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**THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SOME MODERN ROMANIAN
MASS MEDIA HEROES AND THEIR EDUCATIVE EFFECTS ON
PUBLIC**

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Abstract

Mass media represent today a huge social force, designed not only to deliver information, but mostly to shape attitudes and behaviours. It has a strong influence on the way that people perceive life, society, the world and their own existence. The mass media is creating and providing role models, leaders to follow, persons to compare yourself with and “modern heroes” aimed to guide the public. But which are the properties of these characters? What directions are they showing by their actions? This study aims to present the characteristics of some Romanian mass media “heroes” promoted by the best seller newspaper, their goals and the values associated with them. The psychological effects of this type of social models on public will be discussed. In order for this, we selected the most accessed Romanian journal, according to the Romanian Audit Rating Bureau: “Libertatea” (“Liberty”), the online edition, and we followed the lifestyle section during one week.

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1. Introduction

Mass media represent today a huge social force, designed not only to deliver information, but mostly to shape attitudes and behaviours. It has a strong influence on the way that people perceive life, society, the world and their own existence.

The socio-cultural mass media functions reach interpretation, investigation, entertainment and suggest connections between facts. One of its most important functions concerns the role of media contents to promote values and social models, and thus, educate people.



1.1. Psychological effects of mass media consumption

The psychological studies on the mass media effects developed considerably as the media impact on society also increased. Many studies centred on the negative effects of the violent content of mass media on public and especially on children. Related to the amount on violence in the mass media products, some authors considered that “the average overall size of the effect is large enough to place it in the category of known threats to public health” (Huesman & Taylor, 2006).

“The Marilyn Monroe effect” shows that the widespread coverage of a suicide in the media has been capable of triggering copycat suicides among mass public. This effect can be explained by the theory of social learning (Bandura, 1986). The aggressive behaviour can be learned directly or by observing the other’s actions. And mass media is a perfect environment for exposing the other’s acts, attitudes, beliefs.

A more complex set of explanations revolves around the learning process of differential identification. Depending to the extent that people identify with a type of story, that type would be expected to have more of an impact. For example, if people tend to copycat the suicides of superior people, they would be expected to copy the ones of famous celebrities more than the suicides of ordinary people. A third variety of explanation focuses not on story characteristics but on audience mood. The central thesis is that stories which appear when suicidogenic conditions are high in society will have more of a copycat effect since more people are on the verge of suicide (Stack, 2003).

Media has an important cognitive impact on values. Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) defined the values as „very basic beliefs that people hold about either desirable end states of existence or preferred modes of conduct” (1976, p. 13). The authors considered that “mass mediated information can play an important part in creating the conditions for value clarification” (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976, p. 13). This function is realized by presenting information that precipitates value conflict within audience members and between social groups. Once these conflicts are explained by the media, the audience is moved to articulate their own value positions.

The affective effects of mass media content on audience consist in the activation of some feelings and emotional states. The literature mentioned: fear, anxiety and happiness as emotional states generated by the media content.

Alteration in moral and alienation, such as: the sense of collective wellbeing, the “we feeling”, sympathy or anger are also a result of some media messages.

These changes in cognitions, attitudes and affection can lead to behavioral effects. The main behavioral effects of mass media on public are the activation and the de-activation. Activation refers to situations in which the audience members do something that they would not otherwise have done, as a consequence of receiving media messages. The strategy of actions formulated by groups in order to support their protest or to make public their points of view have a large spreading through mass media (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976).

There are very few Romanian studies about the national media content and its psychological effects on public. We should mention an important research about the violence presence in the Romanian mass media and its effects on children (Drăgan et al, 2009). The authors measured the weight of violence in the Romanian TV programs, following the classics indicators used by Gerbner.

They analyzed a sample of Romanian television broadcasts, during 5th and 11th January of 2009, stretching over 348 hours and 15 minutes of broadcasting. They showed that “children are living in an adult world of television. People are forgetting that the media aren’t just an image of the world and ways to signify the facts, but a real symbolic universe we use to approach existence. We are forgetting that the world of television has the strength of reality, has an intrinsically reality effect and that the fiction and the real facts are two faces of the reality, in the television’s content and broadcasts” (Drăgan et al, 2009, p. 4).

