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ARE WE OKAY WITH THE OBSCENITY IN LANGUAGE AND CONTENT IN MEDIA?

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Abstract

There is a gradual lowering of our guards as civilized human beings towards accepting the increasing level of obscenity in our speech and behaviour. This study focuses on the obscenity in language in print and electronic media. Media has emerged as the most powerful tool to influence human receptivity and perceptions. Its influence is a matter of concern for parents as well as teachers, as both are directly responsible for preserving cultural values and the upbringing of the next generation. It is becoming exceedingly difficult for parents and teachers to be able to protect the younger generations from the harmful intrusion of media into their lives. This study hopes to find out the local cultural perspectives on this in Pakistan, which will aid parents and teachers to discover solutions to deal with over-exposure to unregulated obscenity in language and content used in the media. The data to support this study was collected through interviews and a random sampling survey, from parents and teachers. The candid views of adolescents on the subject were recorded in the form of interviews. The local cultural perspectives showed that the majority of parents, teachers and even adolescents themselves are not comfortable with the level of obscenity allowed and propagated by the censoring authorities in print and electronic media. The information found, may prove to be useful for parents, teachers and guardians who are responsible for contributing positively towards the lives of the future generations. The results may be effectively applied in domestic and academic scenarios.

1. Introduction

Tracing the evolution of man into the origin of civilization, one observes that the term civilized is synonymous to educated, refined, enlightened, polite, decent, polished, cultured, elegant and sophisticated. Does the 21st century man rise up to these connotations in his speech and behaviour? There

is a gradual lowering of our guards as civilized human beings to slowly accept the increasing level of obscenity in our speech and behaviour. The focus of this study is on the obscenity in language and content, both verbal and nonverbal, allowed and propagated in print and electronic media. The print media would refer to all paper based publications in the country. Magazines, newspapers, flyers, newsletters, scholarly journals and other materials that are physically printed on paper are examples of print media (Reference.com 2016). The Printed product packaging may also be included in print media advertising. Print media includes those media of communication, which are controlled by space rather than time. It can be read at any available time and can be kept for record (Naveed 2016). The Virtual social networks were not included in the study due to their volatile status, individual nature of input and vast scope.

Media has emerged as the most powerful tool to influence human receptivity and perceptions. The media have a great potential to teach, inspire, inform, and entertain, but they may also corrupt, degrade, and pervert. They have the power to influence profoundly for good or evil all aspects of our values and feelings, as well as our behaviour. We *are* affected by what we choose to expose ourselves to (Cline, 1984). The influence of media is a matter of concern for parents as well as teachers as both are directly responsible for preserving cultural values and the upbringing of the next generation. As we move on into the age of an advanced media with virtual social networking and cyber communication, it is becoming exceedingly difficult for parents and teachers to be able to protect the younger generations from the harmful intrusion of media. This study hopes to find out the local cultural perspectives and discover solutions for parents and teachers to figure out ways to deal with over-exposure to unregulated obscenity in language and content used in the media. The data to support this study was collected through interviews and a random sampling survey, from parents and school, college and university teachers. The candid views of adolescents on the subject were recorded in the form of interviews. The local perspectives showed that the majority of parents, teachers and even adolescents themselves were not comfortable with the level of obscenity allowed and propagated in print and electronic media by the censoring authorities. There is a concern over the media producing pieces that may be unfit for children, adolescents and family reading and viewing.

The information found, may prove to be useful for parents, teachers and guardians who are responsible for contributing positively towards the present human condition and the lives of the future generations. The findings may be effectively applied in domestic and academic scenarios.

1.1. General perspective on obscenity

Wikipedia defines obscenity as any utterance or act that strongly offends the prevalent morality of the time.

The Merriam Webster dictionary (2017) defines it as being 'disgusting to the senses' or being 'repulsive': the quality or state of being obscene. Obscene is also defined as 'relating to sex in an indecent way': abhorrent to morality or virtue; *specifically*: designed to incite to lust or depravity: containing or being language regarded as taboo in polite usage *obscene lyrics obscene literature*: repulsive by reason of crass disregard of moral or ethical principles *an obscene misuse of power*: so excessive as to be offensive *obscene wealth obscene waste. (obscenely*: *adverb).* The simplest synonym for obscene is dirty,

and it can be applied to most examples of obscenity. Other words may be offensive, objectionable, appalling, awful and unacceptable. According to these definitions violence and bloodshed in media can also be included in 'obscenity', as it may be equally uncomfortable as vulgarity for the viewers, listeners or readers of electronic and print media respectively.

1.2. The psychological perspective on obscenity

Reinforcement of negative stimuli will encourage negative behaviour. Skinner (1938) is regarded as the father of Operant Conditioning. He investigated operant conditioning of voluntary and involuntary behaviour. Skinner felt that some behaviour could be explained by the person's motive. Therefore behaviour occurs for a reason, and the three main behaviours shaping techniques are positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement and punishment…the Law of Effect - Reinforcement. Behaviour which is reinforced tends to be repeated (i.e. strengthened); behaviour which is not reinforced tends to die out-or be extinguished (i.e. weakened).

