CULTURAL IDENTITY, MEANS OF CHOICE OF MASS MEDIA COMMUNICATION AND THE USE OF TECHNOLOGIES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract:
This research analyzes the relationship between cultural identity and the selection of media by a group of university students. It analyzes whether the scholastic processes of the university contribute in this selection and what, as university teachers, we want our students to be able to do in their professional lives. The purpose was to identify the significance that they assign to media. The analysis took two methodological dimensions: quantitative and qualitative. In both, the students referred to what they consume and what supports their choice. The research identified that entertainment plays a central and preponderant role in students' life and the predominance of audiovisual media. The university seems to contribute very little to student selection as part of their professional preparation. This paper concludes with a curricular proposal.

Key Words: Cultural identity, choice mass media, university students, cultural consumption, use of technologies, curricular proposal.

Introduction

Historically, the media effects inside the schools have not always been at the forefront of academic and research discussions and Its status has not been considered important in curriculum planning.

This research is an exploratory study about the consumption and extra-curricular cultural practices of a group of students in their last semester at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN)[243]. It analyzes the relationship between cultural identity and the choice of mass media among university students. It questions the school process and the education that the university provides in this selection and what we expect all students to do as professionals. The central research question was: How is the selection of cultural consumption made in terms of the function or meaning that the students attribute to each product? The purpose was to identify the sense that they assign to mass media selection and to contribute to the studies about how the media affects people's perceptions of their everyday lives. The mass media is, perhaps, one of the main factors that contributes to the notion of identity.

The students were asked about their consumption of printed media: newspapers, magazines and books; electronic devices: radio, television and cinema; and the use of information and computer technology. The intention was to contribute to the knowledge of the influence that Mass Media Communication (MMC) has on students and how they choose and respond to media. As university teachers, we are thinking about what kind of young generations we want to see and what competences they should develop. By and large, ,results of this study can expectedly yield valuable inputs in crafting policy measures and mechanisms that spell out maximum effective use of MMC and technologies in certain tasks and situations at school.

Method

The locus of the study was the UPN. Founded in 1978, it is one of the newest public universities in Mexico.

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1 It is a university of education sciences in Mexico.

This research is an exploratory study. The analysis took two methodological dimensions: quantitative and qualitative. For the first dimension, I conducted a standardized survey with 150 students in their last semester to seek for socioeconomic characteristics, age, and gender, as well as to explore the habits and the frequency of the use of each medium. The questionnaire had 32 questions. The survey was pilot tested; ambiguous statements were reworded and irrelevant items were discarded.

The acquired information was processed statistically. It related the socioeconomic variables with the selection of media in order to identify if there were any relations.

For the qualitative dimension, 8 semi-structured, collective face-to-face interviews were held. All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis. In these interviews, the students referred to what they consume and what needs support their choices. The purpose of this study with students in their last semester was to identify if their studies at the university had influenced on their cultural consumption.

It was decided that they would be collective interviews so that the students could express themselves spontaneously and freely. This decision was based on the idea that the interviewed people could help each other to remember their use of media. It was accomplished in the interviews.

The collective interview also played an important role to establish confidence and an empathetic atmosphere among the students, which contributed to the descriptions of their media consumption and habits.

Theoretical background
Theoretical framework
One of the areas under discussion in research on communication in Latin America during the last two last decades is the role of cultural consumption and the cultural practices of different sectors of the population. Several studies in this region were made in the eighties. Only in recent years, these kinds of studies about cultural practices and consumptions in Mexico have begun to receive greater interest.

Some Mexican institutions that have promoted studies in this field are the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM) (Garcia Canclini and Piccini, 2002), the Universidad Latinoamericana (ULA) (Orozco and Charles, 2006), and the Centro Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CNCA, 2007).

In Mexico, the studies on cultural consumption are few. One study explores the approach of a group of secondary students to different mass media (Montoya and Rebeil, 2003). According to this research, the messages of media received by Mexicans occupy a considerable time of their daily life. Their contents have not just become "entertaining", "persuading" and "informing" to the receivers; it goes further than apparent neutrality. The contents of media are shaping people, their knowledge and their forms of understanding and experiencing their surroundings.

