Understanding the Diffusion and Consumption of American Popular Culture in Pakistan

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this research is to identify whether Pakistani youth are aware of the concept of popular culture and how conversant they are with the latest entertainment trends. Through a quantitative research survey this study examines how Pakistani youth in their specific socio-religious context perceive American popular culture and which channels they use to consume American content. This study further investigates whether they prefer watching local content and movies in comparison to American content. Findings show that youth does not resist American popular culture as a whole and are embracing cultural hybridity

Keywords: *Popular Culture, Pakistani youth, Cinema, cultural hybridity, Entertainment.*

Introduction

According to Raymond Williams, the term popular culture can be interpreted using at least four different meanings: Practices and objects that are commonly well-liked by the majority; Practices or objects that are perceived as unworthy or inferior. Using the above context, popular culture can be defined as the residual culture that is left in society after classifying "high" or elite culture, culture that has been created by the people themselves. Popular culture can also be defined

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as "work deliberately setting out to win favor with the people."(Williams R., 1983)

The most basic way to define popular culture is to simply suggest that it is the culture that is well-liked and widely favored by many. Since this is a quantitative index, it can simply be measured by examining the sales of movie tickets CDs and DVDs, examining attendance records at sporting events and concerts or by scrutinizing market research. However, on its own, this approach is not enough to properly define popular culture. For instance, simply examining sales and audience ratings will not filter out high culture that can claim to be "popular" using this approach. (Bennett, 1980)

The second way to define popular culture is to label it as the residual culture that is left over once we have defined high culture. In this context, popular culture can be termed as mass-produced commercial culture. This is very different from high culture that is often a result of an individual act of creation thus labeling popular culture as an inferior culture.

Another way to define popular culture is to refer it as 'mass culture.' This concept is heavily drawn from the previous definition of popular culture being mass-produced for mass consumption. This makes the audience a bunch of non-discriminating consumers; however, the culture itself is somewhat manipulative and serves some purpose.

According to some cultural critics, mass culture is not impoverished or imposed culture, rather it is undeniably imported American culture. "If popular culture in its modern form was invented

in anyone place, it was . . . in the great cities of the United States, and above all in New York." (Maltby, 1989)

Additionally, Andrew Ross (1989) has further emphasized on how popular culture has been institutionally and socially grounded in America for much longer than in Europe. (Ross, 1989)
Since America enjoys its position as the leader of the capitalist society, it has access to the latest technologies that allow it to declare itself as the home of mass culture. A sizable chunk of mass culture comes from America which makes the Americanization a (Strinati, 2004) threat to cultural values and national culture too.

The origins of American pop culture can be rooted in the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century. This was when large rural populations migrated to American cities in big numbers. Several events occurred during this period that allowed popular culture to flourish. For instance, the Industrial Revolution encouraged a new means of mass production. This significantly reduced the price of cultural items. Since this was a different era, early American popular culture items included tabloid news magazines and serial novels.

Postmodernism pronounces the emergence of a society in which popular culture and mass media served as the most potent and important institutions that controlled and altered the shape of social relationships. The postmodern theory was thus an attempt to understand the kind of media-saturated society that had been birthed in the mid to late 20th century. The atmosphere created by the postmodern condition has made it difficult for people to differentiate popular culture from the economy. It is believed that consumption – namely what we buy or intend to buy is increasingly influenced by

popular culture. For instance, we watch more movies because of the extended ownership of VCRs. But this does not end here: advertising, which relies deeply on popular culture trends plays an integral role in determining what we will purchase. (Strinati, 2004)

What is increasingly important to consider here is that style and images have become ever more important during the end of postmodernism. According to Harvey, it is an 'image dominate narrative'.

This puts forward the idea that humans consume images and signs for their own sake rather than to extract usefulness or to avail more profound value. This is evident in popular culture now more than ever as style, jokes and playfulness pre-dominate substance, meaning, and content. This has caused qualities such as intellectual depth, integrity, authenticity, and realism to become strongly undermined.

American Popular Culture promotes the American way of life which often contradicts Pakistan's existing cultural values which is predominately based on Islam. However, because of globalization and easy access to the internet, the Pakistani youth can now explore a myriad of American content which is now available online. What is important to understand here is whether the Pakistani youth resists this influx of new cultural trends or does not resist it?