The psychological effects of the violent television content on children are: the imitation of the aggressive behaviors, through the identification with the negative heroes; the assimilation of the violent style in human relations; the disinhibition, becoming prone to act violent; desensitization toward violence; fear, anxiety, insecurity.

By promoting violence, making a show of it, the mass media cultivate in public an attraction and even a fascination toward it.

Another Romanian study centered on the values and the models that mass media offers to the public. According to Abraham (2005), the television has the most important impact on imposing some attitudes and values to the public, especially to the children and young people. The author showed the contribution of mass media in learning some type of values by these category of public: star wannabe (71-84%); sexuality (40-67%); unscrupulousness (30-53%); violence (67-77%); pleasures of life (26-45%); vulgarity/ aggressiveness (55-66%); lie (33-49%); sensational (59-67%); enrichment (33-47%). The impact is major on the 15-18 year old children.

1.2. The impact of mass media models

In their book suggestively entitled “Carne in scatola” (“Canned meat”), Bolla and Cardini (1999) highlight the many facets of the presentations of bodies in television’s broadcasts. They show how the intimacy disappeared and the bodies have been exposed like merchandise in a shop window. The “perfect bodies” presented by television appear to be “empty” of the human content, lifeless, with the unique aim to impose a model to follow, a reference image for the audience.

“Television launches the rules of the look, new styles, fashion, imposing a normativity to which the public can align their corporeality, entering into the magic mirror of telegenic” (Bolla and Cardini, 1999, p. 10). Beauty models and standards, promoted by mass media, have a large impact on public.

The characteristics of the bodies promoted by mass media are mythic: everlasting youth, endless life, the invincible heroes, the strongest force, perfect beauty and health. The time of these “modern heroes” is also mythic, repetitive and reversible. The psychological effects on the persons that are comparing their “imperfect” bodies or images with the mass media models are important. Some of them are: anorexia, sexual identity issues, low self-esteem, obedience, low authenticity

2. Problem Statement

Mass media is a constant environment in our lives, providing information and leisure, but mostly promoting attitudes, values, behaviours, models, problem’s solutions, ways of action and so, teaching, educating people.

As the writer, the journalist creates some characters that we can consider “the modern heroes”. They are elaborately described, they appear repetitively in the mass media products, their acts, attitudes and thoughts are observed and presented like a role model. Public persons or ordinary people, they are invested by the journalists with the strength of a mythic character.

3. Research Questions

Which are the characteristics of the “modern heroes” that the Romanian mass media promotes mostly? Which are their actions? What goals and values are they proving to be important? Which are the psychological effects of this kind of social models on public?

Which are the directions given to us? What can we learn from this content?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to evaluate the psychological effects that the social models or the “modern heroes” promoted by the most accessed Romanian newspaper transmits to the audience. We will analyse their characteristics, their actions, their goals and the values associated with them, in order to appreciate the educative effects on the public.

5. Research Methods

In order to evaluate the type and characteristics of the persons promoted by the Romanian Journal “Libertatea” we used the content analysis.

Content analysis is a method of analysing written, verbal or visual communication messages. As a research method, content analysis is a systematic and objective means of describing and quantifying phenomena. It allows the researcher to test theoretical issues to enhance understanding of the data (Elo & Kyngas, 2008).

Content analysis has been defined also as a “systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of texts into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding” (Stemler, 2001, p. 1). In order for this, the researcher elaborates an adequate coding system, according to the objectives of study.

The first step of the content analysis is the pre-analysis, which is meant to organize the entire procedure, to operationalize and describe the first ideas and to establish an analysis design. The researcher will define the population of communication, will formulate the hypotheses and objectives and will elaborate the indicators. The indicators are a set of codes to apply to the units of analysis.

