is absolute.
2. Moral truth is relative to the circumstances.
3. Thought about it, have no conclusion.
4. Never thought about it.
5. Don’t know.

17. These questions pertain to people's beliefs. There are no right or wrong answers, so please indicate if you, personally, agree or disagree strongly with each statement, agree or disagree somewhat with the statement, or you don't know.

1. The Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings.

| | | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| <i>Agree</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Don't</i> |
| <i>Strongly</i> | <i>Somewhat</i> | <i>Strongly</i> | <i>Somewhat</i> | <i>Know</i> |

2. I, personally, have a responsibility to tell other people my religious beliefs.

| | | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| <i>Agree</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Don't</i> |
| <i>Strongly</i> | <i>Somewhat</i> | <i>Strongly</i> | <i>Somewhat</i> | <i>Know</i> |

3. When He lived on earth, Jesus Christ committed sins, like other people.

| | | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| <i>Agree</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Don't</i> |
| <i>Strongly</i> | <i>Somewhat</i> | <i>Strongly</i> | <i>Somewhat</i> | <i>Know</i> |

4. The devil, or Satan, is not a living being but is a symbol of evil.

| | | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| <i>Agree</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Don't</i> |
| <i>Strongly</i> | <i>Somewhat</i> | <i>Strongly</i> | <i>Somewhat</i> | <i>Know</i> |

5. If people are generally good or do enough good things for others during their lives, they will earn a place in Heaven.

| | | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| <i>Agree</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Don't</i> |
| <i>Strongly</i> | <i>Somewhat</i> | <i>Strongly</i> | <i>Somewhat</i> | <i>Know</i> |

18. There are many different beliefs about God or a higher power. Please indicate which ONE of the following descriptions comes closest to what you, personally, believe about God.

1. Everyone is god.
2. God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect Creator of the universe who rules the world today.
3. God refers to the total realization of personal, human potential.
4. There are many gods, each with different power and authority.
5. God represents a state of higher consciousness that a person may reach.
6. There is no such thing as God.
7. Don't know.

Appendix B

Class Instructor: please read this script to the class after passing out the survey. Thank you.

This study is an examination of movie preferences by Christian college students. Please read each question fully and choose the answer that best describes your own preferences. Thank you for your participation.