In March 2018, Netflix partnered with PTCL (PTCL and Netflix sign collaboration agreement, 2018), bringing the global internet television network to Pakistan for the very first time. Pakistanis now have unlimited access to a range of TV shows, movies, original documentaries and feature films which are predominately American

though the platform has recently introduced a few popular Pakistani dramas such as *Hamsafar* and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai,* along with films such as *Chalay Thay Sath, Wrong Number* and *Cake,* which was submitted as Pakistan's official entry for 'Foreign Language Film Award' category in Oscars 2019.

Literature Review

As a result of globalization and advanced technology, the world is shrinking, turning smaller and smaller, causing it to become a global village. This has led to the diffusion of culture from one place to another and with America being the front-runner with its multi-million-dollar movie industry, American popular culture remains to be the most dominant and influential across the world. Hollywood can be perceived as what (Williams A., 2002) called the "global cinema." Much of this can be accredited to American soft power.

It is also worth noting that popular entertainment is highly grounded on people's taste and underlays profit oriented motive to boost sales. This is largely why American entertainment dominates the media and transmits the American way of life all around the world.

In his book, Roland Robertson talks about how American entertainment has become an agent of cultural globalization which in turn generates the concept of cultural hybridization. This term is used to describe the blending of various cultural elements. However, this "mixing" of cultural values does not eliminate local values but instead may alter values in favor of the needs of society. (Crothers, 2010)

In the United States, Hollywood continues to be the prominent node for transmitting popular culture while the advertising agencies in New

York City also play an important role in the transmission of modern communications.

Researchers believe that global culture products are a production of global empires that have access to the best communication technologies to convey their messages, in this case, it is evident that America is the front-runner here. This spread of American popular culture can be rooted from the post-World War II era. Many countries including China and France have expressed concerned about American popular culture destroying their own cultural, religious and economic traditions.

According to Stuart Hall, US culture has been more or less complimented by many other nations' cultures, this is why Hall terms popular culture as "global mass culture." It has been found that while popular culture distorts traditional preferences it may also amalgamate or mix cultural products giving way to homogeneous culture, this may also be used as a way to harbor totalitarian perspective. (Hall, 1981)

In light of a survey conducted by PEW Research center, among 16 countries surveyed during 2007 and 2012, the median percentage that exclaimed they liked the way American business has increased by 11 percentage points. On the other hand, the percentage of those who disliked the approached has declined by six points. (Chapter 2. Attitudes Toward American Culture and Ideas, 2012)

The median percentage of those who believe it is good that American ideas and ways of life have spread across the world has also seen a number of increases over these five years; however this opinion still remains the minority viewpoint. It should be noted that even countries where American soft power has great influence and strong appeal have

strong concerns about the thought of "Americanization", with a median of 70% exclaiming that the spreading of U.S culture to their own country is bad.

American soft power, music, movies, and music generally resonate well and are widely viewed by young people, especially those who are under 30 years of age. According to the survey, this viewpoint seemed to be true among several countries that supported American ideas about democracy. According to the results, U.S popular culture is typically received poor results among Muslim majority countries, particularly in Pakistan where 78% seem to dislike it. It was determined that only 10% of Pakistanis aged under 30 expressed a positive viewpoint to American pop culture. On the other hand, the ratings and consumption of U.S popular culture have seemingly increased throughout European Union nations.

Theoretical Perspective

The limited effects theory emphasizes how opinion leaders play an integral role in formulating attitudes in a society. In Pakistan, the most popular opinion leaders prioritize religion and use Islam as a tool to guide people. In this social context, it would be fair to assume that people who follow this opinion leader would consider American TV shows and movies as indecent and immoral. However, the power of social media and access to the internet has given people the power to empower themselves. With information highly accessible now, the masses no longer rely on opinion leaders or at the very least choose to follow their own opinion leaders. In this context, the idea of limited effects paradigm would be rejected.

Cultural globalization refers to the swift movement of attitudes, ideas, values along with cultural products across physical borders around the globe. This concept paves idea to the fact that the inhabitants of this world now experience a mono or global culture. This monoculture has come forward thanks to the internet, popular entertainment and international marketing of some of the most famous brands that have transcended local perceptions, lifestyles and habits. This often alters the shapes, perceptions, and lifestyle of people regardless of where they live in the world.

The impacts of cultural globalization could account for the resistance and negative perception towards American popular culture movies and TV shows. Needless to say, US culture has enjoyed dominance across the world and is often regarded as the "*universal culture*". In this way, American popular culture distorts the traditional way of life or at the very least results in cultural hybridity which may be perceived negatively by locals.