Another interesting study in this field is by Maya and Silva (1987). In this one, the real use of media by elementary students is analyzed. One of its more important conclusions emphasizes, "the great status that the television has gotten over other mass media." (1987:73). It also mentions that the printed media "occupies an inferior place in the daily life of children and young people." (1987:97) Also, Hernandez (1994) reveals that the market of the cultural goods of media is the agency with which children and young people interact more by their own will.

Educational institutions often overlook effects of the media on their students' education. Diverse studies indicate that students acquire much knowledge outside of school. But although there is generally accepted practice, often it is not known what the students consume outside the classroom, the influence that this exerts on them, and therefore how this affects their development. The tendency that we observed is that the MMC are the agency with which young people interact most by their own free will. The previous knowledge of the students is essential to designing the curriculum, and we mostly use suitable educational strategies in accordance with their age, cognitive capacity and cultural baggage.

In the interest of contributing to knowledge in this field, this is an exploratory research about the consumption and extracurricular cultural practices of a group of university students.

Conceptual framework

This study was based on the process of students' reception, taking into consideration what Thompson (2008:62-65) states regarding the "worldly character of the reception activity". He conceives reception as an active and much more creative process, where the individuals give meaning to what they receive from the media in accordance with their social baggage and circumstances.

Another perspective is "the uses and the allowances" (Rubin, 2003:556). This theory tried to explain how the students decide on cultural consumption in relation with what they consider to be significant to their convictions and interests. This is articulated by the ideas of Jacks and Orozco (2006). For them, the identity of the individuals with the MMC plays an important role between the persons and their surrounding reality, because it determines the form in which the individuals take control of mass media. Student contact with the media is considered to become a sort of education which competes with the education provided by the university. In fact, the media is one of the main channels through which present generations learn. The relationship between curricular and the extra-curricular activities is determined for each student, based on the knowledge they have accumulated during their lives. Students bring to the university different knowledge that comes from wide and diverse informal contexts. At their age, one of the most important cultural contexts is constituted by MMC.

Although other cultural contexts exist in which the students also learn, we consider that the relationship between the school cultural context and the extra educational context is solved in each student on the basis of all the knowledge in their personal background. This idea is significant to think about the role of the schools. In words of Vila (1997:178-179) "… boys and girls learn diverse things in their informal contexts or, in other words, `carry' to school different belongings, which means that in school they should learn also different things, if we want that all of them develop similar capacities and, especially, they should learn from several ways because their informal experience also is different".

We can deduce that UPN students, as young adults, bring to the university different cultural capital that comes from their diverse informal contexts. At their age, one of the most important cultural contexts is constituted by the media.

The previous thought becomes more outstanding, when Gimeno (2008:83) analyses Spanish education. He indicates that one characteristic of the school learning is that it is dissociated from the experiential learning of the students. He also indicates that "the breach widens and worsens to the degree that cultural stimulation outside school is more and more extensive, attractive and penetrating" (Gimeno 2008:85). He adds that the media, especially television and video, are a resource of knowledge, a culture more effective and attractive than many school programs, books and teachers.

In the case of Mexico, in a study about adolescents, Hernandez (1994) upholds that the market of cultural goods of media is the agency with which the children and young people interact more by their own will.

The students are a basic component in many areas of the institution. In particular, the students' knowledge is essential for planning the curriculum and it is appropriate to select wide-ranging strategies of education according to their age, their cognitive capacity and their cultural baggage. At this time of their life, their cultural configuration is related to their extra scholastic cultural consumptions throughout the MMC.

The previous ideas are also articulated by Jacks and Orozco (2006). For them, the identity that the people have with the media plays a fundamental role between the individual and his/her surrounding reality, because it organizes the form in which students take control of mass media. What appears in the interviews are expressions of this individual cultural identity of the students. The information contained in the interviews with the developed concepts is the base of this analysis.

For the purposes of this paper, *cultural identity* is understood as the identity an individual derives by membership in one or several social groups, in this case the major corporations in mass media. This concept centers on the habits of exposure, on the practices and interactions users have with media. Here, the receptor's social context is considered central. (Jacks, 2006:173).