When obscenity is appreciated and not condemned by the group, individuals slowly develop a higher tolerance level than their exiting tolerance level for it. With reference to our threshold for accepting and tolerating obscenity in media, our senses have perhaps been slowly conditioned and blunted to accept higher levels of obscenity everyday. This gradually lowers our guards and numbs our senses, so we stop minding things that we once used to find offensive. As Sorce and Dewitz (2007) remark … Printed ads are more structured and therefore, will trigger controlled responses in the minds of the audience/reader. (CareerRide.com)

In a psycholinguistic study of dirty language, the first five acts/words considered to be most offensive by most people were (Jay, 1992) :

i.   Witnessing murdering
ii. Witnessing rape
iii. Witnessing acts of child abuse
iv. *Motherfucker* (word)
v.   Witnessing extreme violence

The threshold for tolerance for obscenity is slightly different in the East and West due to the diversity in cultural values and religious philosophies. It also used to be different a couple of generations ago. With the passage of time, globally, people have generally become more tolerant towards everything. Individual views often overrule cultural and traditional trends. Personal opinions have become more acceptable as compared to culturally conforming views. Now generally people are not bothered by vulgarity as they used to be. Whether it's indifference or a liking for vulgarity, now things lesser than pornography are not even listed under obscenity in libraries.

1.3. The perspective of The Federal Communication Commission The Federal

Communication Commission states the following clauses with reference to 'Deciding what's obscene, indecent or profane' (FCC 2016) Each type of content has a distinct definition:

Obscene content does not have protection by the First Amendment. For content to be ruled obscene, it must meet a three-pronged test established by the Supreme Court: It must appeal to an average person's prurient interest; depict or describe sexual conduct in a "patently offensive" way; and, taken as a whole, lack serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.

Indecent content portrays sexual or excretory organs or activities in a way that does not meet the three-prong test for obscenity.

Profane content includes "grossly offensive" language that is considered a public nuisance.

This seems to be a very broad specification to define obscenity. The legal perspective is not very clear either:

The issue is how, exactly, we can define obscenity and indecency?   The definitions are foggy and have changed over time. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart (1964) said: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced … but I know it when I see it…Stewart's dilemma illustrates the difficulty for the courts in clarifying the ground rules for obscenity.

2.   Problem Statement

This research studies the gradual lowering of our guards as civilized human beings to slowly accept the increasing level of obscenity in our speech and behaviour. Media has emerged as the most powerful tool to influence human receptivity and perception. This research focuses on the obscenity in language and content, both verbal and nonverbal, allowed and propagated in print and electronic media. This is a matter of concern for parents as well as teachers as both are directly responsible for the upbringing of children and adolescents. As we move on into the age of an advanced media with virtual social networking and cyber communication, it is becoming exceedingly difficult for parents and teachers to be able to protect the younger generations from the harmful intrusion of media. There is a concern over the media producing pieces that may be unfit for children, adolescents and family reading and viewing.

3.   Research Questions

Tracing the evolution of man into the origin of civilization, one observes that the term 'civilized' is synonymous to decent, educated, refined, enlightened, polite, polished, cultured, elegant and sophisticated. 'Obscenity' is described as indecent, obscene, offensive, vulgar, profane, rude, gross, foul, improper, and so on. 'Obscenity' seems to be the direct opposite of 'civilized'. The 21st century man must rise up to these connotations in his speech and behaviour whether it is in media or day-to-day communication. This study aims to answer the question:

3.1. How do we respond to the increasing obscenity in the language and content used in electronic and print media?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study hopes to find out local cultural perspectives and discover the views and opinions of parents and teachers on whether they are bothered by the increasing vulgarity and over-exposure to unregulated obscenity in language and content used in media, and to what extent.

5. Research Methods

The data based on attitudes and opinions to support this study, was collected through observations and a random sampling survey through a semantic differential scale. The 100 respondents were mostly Pakistani parents, and school, college and university teachers. The survey was based on the research questions mentioned above. Data was collected through a survey on the acceptance level for obscenity in the language used and the content shown in TV advertisements, soap operas, news broadcasts and talk shows on the various television channels . The respondents' views on the acceptance level for obscenity in the language used and the content printed in newspapers, magazines/catalogues, flyers and brochures were also collected. Non-electric billboards were also included in print media. The candid views of adolescents on the subject were recorded in the form of interviews. Some responses had to be omitted from the documentation due to their unclear nature.

6. Findings

Table 1. How do we respond to the increasing obscenity in the language and content used in electronic and print media?