Social Learning Theory came into existence and was first outlined by Walters and Bandura in 1963. The theory was further elaborated in 1977. The core idea of social learning theory laments how people learn things through observational learning within a social context. Learning is not merely a behavioral process. Instead, it is a cognitive process that is learned via social context. Learning can be initiated by observing behavior or by observing the consequences of various behaviors. A significant part of learning involves observing your surroundings, extracting information from those observations and then making decisions based on the performance of those behaviors, otherwise known as observational learning or modeling. Thus, learning may still

occur when there are no observable changes in one's behavior. Reinforcement is an integral part of learning. However, it is not completely responsible for learning. The learner is not considered as a passive recipient of information. It is important to note that environment, behavior and cognition are all influence each other. This phenomenon is also termed as reciprocal determinism.

This theory helps how people in Pakistan pick up different behaviors while watching American TV shows and movies. Watching movies and shows provides the audience with plenty of social context that encourages learning. In this way, the audience may be encouraged to mimic certain behaviors.

The diffusion theory was brought forward by Everett Rogers. This was made possible by combining a number of research findings with the flow of information across various fields including sociology, anthropology, and rural agricultural extension work. The diffusion theory was an extension of Lazarsfeld's original idea of the two-step flow.

According to the diffusion theory, innovations will pass through a series of before they become widely adopted. In the first stage, most people will become aware of this innovation, often through mass media. In the second stage, the innovation will be adopted by a small group of people, these group of innovators will be known as early adopters. In the third stage, opinion leaders will learn about the innovation from the early adopters and try out the innovation themselves. In the fourth, if the opinion leaders deem this innovation as useful, they will encourage their friends (opinion followers) to give this new innovation a try. In the last stage, after most of the people

have adopted this innovation, it is now time for late adopters or the group of laggards to adopt this change

According to Rogers, there are four integral variables that influence how innovative practices, concepts, ideas and technologies diffuse through a social system, which includes: the innovation; the channels it is transmitted to; the amount of time the group is exposed to said innovation; characteristics of the group.

American popular culture has diffused into Pakistan using many different channels, most prominently the internet. Social media platforms and online subscriptions such as Netflix have made it possible for Pakistanis to stay up to date with what's happening around the world and have access to the most popular movies.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the study is to find out whether young Pakistanis use the internet to watch American movies and TV shows and whether or not they find American TV shows and movies inappropriate according to Pakistani cultural values, leading to a negative perception about it.

Research Questions

RQ1. What is the perception of American Popular Culture and how up-to-date are Pakistani with the latest Popular Culture trends?

RQ2. What are the main diffusion channels of American Popular culture in Pakistan?

RQ3. Is American popular culture (entertainment) consumed by a specific socio-economic class in Pakistan?

RQ4. How do Pakistanis perceive American movies and TV shows?

RQ5. Do Pakistanis resist American Popular Culture?

Methods of Research

A quantitative research survey was created to understand how Pakistanis perceive American popular culture and what diffusion channels Pakistanis use to consume American content. A questionnaire was created to answer relevant research questions.

The purpose of this overall study was to determine whether the Pakistani youth resists or possess a negative perception of American popular culture. This research is also being conducted to determine how up-to-date Pakistani's are with the latest American popular culture trends.

The survey was filled using Google Forms. A large majority of the participants were between 20 to 25 years old. Each participant was required to answer 11 questions in total in which they were required to express their opinions about American popular culture.

All efforts were made to keep each question short and to the point as to not distract the attention of the respondent. The responses were collected anonymously to ensure each participant would answer the questions truthfully. The questionnaire was also filled anonymously in an attempt to make respondents feel comfortable about sharing their monthly household income for the purpose of this research.

The first part of the questionnaire requested respondents to share general information such as their age, household income and gender while the second part was dedicated to the survey questions which amounted to 11 in total. Out of the total, 10 questions were MCQs while one was an open-ended question. A rough draft of the questionnaire was made and was later approved after a few improvements.

Findings

Understanding of "Popular Culture":

Since this was an open-ended question, the responses varied. Among the 100 responses received, 20 responses suggested that popular culture comprises of the latest trends while only 4 respondents were able to define popular culture accurately. The rest were clueless.

Table 1: Hollywood movies audience

	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	88	88%
No	12	12%

From the chart, it can be determined that a great majority of respondents, 88 out of the total 100 watch Hollywood movies while 12 out of the total 100 respondents do not watch Hollywood movies.

Table 2: Genres of Movies choices

	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Comedy	62	62%
Romance	52	52%
Rom-com	26	26%
Action	36	36%
Sci-fi	38	38%
Thriller	52	52%
Horror	54	54%
Other	14	14%

From the above table, it can be determined that comedy, horror, romance and sci-fi seem to be the most popular genres that the respondents enjoy watching. These findings are not very surprising

especially because the Pakistani audience does not have too many local options when it comes to horror or sci-fi content.

