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Consumption in Soap Operas From Brazil, New Zealand, and the U.S.: Production, Products, and Process

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Consumption in Soap Operas from Brazil, New Zealand, and the U.S.: Production, Products, and ProcessSession Chairs: Barbara Stern and Cristel Antonia RussellSoap Operas in New Zealand and the U.S.: Product Placement Strategy and Consumption ImagerySimon J. Pervan, Deakin University and Brett A. S. Martin, University of AucklandA study of consumption imagery is presented using data collected in a content analysis of the New Zealand soap Shortland Street (SS) and the U.S. soap The Young and the Restless (YR). Production and regulatory factors determine product placements, for whereas SS was co-produced by the public and private broadcasting industry, YR is a strictly commercial venture. Findings indicate a high level of consumption imagery in each country's soaps, but significant differences in product types and emotional outcomes of product use. Each country's soap displays the relationship between the identity and culture of the country of origin. Product Placement in Brazilian Telenovelas: Selling Soaps and Social CausesAntonio C. La Pastina, Texas A&M UniversityBrazilian television producers have expanded the commercial potential of televisual texts, particularly popular prime time serial telenovelas, which are funded by product placement and advertising revenues as well as by the government. As a result, Brazilian telenovelas feature both a consumption scenario and a social welfare-oriented plot. A study of audience reception is presented using ethnographic participant-observation to analyze soap opera consumption in a rural area. Findings about the reception of placed products highlight issues of interpretation and appropriation of the consumption ideology as springboards for viewers' discussion of political and gendered life in their communities. Aspirational Consumption in U.S. Soap Operas: The Influence of Parasocial Attachment on ConsumersCristel Antonia Russell, San Diego State University and Barbara Stern, Rutgers, The State University of New JerseyThe paper analyzes consumption scenarios in U.S. soaps and the process of parasocial attachment whereby soap characters influence viewers' aspirational consumption and behavioral modeling. The model, derived from literary analysis and social psychology theories, describes an influence process driven by parasocial attachment, defined as audience relationships with fictional characters conceived of as real, which affects the capacity of characters to serve as referent others and behavioral models for viewers. Findings from a real-time survey of soap viewers indicate that the characters' consumption influence consumers' consumption behaviors both directly and indirectly as a consequence of these parasocial relationships.

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session overview

This session examined the influence on consumers of consumption imagery and cultural reality depicted in soap operas from Brazil, New Zealand, and the United States. The papers presented studies of products placed in television soaps in selected countries where the vehicle and/or the audience have not been sufficiently well studied. The rationale is that knowledge of the entertainment-education value of soaps in context contributes both to better understanding of consumers as well as to ways that placed products impact their lives (Kennedy et al. 2004; Singhal and Rogers 1999). Insofar as soaps produced and consumed in each culture have important but not fully researched differences, the session provided insight into consumption scenarios and consumer interpretations.

The importance of soaps lies in their ubiquity across the globe: soaps are not only produced in or exported to most countries in the world, but also are the media vehicles of choice of a majority of viewing audiences wherever they are aired (Allen 1995). However, despite the omnipresence and popularity of soaps as a vehicle for spreading consumption ideology, the genre is not uniform from country to country. Rather, each country’s soap negotiates reality through the lens of the particular culture where it is produced and consumed, for the vehicle is shaped to conform to the local context with messages crafted to appeal to a local audience. That is, soaps are responsive to a wide variety of local institutions and social requirements (Allen 1995).

But notwithstanding the particularized social context, soaps do have one common feature—product placements in consumption scenarios. Placements reflect the economic realities of production, the society in which characters and consumers live, and the nature of the products shown. Depictions of consumption influence audience reception via the characters, who serve as aspirational figures, role models, and agents of socialization, revealing themselves by means of the products they use, the usage context, and the usage outcomes.

General Orientation

The three papers in this session all focused on soap operas and placed products, but relied on different methodologies and studied different cultures. Pervan and Martin’s paper documents the consumption messages and ideology in soaps in a U.S.-New Zealand content analysis; La Pastina’s paper relies on ethnographic data to discuss issues of reception and interpretation of a telenovela in rural Brazil; and the Russell and Stern paper uses a cross-sectional survey to test a model of the influence of soaps on U.S. viewers.

Simon Pervan and Brett Martin’s “Soap Operas in New Zealand and the U.S.: Product Placement Strategy and Consumption Imagery” is a comparison of products found in the New Zealand soap Shortland Street (SS) and in the U.S. soap The Young and the Restless (YR). Each country’s vehicle displays the relationship between the country-of-origin identity and culture, including the production factors that influence differences in the serial dramas. The study provides insight into the consumption habits of viewing audiences in both countries, for despite a high level of product placements, differences in the types of products and emotional outcomes of product use between the two countries were found.

Antonio La Pastina’s “Product Placement in Brazilian Telenovelas: Selling Soaps and Social Causes” is a study of audience reception of telenovelas in Brazil, and uses ethnographic participant-observation to analyze soap opera consumption in a rural area. The telenovela production industry is financed in part by revenues from product placements, and even though the intertwining of cultural and economic issues is pervasive, interpretation in rural communities differs from that in a city. The reason is that rural communities such as the one in this study are not only distant from urban production centers, but are also poor agricultural areas with dormant economies. Factors that influence interpretation are multigenerational group viewing, daily discussions in the village square, and low exposure to sources of outside news. The focus is on the “limits and appropriations” of interpretation, and the study presents findings about the reception of placed products that highlight issues of interpretation and appropriation of the consumption ideology as springboards for viewers’ discussion of political and gendered life in their communities.