In a further phase, the researcher will chose the units of analysis, meaning the element of population that it’s going to be studied. The relevant documents will be selected according to the criteria that serve the research’s purposes. Qualitatively, this involves identifying patterns and common sequences.

Then, the selected material will be exploited following the decisions taken in the first phase. This can be made mechanically by the researcher or using a computer program.

The results will be processed and interpreted using different statistical data presentations and the conclusions will be formulated.

5.1. Pre-analysis of the content

In order to establish the most press promoted characters, we selected the most accessed Romanian journal, according to the Romanian Audit Rating Bureau: “Libertatea” (“Liberty”), the online edition. We followed the content of the lifestyle section of this journal during one week: 1st-7th September 2016. Thus, we selected the journalistic content that had as prime goal not providing information, but emphasising the personality and actions of one character in particular.

This type of articles differs from the informative ones by some particularities: they are centred on a public or common person in order to underline, to analyse, to emphasise some of their actions, goals, characteristics, in the same way that a writer presents one character in a book. These “journal” characters often fulfil banal actions, they have some common “peculiarities”, their actions and their goals are important only for them and for their relatives or friends, thus, they have no social impact on the other people. So, this type of journal content has none of news’s characteristics. Instead, they are focusing on describing a person whose actions, goals and characteristics are invested with importance, creating a social model to follow or a “modern hero”.

The journalists are paying a specific attention to these characters, which are presented continuously, with tireless vigilance, seeking new and new facts in their ordinary existence and emphasizing any of their acts.

5.2. Content analysis procedure

We evaluated a total of 115 articles published in the newspaper “Libertatea” during September 1st, 2016 – September 7th, 2016. We analyzed articles containing stories about certain public figures or ordinary people, raised at the rank of “heroes”. The articles were accessed through the online edition of this newspaper. The selected articles were part of the lifestyle section.

We considered for each item the main characteristics of the subject such as age, sex, area of activity, the public or common status of the person; the behaviors manifested by the characters that were described; the goals and the values associated with them.

We evaluated also which type of these characters is the most present in the analysed content. We used a qualitative approach.

6. Findings

- Total number of the persons described: 116
- Total number of the foreign persons: 9 (8 women, 1 male)
- Medium age of women characters: 32
- Medium age of male characters: 45
- Number of third age persons: 5: 4 men, 1 woman

The main activity field of these persons are: fashion, music and TV journalism. There were only a few persons acting in the fields like: politic, religious, theatre, movie, history.

The main topics of these articles are sexual or sensual, sometimes the sensuality being associated with maternity. The „heroes” are young women in exhibitionist attitudes and behaviors, whose actions are

centered on exposing themselves in order to obtain attention and admiration. These young women are presented posting their provocative photos on the internet, showing their bodies in a variety of situations, discussing/ exposing details about their private life and events: pregnancy, birth, lactation, health issues.

The second category of topics is centered on social recognition (respect, affiliation, approval by others): persons engaged in aggressive behaviors, imposing themselves by some particularities, attitudes or behaviors, in order to obtain material gains, power, social domination and influencing others.

The third category of journalistic contents is centered on pleasure, fulfilling desires, leisure.

The main goals of those actions described in the analyzed contents are, according to the preponderance: obtaining attention and admiration, obtaining material and social gains, obtaining power.

7. Conclusion

The psychological effects of these mass media contents on the audience are mostly negative. The public, especially the young ones, can learn to seek for pleasure, power and material gains, to obtain social power in the easy way, like “modern heroes” do.

In need for visibility and economic gains, mass media promotes mostly some negative values and heroes, in order to raise their audience. The traditional values are no longer “fashionable”.

A sustained endeavour for educating the people to select and criticize the mass media content is needed.

8. Limits and further directions of research

Due to its concentration on one newspaper’s content and to the short period of time analysed, this study is not a representative one for the entire Romanian mass media. It is a part of a larger study, that involves more mass media channels and correlations with the study of psychological effects of high mass media consume on public.

Further direction of research may also investigate the journalist’s personality in order to explain better the products of his work.

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