Table 3: Cinema Visits

	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Don't visit the cinema	22	22%
Once or twice a year	58%	58%
Five to ten times a year	19	19%
More than ten times a year	1	1%

From the above chart, it can be deduced that a great majority of respondents either only go to the cinema 1-2 times a year or do not go to the cinema at all. Furthermore, only one respondent claimed to go to the cinema more than 10 times a year.

Table 4: Cinema and Hollywood movies preferences

	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Never watched a Hollywood movie in the cinema	38	38%
Once or twice a year	46	46%
Five to ten times a year	15	15%
More than ten times a year	1	1%

From the above table, it can be deduced that a great majority of respondents either only go to the cinema 1-2 times a year to watch Hollywood movies or do not watch Hollywood movies at the cinema

at all. Once again, only one respondent claimed to go to the cinema to watch Hollywood movies 10 times a year.

Table 5: American shows audience

	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Daily	20	20%
Rarely	32	32%
Once or twice a week	18	18%
A couple of times a month	22	22%
Prefer watching Pakistani drama	8	8%
Prefer watching Indian drama	0	0

From the above chart, it can be deduced that a great majority of respondents rarely watch American TV shows while 22% claim to watch American TV shows a couple of times a month. What is most surprising that none of the respondents prefer watching Indian dramas over American shows while 8% of the respondents claimed they preferred Pakistani dramas over American TV shows.

Table 6: Netflix Exposure

	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	88	88%
No	12	12%

From the above table, it can be deduced that a great majority of youngsters know what Netflix is while 12% of the respondents do not.

Table 7: Preferences of Channels for American shows

	Number of Respondents	Percentage

TV channels	14	14%
Online/torrents	46	46%
Netflix	20	20%
DVDs	0	0
Most of the above mentioned	20	20%

From the above chart, it can be deduced that a majority of respondents use the internet to watch American content whether it is through torrents, online streaming or Netflix. It can also be deduced that only 12.2% use TV channels to watch American TV shows and movies while none of the respondents use DVDs to watch American content anymore.

Table 8: Appropriateness of American shows and relevance to the Pakistani culture

	Number of Respondents	**Percentage**
Yes	15	15%
No	1	1%
Depends on the content	83	83%
Neutral	1	1%

From the above table, it can be deduced that a majority of respondents are able to distinguish different types of American content. About 82% of the respondents do not perceive American content as immodest and inappropriate as a whole, rather it depends on the type of content being viewed. On the other hand, only one respondent (making up 2% of the total) said that they did not perceive American content as immodest and inappropriate.

Table 9: Parental control on Hollywood movies and American TV shows

	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	68	68%
No	32	32%

From the above table, it can be deduced that a majority of respondents, precisely 68% of them have not been discouraged from watching Hollywood movies and American TV shows. It can thus be assumed that their parents or elders do not negatively perceive American content. On the other hand, 32% of the respondents have been discouraged from watching American content at some point in their lives.

Table 10: Censorship on American content

	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	64	64%
No	36	36%

From the above chart, it can be deduced that a majority of respondents believe that American content should not be censored for Pakistani viewership. On the other hand, 36% of the respondents think that American TV shows and movies should be censored.

Discussion

The findings that have come forward from this questionnaire have shed light on how the Pakistani youth perceives American popular culture and what channels are most effective in diffusing American entertainment trends.

RQ1.What is the perception of American Popular Culture and how up-to-date are Pakistanis with the latest Popular Culture trends?

While the youth of Pakistan might not be familiar with the definition of Popular Culture, they are not alien to its ideology. As users of social media and the internet, it is difficult for youngsters to shield themselves from what is happening around the world. In the same way, thanks to the internet, Pakistanis now have access to a myriad of content. In this way, the audience has become incredibly finicky and is making a conscious effort to choose what they are watching. This is unlike conventional television where one acts as a captive audience – being forced to watch whatever is on schedule. The benefit of online streaming

websites, torrents and media services provider such as Netflix makes it possible for the audience to make a rather "intelligent" decision when it comes to what they want to watch which is why they can simply abstain from watching content that may be deemed as inappropriate according to Pakistan's cultural values. They now realize how all their actions are a product of deliberateness which is why they can no longer blame Americans and their way of life and feel it is best to embrace entertainment trends that are circling all around the world.

RQ2. What are the main diffusion channels of American Popular culture in Pakistan?

