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Media and Intercultural Communication Shifts: A Semiotic Analysis of the Cultural Identity in Two International Films

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Abstract

This research investigated the role of media in fostering intercultural communication within the global context. Specifically, the study examined how films continue to serve as important media tools to facilitate the maintenance of cultural identity even within multicultural settings where exposure to other cultures and cultural empiricism were common. To explore the study's purpose, grounded theory was used as a qualitative method. With this method, it was possible to analyze the impact of intercultural communication and cross-cultural interaction on people from a behavioural perspective. Whereas grounded theory was the overall research strategy, the specific data collection method employed was semiotic analysis. Two films, "My Big Fat Greek Wedding (2002)" and "Shanghai Kiss (2007)" were selected and analyzed. The findings revealed that cultural exposure and cultural empiricism could sometimes lead culturally related dilemma and contamination, but they do not necessarily guarantee that people experiencing them will always give up their cultural identities. Two major conclusions were: 1) that films can aid intercultural communication in a global context and 2) cultural exposure and cross-cultural interactions can take place without a person losing his or her cultural identity.

Introduction

As part of globalization, people now find themselves in multicultural societies or locations with cultures totally different from theirs. In such circumstances, not only does intercultural communication take place but also cultural exposure and cultural knowledge building known as cultural empiricism is evident (Baird, 2009). Different studies using theoretical arguments have expressed their ideas about the impact of cultural exposure and cultural empiricism. The technological development in communication and globalization have also increased intercultural communion across distances. The world is gradually becoming a global village, resulting in making forms of communication entangle with multiculturalism.

Communication and culture are seen as two concepts with organic systems that depend on each other (Seyfi & Güven, 2016). As the primary moderator of global communication, the new media platform forms the basis of the international and intercultural communication. Undoubtedly, media has influenced a significant percentage of the world's population in one way or another. Together with the advanced technology, the mass media has made a profound impact on people's manner of communication, hence termed as intercultural interaction (Seyfi & Güven, 2016). The daily or occasional utilization of the media sways individuals' beliefs, ideologies, assumptions, and experiences. Hauser, Luginbuhl, and Luginbühl (2012), however, held the view that traditional media including television and films, continue to have the same conventional influence they had had on intercultural interactions. As the focus on most modern studies moved to

the new media, this study make a paradigm shift to traditional media, particularly to the films.

New media is digital in nature. It has reduced the distance between locations and made people move beyond local, national, and global boundaries. The reachability and accessibility of new media is no longer confined only to the privileged classes or to the state or the government, but it is now equally shared by all individuals. New media has brought innovations and have changed the way people think, act, and live. New media is also the main force to accelerate the trend of globalization in human society. The globalization trend has led to the transformation of almost all aspects of human society. For instance, socially and culturally, globalization has changed the perception of what a community is, redefined the meaning of cultural identity and civic society, and demanded a new way of intercultural interaction.

Film semiotics can be categorized as new media particularly because it is a hybridization of media and language. Semiotics refers to the study of sign processes any such activity that involved signs or signals. Semiotics is also concerned with signs used in a context by taking different forms of words, images, paintings, sounds, and art objects. When these signs and signals relate to films because like any art form, films also have some hidden signs or symbols which are left to the audience to make meanings. Films are one of the means of sharing ideas since film makers use films to depict life's real events and stories. These messages are usually communicated through semiotic systems including signs, symbols, speech, writing, gesture, and print.

This study aimed to show that films are not just meant to entertain, but also serve as a meaning making and message sending medium – some of which can be in form of signs. For instance, the two films sampled for this study, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) and *Shanghai Kiss* (2007) are films with too many messages in the forms of signs which though pass unnoticed, but a semiotic study can identify them. These two movies received their acclaim because of their deep cultural significance as they carried the hidden meaning of cultural empiricism trying to resolve the culturally related dilemma. The films used semiotics to show how people experienced their cultural identities and challenges therein. In this regard, these were deemed to be suitable films for semiotic analysis. It was also felt that most of their “text” focused on multimodal text types such as signs and gestures but gave very little attention to long passages of text. It is against this backdrop that this study embarked upon to make a semiotic analysis of the two films.