S#	Questions	Respondents & Percentage					Total 100
		ELECTRONIC MEDIA					
1	Do you think the obscene language used in electronic media is objectionable?	Respondents→ unobjectionable→	4 0%	10 10%	80 70%	6 100%	objectionable
2	Do you think the visual obscenity shown in the electronic media objectionable?	Respondents→ unobjectionable→	3 0%	1 10%	96 90%	0 100%	objectionable
3	Is the language used in the majority of soap operas dirty?	Respondents→ Clean →	9 1%	20 7%	20 59%	65 33%	dirty
4	Are the scenes shown in the majority of soap operas dirty?	Respondents→ Clean →	10 5%	20 50%	64 70%	6 95%	dirty
5	Is the language used in the majority of talk shows dirty?	Respondents→ Clean →	40 43%	10 40%	54 13%	6 4%	dirty
6	Are the scenes shown in the majority of talk shows dirty?	Respondents→ Clean →	40 43%	10 30%	54 17%	6 10%	dirty
7	Is the script used in the majority of news broadcasts dirty?	Respondents→ Clean →	50 40%	24 26%	23 10%	3 4%	dirty

8	Is the visual coverage shown in the majority of the news broadcasts dirty?	Respondents→	30	33	27	10	
		Clean →	37%	24%	22%	17%	dirty
9	Is the script used in the majority of electronic advertisements dirty?	Respondents→	30	20	45	5	
		Clean →	33%	23%	60%	4%	dirty
10	Are the scenes shown in the majority of electronic advertisements dirty?	Respondents→	10	11	70	9	
		Clean →	13%	24%	65%	20%	dirty
	Questions	**Respondents & Percentage**					**Total 100**
	PRINT MEDIA						
11	Is the level of obscenity in language in print media acceptable to you?	Respondents Acceptable→	2	10	80	8	
			0%	10%	60%	100%	unacceptable
12	Is the level of visual obscenity in print media acceptable?	Respondents Acceptable→	3	5	91	2	
			0%	10%	70%	100%	unacceptable
13	Is the language used in the majority of newspapers objectionable?	Respondents→ unobjectionable→	50	24	23	3	
			40%	26%	10%	4%	objectionable
14	Are the pictures printed in the majority of newspapers objectionable?	Respondents→ unobjectionable→	30	33	27	10	
			37%	24%	22%	17%	objectionable
15	Is the language used in the majority of magazines/catalogues objectionable?	Respondents→ unobjectionable→	50	23	24	3	
			45%	25%	17%	13%	objectionable
16	Are the pictures printed in the majority of magazines objectionable?	Respondents→ unobjectionable→	31	33	27	9	
			16	20	24	40	objectionable
17	Is the script used in the majority of flyers/brochures objectionable?	Respondents→ unobjectionable→	43%	32%	17%	8%	objectionable
18	Are the pictures printed in the majority of flyers/brochures objectionable?	Respondents→ unobjectionable→	43%	42%	10%	5%	objectionable
19	Is the language used in the majority of fiction objectionable?	Respondents→ unobjectionable→	43%	32%	17%	8%	objectionable
20	Are the pictures printed in the majority of fiction objectionable?	Respondents→ unobjectionable→	43%	42%	10%	5%	objectionable

7. Conclusion

The local perspectives showed that the majority of parents, teachers and even adolescents themselves were not comfortable with the level of obscenity allowed and propagated by the censoring authorities in print and electronic media. It was found that there was a general consensus that the media has to upgrade its censorship level.

7.1. Electronic Media

Most respondents showed a greater concern towards the verbal and nonverbal obscenity in electronic media as it has a greater impact than the print media due to a strong combination of audio as well as visual representation of ideas. The major trend towards the language and visuals in electronic media was partially towards it being objectionable. The scenes in soap operas were considered more objectionable than the language used in them. A mixed trend was seen towards the responses regarding television commercials. Some respondents were okay with them and some showed distaste for the script only. More, however, objected to visuals and scenes in the advertisements on TV. The talk shows were classed as slightly less objectionable and the news broadcasts were considered the least objectionable with reference to the language and scenes shown in them. Overall, there were concerns with reference to the content and visuals in electronic media being fit for comfortable and acceptable family viewing.

7.2. Print Media

The responses showed a trend favouring print media over the electronic media for being generally cleaner or less obscene. However, newspapers were considered more or less clean and fit for comfortable reading with reference to the language used in them and the pictures printed in them. The language and content used in the magazines and catalogues didn't seem to be a matter of serious concern to the respondents and showed a tendency towards the positive. The messages used in flyers & brochures were not found objectionable and only a few respondents had a problem with them. Respondents commenting on the obscenity present in assorted fiction (novels, dramas, poetry, short stories etc.) showed a positive inclination towards them as being mostly clean.

The local perspectives showed that the majority of parents, teachers and even adolescents themselves were not comfortable with the level of obscenity allowed and propagated in print and electronic media by the censoring authorities. There is a concern over the media producing pieces that may be unfit for children, adolescents and family reading and viewing.

The information found, may prove to be useful for parents, teachers and guardians who are responsible for contributing positively towards the present human condition and the lives of the future generations. The findings may be effectively applied in domestic and academic scenarios.

A future study based on this research will aim to investigate and deliberate the global or international perspective towards the acceptance of obscenity in media. It will study how people from different cultures and demographics cope with the increasing obscenity in language used and visuals shown in electronic and print media. It will discuss the general acceptability level towards obscenity in different cultures and different countries, and the various ideas to deal with it. It will conclude on how the parents and teachers can protect adolescents from the obscenity in language and content in media.

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