Insofar as *reception*, this study will make use of the concept formulated by Orozco (1996:175), which considers the receptor as an active, socioculturally-determined subjet. According to Orozco, the receptor is capable of creating and negotiating the content of the messages emitted by

mass media, — unlike before, when the receptor was understood to be a passive consumer of mass cultural products.

Results
Main findings of the quantitative analysis

The results of this study give us a general view about the students' choice of MMC. With this, we hope to realize one of our purposes and to contribute to further research about this subject.

There is almost no variable relationship between media consumption and socioeconomic group. The relationship is only close in two cases: between the parents' wage and their cinema habits, and between the schooling of their parents and their reading habits.

Reading newspapers, books and magazines do not constitute a high-priority cultural consumption. According to the the questionnaires, 73% of the students do not read the newspaper. 20% do it 2 or 3 times per week and only 7% read it 5 to 7 times per week. The most read section is the gossip columns. Sections such as editorials, national and international news articles, education and culture are read by around 10% of the students. Magazines are read by 34% of students and mainly for: fashion, beauty, gossip, sports, entertainment and the TV guide. Only 2% of the students read educational magazines. This illustrates that only a tiny percentage of college students is interested in looking for information that supports their professional development.

As for books, 64% of the students declared not to have read a single book during the current semester. Just 28% were reading literary books. No more than 8% read books with information that is related to their professional development. As a result, It is possible to think that the school processes do not seem to generate an active interest in reading books. I agree with Hernandez (1994:96), when he indicates that the culture of the written word has developed an inferior status in the scale of preferences.

Regarding radio, 77% of the students listen to it very frequently, mostly to music. Educational, cultural and political programs were only mentioned by 9%.

Regarding TV, the numbers indicate that, independently of the parents' schooling and the level of income, television has an outstanding and systematic appearance in the daily life of the students. 97% watch TV for around 4 hours a day from Monday through Friday and on the weekend exposure is more intense. Programs for amusement predominate and few students watch cultural or educational channels. We could suppose that university students have a guiding principle of viewing different to the general population, yet the cultural consumption of these students is not very different from other people. What is clear is that television continues being a predominant media.

In regards to the cinema, 53% of the students almost never go. Here there is a relation between socioeconomic variables and the tendency to go to the cinema. Those that attend the cinema normally have a high income. The genres that the students watch are: action, adventures, comedy and terror. The films that can be classified as art films are watched by just 8% of the students.

In relation to the use of information technologies such as Internet, 51% do not use it because they don't have a computer at home and those that do have one, use it simply to do homework and for entertainment.

We can conclude that the media is considered a practical activity that the students carry out as an integral part of their daily lives. The mass media has invaded daily lives to such an extent that it has become indispensable to our existence and occupies a predominant space. Of all the MMC, television has the greatest presence in students' life. Therefore we may conclude that university teaching competes with the MMC.

The analysis suggests that the UPN has a weak influence on modifying the cultural consumption of its students. Most of the cultural consumption of these students is very similar to those who do not attend university. Another important conclusion is that audio-visual media is predominant and seems to play a greater role than the printed media. The overwhelming weight of television stands out. We can further question that, if most of the curriculum subjects imply reading and the analysis of a wide bibliography, then why is there no continuity beyond the university? This study seems to suggest that teachers should include more audio-visual materials in the academic life of the university to make it more similar to life outside the university. Another fundamental conclusion of this study is the overwhelming predominance of entertainment. If the university

requires students to use their analytical capacities, why it does not transfer to student's life outside school. There is a strong tendency among students to allow themselves to be captivated by the trivial matters of the world of celebrity gossip and entertainment. This data was also explored in a qualitative dimension through group interviews where it was possible to see why the students select certain media.

Main findings of the qualitative analysis

What appear in the interviews are expressions of this individual cultural student identity. Eight group interviews were carried out with 37 students, who were asked what they consume and why. Based on their responses, four analytical categories were constructed. The order goes from the greater to the lesser frequency: Entertainment and Recreation; Life Guidance; Being Informed; and Critical to the Media and its Products.