This research also aimed to explore the aspect of media in intercultural communication by considering the question of whether the media fostered cross-cultural interaction among different communities within the global context. Specifically, the research examined the impact of films as media tools on global interaction. This is done by investigating the degree to which films support or reject theories in literature about the impact of intercultural communication and cross-cultural interactions on

people. In doing this, two major theoretical frameworks that were considered were cultural exposure and cultural empiricism.

Literature Review

The Concept of Media and Communication

The topic of mass media and the global communication has remained a longstanding area of study. The researchers have indicated intense interests in the elements of the media's mainstream such as news, advertisements, and entertainment through radio, television, and social media platforms. Therefore, analyzing the interdependence between the concepts of media and communication has raised essential concerns in the field of academic research and studies including journalism and cross-cultural communication (Hauser et al., 2012). The development of new media technologies since 1990's has shaped the dynamics of the communication systems. Previous studies published on the relationship between communication and media technologies indicate extreme risks that mass media has implanted on the communication systems of the modern humanity (Danesi, 2017). Because of the gravity of the concern, several universities have established departments and faculties for media and communication studies. According to Danesi (2017), the study of media and communication provides effective means of understanding the association between the media and every aspect of human communication either verbally or non-verbally.

Media literacy is the condition of having the understanding of distinguishing between a bias media communication and non-bias media communication (Heisler, 2013). Since media has become an essential communication tool across different cultures, it is important to understand the environment of media coverage. The media usage gives people a broader perspective of understanding the context of the communication, patterns, and the functions of such communications (Heisler, 2013). Moreover, media usually favors the power of the ruling class or the upper-class individuals of the society. Therefore, sociological studies suggest that media literacy is an essential tool for identifying the bias in the media communications. Additionally, the former analysts observed that media contributes to the development and the growth of the society. Therefore, there is need to expose the people to the new technology. However, critical thinking, caution, and constant exposure to the several new forms of media may enable the individuals to improve their cultures and lives (Heisler, 2013).

Mass Media and Culture

While new technological forms of media have promoted the invention of a global culture, the cultural enthusiasts claim that media has developed a new breed of culture. Various cultural studies have opined that the mass media has a negative moral dimension thus derailing the cultural morality and virtues (Tester, 2013). The elaborate literature on the cultural deviation and the new media technology shows that the invention of the new media techniques has corroded the cultural practices and beliefs of

several populations. Through the exposure to the elements of media such as social media forums, televisions, and radios, most cultures have lost the essential entities. According to [Tester \(2013\)](#), media exposes individuals to the world through technology. The exposure increases the vulnerability of cultural contamination through significant entities such as language, dress code, family styles, and eating habits.

While media has intruded the cultural systems of individuals, Makayla [Heisler \(2013\)](#) observes the association between the American culture and mass media and applaud the new media technologies for the immense changes in the people's communication culture ([Heisler, 2013](#)). Today, individuals can obtain a lot of information from more than one source and within a short period. Further, the media has transformed the political dimension of the American culture by influencing the perception of the individuals. Although there are immense benefits of media on political, economic, and social aspects of the culture, the research suggested that humanity should establish effective means of controlling the media to avoid devastating impacts on the culture ([Heisler, 2013](#)).

Intercultural communication is a multidimensional procedure. According to the Information Systems Theory, there are ten sets of interaction systems in all human activities ([Seyfi & Güven, 2016](#)). The systems include communication, subsistence, association, bisexuality, temporality, subsistence, acquisition and learning, exploitation, defense, and play. The intercultural communication allows individuals to adapt to other people's cultures through physical or virtual contacts. Additionally, the practice enables people to have an ideal exchange through empathy and open-mindedness that bring the required appreciation of one another's cultural backgrounds ([Seyfi & Güven, 2016](#)). Several components of culture influence intercultural communication and the individual's adaptation to certain practices. Therefore, these components include social roles and events, virtues and norms, general thoughts and stereotypes, and uncertainty and anxiety.

