



Reihe Rezeptionsforschung I 42

Elena Pelzer

# Living with Cultivating Messages

What Are the Constructs that Compose Media Messages in Cultivation Theory?



Nomos

This series is a forum for up-to-date empirical and theoretical contributions on the subject of media reception. One area these studies investigate is how people deal with the media messages they receive, which ranges from which forms of the media on offer they select and why, the quality of what they receive and how they process it, to media reception in everyday life and its consequences for individuals and society. In short, the series addresses the question of what people do with the media.

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Volume 42

Elena Pelzer

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*For Ben*



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## Abstract

Cultivation theory assumes that the exposure to messages on television affects people's conception of social reality. Initially, it was assumed that these cultivating messages are uniformly distributed and that the viewers are unselective in their viewing habits. Over the last five decades or so, a large volume of empirical studies has investigated this cultivation effect further and produced significant development and refinement of the theoretical premises.

One of the most substantial developments is the introduction of genre-specific messages and metanarratives as alternative concepts of how messages are conveyed on television and how viewers receive them. Genre-specific messages assume that viewers have preferences for certain genres and that each genre consists of a unique message; metanarratives, on the other hand, assume that there are messages that are conveyed across different genres which are sought out actively by the viewers. Much of the criticism around these alternative concepts of cultivating messages centers around the question of how they differ from the original concept of uniform messages. Moreover, some critiques doubt that there is a need for alternative concepts despite the changes in the media landscape towards online television.

In light of the shift in viewing habits towards online television including subscribed video on demand (SVOD) services such as Disney+ or Netflix, this book explores the constructs and the set of propositions that compose media messages in cultivation theory. To this end, the current conceptualizations of cultivating messages, namely uniform message, genre-specific messages, and metanarratives, are disentangled by evaluating their degree of precision and underlying main theory. From the implications of these three message concepts and against the backdrop of the trend towards a greater fragmentation of genres towards subgenres in the era of online television, an original concept for cultivating messages is introduced: subgenre messages. Including this original concept, the final set of four main concepts for cultivating messages is then synthesized in order to assess how similar or different they are to one another. The result is the definition of two postulates and a number of lemmas that relate the cultivating concepts to one another in a generalizable framework that applies to any field and research area that studies cultivating messages. By

## *Abstract*

using the degree of fragmentation of messages and the level of selective viewing as the framework, a two-dimensional space is developed to situate the four cultivating concepts.

In a unique simulation model, the validity and implications of the postulates, lemmas, and two-dimensional space are tested. The simulation investigates how a bias between true and estimated message concepts affects the results from cultivation analysis. The study consists of a data generating framework in which the true state of the simulated world is defined, such as the way viewers behave and how messages are distributed. The four generating frameworks, each guided by an according message concept, are then analyzed in a second step by a data analyzing framework. This ensures that data derived from each message concept is analyzed through the lens of each message concept. The results show that the cultivation effects differ substantially, although still to varying degrees, depending on the message concept that is applied. The analysis of uniform messages is only convincing in the single case when uniform messages shape the reality. In most cases in which the analysis performed differs from reality, subgenre messages outperforms the alternative message concepts. The simulation also demonstrates the mechanisms of the original concept of subgenre messages which enables future scholars to implement it in their future research.

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## List of Abbreviations

CS	character violence score
DAF	data analytical framework
DGF	data generating framework
DVD	digital versatile disc
DVR	digital video recorder
E-ELM	extended elaboration likelihood model
EPG	electronic program guide
GNP	Gross National Product
HBO	Home Box Office
HV	heavy viewer
IMDb	The Internet Movie Database
LV	light viewer
P2P	peer-to-peer
PPV	pay-per-view
PS	program score
PSA	public service announcement
PVR	personal video recorder
ROC	receiver operating characteristic
SLR	systematic literature review
SVOD	subscribed video on demand
UGC	user-generated content
VCR	videocassette recorder
VHS	video home system
VI	violence index
VOD	video on demand