The most important diffusion channel of all is perhaps the internet. Without it, the world would not have shrunk to become the global village it is today. The Pakistani youth has taken to watching content of various genres of entertainment through websites which offers free of cost of streaming or downloading. The internet is mainly dominated by

online streaming sites, torrents and Netflix. These channels seem to be the most prominent diffusion channels that are popular amongst youngsters. From this study, it can be identified that traditional formats such as TV channels are no longer preferred as youngsters are not in control of the schedule of TV programs and do not like being a 'captive audience'. They would much rather have greater control over their choices and preferences. The internet, however, offers a wide variety of options – all without interruptions such as advertisements. Furthermore, content online can always be paused and viewed later at one's convenience. This provides recipients the freedom of choice. It should also be noted that none of the respondents exclusively use DVDs to watch American content which proves that traditional means of viewing content such as DVDs have already become obsolete.

RQ3. Is American popular culture (entertainment) consumed by a specific socio-economic class in Pakistan?

The inception or revival of Pakistani cinema slowly picked up ground in 2010-2011 when several multiplexes came into being. The construction of new cinema houses excited investors and movie-watchers alike, this kindled a flame in the industry if not a massive boom. Aside from the revival of Pakistani cinema, the doors of multiplexes welcomed Pakistanis to watch Hollywood movies on the big screen now. This allowed popular blockbusters such as *Avengers* and *Wonder Women* to do well in the big screens of Pakistan. However, according to Badar Ikram, cinema has become the elitist form of entertainment in Pakistan (Jawaid, 2017). This is very different from how it was a few decades ago when almost anybody could afford to go to the cinema. Owing to the surging prices of movie tickets and fares, a

vast majority of the cinema-going audience comprises of the younger, English-medium crowd who secure a comfortable spot in the economic strata. It is primarily this elite class that possesses the resources and funds to gauge pop culture references in Hollywood movies. In other words, their educational background and fluency in the English Language molds their movie preferences. This is also one of the reasons why Hollywood movies such as *Justice League* and *Wonder Woman* have done well in the Pakistani Box-office (Jawaid, 2017). This is also perhaps why the young audience thrives on newer themes instead of the Indian dramas that are on cable.

RQ4. How do Pakistanis perceive American movies and TV shows?

According to the findings of this research, not a single respondent claimed to prefer watching Indian dramas over American TV shows. However, 8% of the respondents did say they preferred watching Pakistani dramas over American TV shows. Perhaps this is because youngsters have grown tired of the same themes that are repeatedly used in Indian dramas. In comparison, American TV shows and Pakistan's drama industry offers much more substantial content than what it showed across the border.

While a majority of the youth knows what Netflix is uses the internet to stream or download American movies, Pakistani youngsters don't visit the big screen with the same enthusiasm. A low reason for the youth's unwillingness to go to the cinema could simply account to lack of funds or one's inability to grasp popular culture references. Lethargy could be another factor that could be deterring the youth from purchasing a movie ticket.

RQ5. Do Pakistanis resist American Popular Culture?

68% of respondents claim that their elders/parents have never discouraged them from watching American TV shows/movies. In a way, it can be assumed that parents are promoting this diffusion of popular culture for the best interests of their child. This gradual acceptance could also be a product of modernity and globalization.

It is impossible to observe globalization without acknowledging the influence of the West. American culture is undoubtedly the most dominant because of its sophisticated media outlets. American popular culture is an element of soft power in this era of globalization. Keeping this in mind, it makes sense why parents would want their children to evolve with their surroundings instead of facing the repercussions of not embracing modernity.

This diffusion of American popular culture in Pakistan somehow alters or modifies local popular culture leading to a phenomenon known as cultural hybridity. This cultural hybridity promotes a new paradigm in local popular culture and is increasingly becoming evident in the content we see today. For instance, in the Pakistani movie *Cake*, we see more progressive female characters that have evolved from their conservative roots. These characters have embraced a more progressive life that involves studying abroad, wearing Western clothing and adopting a more independent approach to life in general all while simultaneously caring for their family values and heritage.

Conclusion

The findings of this research have shown light on how the youth of Pakistan is beginning to make intelligent choices when it comes to viewing content, especially American entertainment. It has also brought light on how Pakistanis are more willing to stream or

download American content online instead of going to the cinema and opting traditional channels of entertainment. It has also brought to light how the youth does not resist American popular culture as a whole and are embracing cultural hybridity. As the years go by and globalization further reduces the gap between borders, we will further witness Pakistanis embracing and enjoying foreign content.

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