Theoretical Frameworks in Cross-cultural Communication

To conceptualize the influence of the media on the individual's values, cultures, and beliefs, various theoretical frameworks are in place. For instance, Marxists argue that values and customs dictate the person's behaviors and traits. Empiricists further build on this reasoning with the theory of empiricism. Empiricism has over the years sought to establish the source of knowledge that can be considered as authentic and accurate ([Psillos & Curd, 2010](#)). Today, modern empiricists argue that ideas formed with basis in empirical evidence is the best source of knowledge. Such evidence-based ideas are preferred to notions built on innate ideas and traditions ([Baird, 2009](#)).

Early empiricism however posited that perception and inference are the two most reliable sources of knowledge. In the field of cross-cultural communication, the early empiricism and modern ones are both accepted. With this, cultural empiricism emerges as cultural knowledge that people develop about other cultures based on the perception, inferences and empirical evidence about those cultures. [Markie \(2004\)](#) lamented that when cultural empiricism is formed, it mostly gives wrong interpretation

about other people's culture, making it impossible for cross-cultural acceptance and communication to take place. In other cases, cultural dilemma is developed about the other cultures (Chisholm, 1948). Another theoretical framework that has often guided the literature about cross-cultural communication and interaction is cultural exposure. As the name suggests, cultural exposure refers to the practice where a person becomes exposed to another culture due to cross-cultural settlements that take place (Weber, 2011). The media has also been known to play a role in cultural exposure because it is now seen as a medium by which people living in distant locations get exposed to the cultures of other people, Media has played a role in the intercultural exchange. According to Livingstone and Brake (2010), media provides the platform for communication and sharing of knowledge. The technological development of the media facilitates online interaction between people in remote areas. Holloway and Valentine observed that the youth use media to download music exchange lives stories, communicate via mail and watch movies. Movies and music accessed in media influenced the culture of the new generation. Social media also provide the interactive platform for discussion and cultural exchange. The radio and television programs on cultural practices also influence the listeners by modifying their perceptions and decisions on several issues (PBRStrtGng, 2011).

Teenagers and adults have faced the cultural dilemma because of the exposure to different cultures through the mainstream media. The mass media has also fueled cultural exchange in the mode of dressing. Social media such as Instagram has been used to share the trending fashion from different parts of the globe. An innovative dressing design in the USA can easily be shared in Africa or Europe through media. Media facilitate intercultural communication through sharing of life skills and experienced. Additionally, it provides platforms for exchange of social and religious values, which form an integral part of people culture. Social Media provides online marketing platform, which encourages intercultural exchange. International leaders and business use media to sell their ideas. Adoption of these ideologies has affected cultural practices. Media has perpetuated cross-cultural social change (Stein et al., 2014). The role of the media in intercultural communication is also evident in the current radical political campaign systems that spread across the American, Asian, and African continents.

Under the analysis section of this paper, film reviews have been performed to test the practicality of the effect of cultural exposure from a real-world scenario, using movies as a media tool.

Semiotic approaches to films

Several studies have examined films with different semiotic approaches. For instance, Danish and Ijaz (2016) examined the movie *Three idiots* and found out motivation as a process of learning in the film. Malik (2016) obtained the data for his study through various signs and messages about

the film and used a qualitative descriptive method of data analysis using the Saussure's Dyadic Theory as a theoretical framework. This helped the study to concentrate on signifiers (physical signs) and signified (mental signs) in the film. The findings of the study indicated that major characters are motivated towards learning through signs, messages, and images. A similar semiotic study is done by [Armelia \(2019\)](#) on the film *The Lord of the Rings*. In this research, too, the signs and images are collected as data and analyzed through codes (technical code, social code and representational code), each code representing a sign in the film. [Armelia \(2019\)](#) conclude that signs employed in the film had the potential to construct a media text with these three codes social code represented gestures, language, food, dress, etc. Technical code included music, sounds, lighting effect and mood of the audience. The representation code included narrative structure and dialogue to make the audience feel what the director wanted.