- Entertainment and Recreation

Entertainment was the most frequent reason given by students for why they use the media. Radio and television cover this function. But why is entertainment the primary concern? According to Rubin (2006:558), "the public takes the initiative to select and to use the communication vehicles in order to satisfy its necessities or desires".

Also Bryant and Zillman (1996:588) indicate that televising entertainment can be used as a regulator of excitement. According to these authors, entertainment can be calming, and this effect can benefit those who feel tense, dissatisfied, upset, angry, violent or otherwise disturbed. Satisfying this necessity is one of the reasons people choose entertainment of a calming nature. The selection of these entertainments seems evident; moderation of excitement is the fundamental component. The music listened to by students on the radio also would support this. Many of the students seek out television programs that help them to relax, such as soap operas. Programs that frequently attract students' attention are old cartoons "because they are amusing and contain no violence, like the '*Pink Panther*'", as several students report. As far as films are concerned, students prefer humorous films because they contain good clean humor. Two passages to illustrate:

Angélica: "…when I watch TV, I look for soap operas, because they make me feel relaxed and comfortable. I do not have to think too much"

Betty: I love to listen to the radio program *"The Hairy Hand"*. Here they tell stories about exorcisms. Other times this program narrates about ghost, phantoms and terrifying tales ..."

Bryant and Zillman (1996) postulate that the greatest universal enjoyment among cultural consumption constitutes what they call *affective disposition,* especially when people are confronted with problems, conflicts and adverse situations. This function of entertainment frequently appears in the interviews. The main reference is television consumption. Students frequently referenced the soap operas.

However, literature consumption does not occupy a major space. Different factors contribute to this situation. Some students expressed their relation to reading with reference to the school practices of the university. They mentioned that they have to read many textbooks for their academic studies, and now they already feel tired and no longer have the desire to read. As one student remarked:

Luz Maria: "…What happens is that at the university, over the four years we have been reading a lot of textbooks, too much theory… we read and read… tons and tons of photocopies, now I don't feel like reading outside of school, it is too tedious"

A consideration by Sacristán (2008:85) is that, the disadvantage that school has in relation to television and video is that these forms of cultural stimulation are more attractive, sharper and lead us to a greater understanding than school does. Therefore, this research also looked into the tedium of reading indicated by some students. What appears is a deeper transformation of the cultural practices of young people. They tend to substitute reading with audio-visual forms. The exception was when the students look for great pleasure in reading literature. In these cases, the students said that this pleasure was formed prior to going to university.

As far as printed media, the diversity of literature consumptions ranges from horror stories to novels by Garcia Marquez, from poems to comics. In the interviews on this area, the variety of consumption was great.

To close this section, I want stress that entertainment has more weight over the others categories, and there is a wide heterogeneity in entertainment consumption.

- Life Guidance

Here the students made reference to the existence of messages that imply reflection, which are very predominant in their daily lives. Subjects like sexuality, couples, drugs and adolescence came up frequently among the students interviewed. The preference goes from soap operas to literature, from cinema to radio and some television programs of which the purpose is to provide life guidance.

The program that appeared with more frequency was *"Dialogues in Confidence",* which focuses on daily life. This program was mentioned by 25 of the 37 interviewed people and always with a positive evaluation.

Marcela: "…I love *"Dialogues in Confidence"*. It is very good. There I can find what's going on with me.

Although the TV show's schedule is incompatible with their school schedule, some students try to catch the reruns even though they are at dawn or on the weekend.

One of the frequently reoccurring subjects in the interviews was sexuality. The mass media related to this subject was varied. In some cases they made reference to the reaffirmation of values or self-esteem. Two excerpts from the data are pertinent here

Meche: "Now I listen to one 1260 AM program because they come out with themes about sexuality, abuse, homosexuality, for adolescents like me. I like to listen to *"Voices of Privacy"*. I like how she handles the topic of sex"

Patty: "Sometimes I read the magazine named *"To Undress",* because it talks about things that sometimes happen to me…"

Some other opinions were related to more worldly questions like personal care or home adjustment. In order to conclude this section I want to emphasize that *Life Guidance* was the second most frequently mentioned after entertainment. When a program touches the students more directly and personally, that program is viewed regularly.