Besides, there are several other studies that have conducted semiotic analysis of films. A recent study ([Wantoro, 2018](#)) analyzed signs related to space and time in the 2002 film *Time Machine* using Saussure's theory. The film used technology codes to describe the time and space situations. [Armelia \(2019\)](#) analyzed symbols of heroism in *Spider-Man 2* and presented the three signs of icon, index, and symbol in relation to the main character's physical appearance and his social images. Likewise, [Pauzan \(2018\)](#) analyses the film *John Wick* from the semiotic perspective and used Peirce's Triadic theory as a theoretical framework. He identified Icons, indices and symbols in the film and proved that a theory can be used technically to explain the meaning of the signs in a film.

Methodology

Research Method

This study aimed to contribute to the field of intercultural communications by understanding how components of media contributed to the practical realization of two main theories or concepts that emerge from this study namely the concepts of cultural exposure and cultural empiricism. To do this, qualitative research method was used to explore human behavior relating to films as a component of media. In qualitative research, researchers have sought to understand human behavior and the conditions that motivated their actions ([Saunders, 2011](#)). The qualitative research method therefore made it possible to analyze issues relating to how films made practical, the concepts of cultural exposure and cultural empiricism, by focusing on the behavioral aspects of films.

Research Strategy

[Robson \(2011\)](#) identified six main types of research strategies, of which grounded theory was chosen in this study. Grounded theory basically concerns with the systematic approach to constructing theories through

the analysis of data (Sapsford & Jupp, 2006). Certain key steps or stages were followed in conducting grounded theory. These can be summed to include the collection of data, analysis of data, memoing, and drawing theoretical outline (Remenyi, Williams, Money, & Swartz, 1998). Details of how these steps were used have been explained in the next section. Grounded theory was selected because it was seen as appropriate in realizing the contribution of this study to the field of intercultural communications, where attempts were being made to identify ways in which films help to make practical, the concepts of cultural exposure and cultural empiricism. That is, by critically analyzing selected films, it was going to be possible draw conclusions or theories from them on how they exemplify the two concepts of cultural exposure and cultural empiricism.

Data collection procedure

The grounded theory is a systematic approach comprising collection of data, analysis of data, memoing, and drawing theoretical outline. To achieve this, film analysis was used as the data collection technique. The two concepts of cultural exposure and cultural empiricism served as themes for searching and selecting two films for this study. The search and selection process involved the use of two online databases, Movie Review Database (MRDb) and Internet Movies Database (IMDb). Films were searched with both themes as keywords. Initial search produced 32 results and so there was the need to reduce them, using specific criteria. Language was made the first criteria, where all movies that were not in English were excluded. This reduced the number to 21. Then year of production was also used, and films produced before 1980 were excluded. This reduced the number to 14.

Reviews on the remaining 14 were read to select two of them that best fitted the purpose of the study. The two films selected were *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Shanghai Kiss*. Once these two films were selected, semiotic analysis was used to analyze them. Collis and Hussey (2013) noted that in semiotic analysis, culture, society and natural occurrences are interpreted to make meaningful communication. Semiotics embodies culture and communication, the two of which are very relevant to the current study. To conduct semiotic analysis on films, subthemes were also developed from the two main themes.

The two sampled films were viewed for about three times each. During the viewing, codes were developed from them in the form of scenes, dialogues, customs, settings, plots, and themes that reflected each subtheme. In the next chapter, the outcome of the semiotic analysis was presented in the form of a film review on three movies. The film review sought to basically summarize, analyze and interpret, evaluate, and relate the films to the themes (Hakim, 2012).

Results

This section mainly contains the detailed film reviews of the two sampled films *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Shanghai Kiss*. Each film was

interpreted for the two themes of cultural exposure and cultural empiricism respectively
i. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and the interpretation of cultural exposure

Big Fat Greek Wedding tells the story of Toula, a young Greek woman who falls in love with a non-Greek school teacher, Ian. Even though Toula was convinced the love she had for Ian was genuine, she struggled to have her family accept the man of her choice by accepting cultural and religious differences. At the same time, Toula was still trying to come to terms with her own heritage and cultural identity as a Greek living in Chicago. Toula's father, Gus was particularly against his daughter marrying a non-Greek because to him, such men were Xenos, which is interpreted in English as stranger. Before the family of Toula would accept Ian, he had to make several sacrifices including agreeing to be baptized into Greek Orthodox Church. When the marriage was established and the couple's daughter was five years old, Toula assured her that she could marry whoever she wanted when she grew. This means she did not have to fear attending a Greek school.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding relates to the theme of cultural exposure and its impact on intercultural communication and helps to exemplify how practical the concept is. In the first place, cultural exposure is exemplified in the interaction that Toula had with the American society and how this influenced her thinking about her own culture. After being exposed to American culture as a Greek, she perceived that she needed to have certain looks and appearance, depicting the American style before she could boost her confidence and self-esteem. This situation was felt where Toula traded her glasses for contact lenses and decided to curl her hair and started making up.

The second perspective from which cultural exposure is depicted in the movie is Gus's perception of non-Greeks after he had also been exposed to the American culture. Unlike Toula, Gus was very firm about his cultural identity, serving as a reason he saw non-Greeks as being strangers. This was ironic because in real sense, it was Gus who was living in Chicago as a stranger, but he saw the Americans or non-Greeks as strangers because they did not share his culture and faith. Finally, Ian was also depicted to have been exposed to Greek culture and religion after his encounter with Toula's family. But like Toula, Ian responded to the cultural exposure by agreeing to go the way of the Greeks, just so that he would have the chance marry the woman of his dreams.

To have an informed analysis of how cultural exposure was depicted in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, whether as a concept with positive or negative influence on people affected by it, it is important to view it in relation to what other researchers have written about it as given in the literature review. In the first place, [Tester \(2013\)](#) saw cultural exposure as having negative impact on people because it increased their vulnerability to cultural contamination, through such means as changes in language, family styles and dress codes. This situation was clearly depicted in the film from the perspective of Toula and how she responded to her exposure to American culture.

Toula made every effort to present herself as an American, which exposed her to cultural contamination when she started seeing her Greek heritage and identity as inferior and demeaning. It is interesting to note however that the author of the film made conscious efforts to address the issue of possibly curtailing the impact of cultural exposure on oneself. [Lacey \(2002\)](#) argued that cultural exposure made people lose their essential cultural entities, but Gus stood firm in ensuring that this was not the case, as far as his family was concerned. In the long run, the position taken by Gus prevailed because Toula had to rediscover her cultural identity together with Ian before she would be allowed to marry him.

The position taken by the author in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* tends to give a new meaning to cultural exposure, which can be said to be a new contribution to literature. This new contribution suggests that even though a good number of writers have depicted cultural exposure as a negative influence which leads to cultural contamination ([Chisholm, 1948](#); [Weber, 2011](#)), the film has showed that otherwise it is also possible. The move was exceptional in first admitting that cultural exposure and its negative impacts were a reality. It however did not end here because it made the power of resisting the negative impact of cultural exposure stand out.

With the position taken from the film, a new sense of cross-cultural interaction among people from different communities was now created. This new sense was one that showed that cross-cultural interactions and communication can take place without necessarily having to sacrifice one's cultural identity. In the epilogue of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, Toula assured her daughter that she could attend any school of her choice because when the time came, she could marry whoever she wished to. This scene was significant in reiterating the contribution of the film's writer to the effect that not even interracial marriage had the potential making people give up their cultural identities and so Toula did not have to fear the implication of making her daughter marry a non-Greek.

ii. *Shanghai Kiss* and the interpretation of cultural empiricism

In *Shanghai Kiss*, Liam, a Chinese living in Los Angeles is an actor who falls in love with a high school girl, Adelaide. Because of age difference, he refuses to go ahead to be intimate with the girl. Meanwhile, Liam received a call from his dad, informing him that his grandmother had died and who had left for him a house to inherit in Shanghai. This forced Liam to move to Shanghai. Upon reaching, Liam decided to sell the house but because the price was not good enough, he rescinded his decision of sale. While in Shanghai, Liam meets Micki, whom he readily falls in love with. Micki was however skeptical about Liam, mainly because she saw him as a foreigner in his own country. Indeed, Liam had never been to his hometown, could not speak the language of the people, and was absolutely absorbed into the American culture with all the lifestyle that came with it.