Other themes that were mention included relationship with partners, adopted kids, old people, drugs, sex abuse, etc.

- Being Informed

I begin with a quote from Michel (2002:43): "At the present time, it almost seems to me a sacrilege not to read the newspaper in the mornings. I even have begun to think that I live by the information; that the news, gadgets or rumors also are food for me; something vital for my existence" If this author supposes that with this speech he rescues the practices of cultural consumption of most of people, the material from the students' interviews contradicts this idea.

The idea of being informed, for the students, was not relevant. They do not take an active interest in what is happening in the world. The newspaper, which is the most important media, is read almost daily by only 3 of the 37 interviewed students. The others students, if they read the newspaper, only glance at the celebrity gossip section.

One student commented: Alma: "Well… when I read, I read the funny things. I like the cartoons about what's going on at the present… but I really do not have time to read it"

For most of the students, if they want to know about what is happening in the news, they watch television because it provides easier access than the newspaper. However, being informed is not the priority for the majority of the students. Just one minority of them reads the newspaper habitually, and another small minority gets information through the television. The students interviewed point out some criteria of discrimination related to the type of news they prefer.

- Critical to the Media and its Products

This section talks about the criticisms students make about certain media. These criticisms are strong arguments for not consuming certain media and products. Most of these have a central

argument for the rejection of violence in the media, specifically on television. This was a forceful argument in the preference for old cartoons over current ones. The refutation of violence was an argument reiterated by the students interviewed. It also appeared in reference to the cinema. Another reason for rejecting certain media is the manipulation or distortion of information.

Rejection of the presentation of violence in the media was an argument reiterated made by the students interviewed. The criticisms were made to the full range of media and were often in reference to the cinema, as evidenced in the following interview excerpt:

Claudia: "I do not like films with violent topics like karate, martial arts, or cops and robbers".

Another one of the criticisms for rejecting certain media concerned that which the students consider to be manipulation or gross distortion of facts and information.

Alicia: "I don't like the television. They always present very trivial and unimportant things, very banal for my taste. The news items are very distorted; the programs that criticize the system also are very deceitful and fake for my taste ".

Pedro. "... the news is really twisted, the information is distorted, but I like to make certain comparisons, so sometimes I listen to radio, to see if there is some relationship between the news on television with the news on radio…"

In some cases, the instances of intent to manipulate were accompanied with specific references.

Fernando: "I can see how the media manipulate and control us by regulating everything, like commercials, programs, as well as comic and stories; but everything is focused on promoting consumption. They don't see any human beings at all, just the mass consumption".

Many examples exist of how the reception is a process in which the consumers are not simple recipients of media. There is a process of active identification with media products. The criticisms are an exception which is made only by a minority of the interviewees. Although criticisms of the media and their products are not generalized among those interviewed, in those cases where they do they appear to imply forceful arguments to refuse certain media consumption.

Conclusion

We can draw the conclusion that audiovisual media predominates in frequency and in proportion to its consumers: Television is the dominant mass media over reading and there is also a predominance of entertainment.

In view of this situation, the university seems to do very little concerning students' choices.

We may conclude that the education offered by the UPN does not modify its students' cultural consumption.

Such a result is unacceptable. We want all our students to be able to make better choices of content among mass media, and higher education should offer learning environments that promote cultural awareness.

A curricular proposal would be a transformation of the training programs, linking subjects and communication, emphasizing the conceptual analysis of the reception mediations, and involving the students in a critical reception of different media. Another implication would be to consider a horizontal unifying line to the entire curriculum.

This should be taken into consideration in fostering collective work among teachers of all subject areas and would mean teacher preparation and professional development. Teacher preparation will need to respond to the educational challenges and changes in society in the 21ˢᵗ century in order to prepare future students of the global community.

I want to add that, in our present world, the potential of multimedia technology is such that we can use a wide range of methods. Using modern technology will hopefully motivate students because they are already accustomed to it.

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