When the sale of the house and the relationship with Micki could not go through, Liam returned to Los Angeles and to Adelaide. But around the same time, Adelaide travelled to France to learn art. This prompted Liam to go back to Shanghai, this time with the aim of living as a Chinese person.

Not even this sense of change in identity could get Liam to marry Micki because it turned out Micki had a boyfriend secretly. The love between the two however continued to grow even though Liam was largely semi-foreign at the time. This made Liam leave the house to Micki before returning once again to Los Angeles to reestablish relationship with Adelaide after she returned from France.

Cultural empiricism is based on the belief that perception and inference were the only sources of knowledge that could be considered as reliable (Markie, 2004). Cultural empiricism has therefore been explained from this perspective, where it is largely in a multicultural society, or after people experience cross-cultural interactions for a period, they developed perceptions and inferences about their cultural practices, which shaped their knowledge about the said culture.

In “Shanghai Kiss”, cultural empiricism was exhibited from its earliest perception because the fact that Liam had lived in Los Angeles since his infancy shaped the knowledge that Micki had for him. Indeed, the idea of Micki that she could not be in a relationship with Liam because he had an American background was only based on perception and inference rather than empirical evidence, which is now considered the modern approach to the source of knowledge (Baird, 2009). In the body of literature, it has largely been held that whenever cultural empiricism is formed, whether based on perception, inference or empirical evidence, it leads to cultural dilemma (Psillos & Curd, 2010).

Even more, when the said cultural dilemma is formed, acceptance is said to become very difficult to establish because of the knowledge formed during cross-cultural interaction. In *Shanghai Kiss*, the writer appreciates the effect of cultural empiricism in creating cultural dilemma but fails to share the opinion that in a state of cultural empiricism, cross-cultural acceptance cannot be possible. This is because after all the contemplation, Micki came to accept the fact that she could go ahead and dates Liam, regardless of the cultural differences that existed between them.

Through the analysis of the two films, the current study contributes about the difference between the theoretical aspect of cultural empiricism and its practicality. In practice, even though cultural perception is built on empiricism, it may lead to cultural dilemma, the dilemma does not necessarily mean inability for cross-cultural interaction and communication to take place in perfect harmony. This realization was established in both the films by the protagonists who disregarded the cultural differences.

Conclusion

Literature on cultural exposure and cultural empiricism have largely depicted the concepts as having negative impact on people. Some of the impacts that have been associated with the concepts in literature are cultural contamination and cultural dilemma. The film reviews however showed that this is not always the case. From the review of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, it emerged that even though cultural exposure and its negative effects were real, it is not always the case that people suffered the impact.

The same situation was seen in relation to cultural empiricism in *Shanghai Kiss*.

This study contributes to existing body of knowledge by using media in the form of films to examine how practical the theoretical arguments are. The research also explored the influence of the media on the interaction between individuals with different cultural orientation including ethnicity and race. The study has also made a strong contribution to the body of knowledge on cross-cultural interactions among people from different communities, where it has established that cultural exposure and cultural empiricism can still take place while the core identities and people's cultures are preserved. But because films served as the media tools in coming to this realization, it can be concluded that media played a role in intercultural communication by correcting the impressions that people have on cross-cultural interactions among people from different communities. With the influence of films in communicating to its audience, it also has the potential of reshaping the ideologies and mentality that people have about cultural exposure and cultural empiricism. That is, in a typical multicultural society, it should be possible for people to be exposed to each other's culture without the fear of cultural contamination and cultural dilemma.

This research has significance in several essential areas. First, it analyzed the relationship between the media and cross-cultural interaction. Other researchers may use the research as a basis for further investigation on the role of media and intercultural relationships or media and cultural morality. Similarly, cross-cultural theorists may also use this research to analyze and draw conclusions on the potential dangers of the emerging forms of media on the global culture. Secondly, the study highlighted specific areas of concern that may interest students and tutors in the disciplines of media and communication, mass media, and journalism studies.

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