Cristel Russell and Barbara Stern’s “Aspirational Consumption in U.S. Soap Operas: The Process of Parasocial Attachment to Soap Characters” is a study of the influence of television soap characters on viewers’ aspirational consumption and behavioral modeling. It uses real-time survey data to analyze U.S. viewers’ parasocial attachment to soap characters. Unlike soap operas in Brazil or New Zealand, U.S. soaps go on for decades and allow viewers to form extended relationships with characters who become familiar over a long period of time. The characters are depicted in realistic consumption scenarios, surrounded by familiar consumer products such as homes, clothing, food, beverages, and cars. The paper proposes a model in which viewers’ parasocial attachment to the characters shape attitudes towards the characters that ultimately influence their own consumption desires. The study presents findings about the direct and mediated effects of parasocial attachment on viewers’ consumption behavior in five product categories.

The discussion was orchestrated by Marilyn Lavin, whose research has traced the history of the soap opera genre since its emergence on the radio in the 1930’s (Lavin 1995). She tied her own academic and personal experience of soaps to the three presentations and engaged the audience in further consideration of the issue of the relationship of consumption ideology and culture in global soap operas.

important substantive issue in consumer Research

Perhaps the main contribution of the session was heightened awareness of the world-wide scope and significance of soaps—like advertisements, they both reflect and affect cultural precepts, but unlike advertisements, they do so more subtly via product placements. Attention to between-country differences in what is only ostensibly the same genre opens up consideration of issues of production, viewing modes, materialism, and social responsibility.

In addition, understanding the consumption imagery in general enables a better assessment of both the relevance of product placement and the consumption habits of the viewing audiences, and an important substantive issue is the nature and valence of soaps’ influence on consumers. Equally important is the issue of the
industry’s responsibility to consumers beyond mere entertainment. In the U.S., the industry is untrammeled by the need for government funding, and thus not obligated to engage with social welfare issues, unlike the industries in Brazil and New Zealand, which depend on such funding. The result is an exclusion of these issues—soaps ignore the outer world—and a celebration of materialism in the characters’ world that represents the neglect of an opportunity for positive influence that has.

“Soap Operas in New Zealand and the U.S.: Product Placement Strategy and Consumption Imagery”
Simon J. Pervan and Brett A. S. Martin

The imagery of consumption, as represented on a daily basis in a range of media channels, plays an important role in the way consumers develop and apply meaning to their consumption habits (Hirschman 1988; Englis et al. 1993). In broadcast media, the development of the soap opera has been regarded as a major contributor to the rise of mass consumption (Lavin 1995; Miller 1995) as well as one of the most successful advertising vehicles ever used (Allen 1995).

Given the impact of soap operas on our economy and our society, it is somewhat surprising that there has been relatively little attention paid to them in the marketing literature. Much of the research is in the form of sociological critiques (see for example Harrington and Biely 1995; Riegel 1996; Barker 1998) or magazine and newspaper articles. In marketing, Hirschman (1988) has conducted an analysis of the ideology of consumption, and Lavin (1995) provided an historical review of the success of the early radio soap operas. However, questions remain about the importance of this television genre to marketers and consumers such as: What types of products are being consumed? How are they being consumed? In what light does the consumption episode portray the product?

This study examines the types of products as well as the context and emotional outcomes of consumption imagery in soap operas in two countries, the U.S. and New Zealand. The importance of the U.S. industry is self evident. Over $500 million per year is earned from international sales by each of the transnational giants Warner Brother, Paramount, and Universal, making the U.S. soap opera industry alone a billion dollar entity (Ortiz de Urbina and Lopez 1999). Our decision to study soaps in New Zealand follows the remarkable success of a locally produced soap opera (Shortland Street). Based on life around a private medical clinic, the show attracts around 25% of the three million population every day, and has been syndicated around the world, including the UK, South Africa, Ireland, and Australia (Television New Zealand, 2000). Our research interests centered on both the cross cultural differences of consumption imagery and a test of the assumption, noted in the sociology literature that the influence of soaps is limited to the effects of “Americanization” on local culture (Miller 1995).

Content analysis was used to provide evidence of product categories and brands, product use, and the emotional outcome of product use. The highest rated soap operas were chosen from each country: The Young and the Restless (Y&R) in the U.S. and Shortland Street (SS) in New Zealand. Y&R has been the top rated daytime television show in the U.S. for over 11 years (Schlosser, 1999), and Shortland Street, now in its eighth year in New Zealand, has consistently outrated all other drama programs, soap opera or otherwise, on television (Television New Zealand 2000). Both shows have daytime schedules, with Shortland Street aired twice due to its popularity, plus an additional early evening schedule. Furthermore, both shows are typical of the soap genre, with serial narratives (Allen 1995) and a primary focus on issues relating to sex and social life within a family (Cantor and Pingree 1983). Finally, each attracts a similar target group, key amongst which are 18-49 year old females.

Findings indicated that American soap operas tended to display more consumption imagery in relation to leisure and appearance-related items, whereas New Zealand soap operas included products for transport or food. There were also differences in the emotional outcomes of product consumption, with the New Zealand soap opera yielding more positive emotional consequences, particularly for products such as alcohol and cars, and the U.S. more negative consequences for products such as phones. The analyses also found support for soaps as a rich context of brand placements, with almost half of all episodes (46%) containing actual brand references, with higher levels in New Zealand (70%) than in the U.S. (26%). These findings provide a basis for discussing the processes of reception and interpretation described in the La Pastina presentation and the process of referential influence driven by the soap characters addressed in the Russell and Stern presentation.

“Product Placement in Brazilian Telenovelas: Selling Soaps and Social Causes”
Antonio C. La Pastina

Telenovelas are melodramatic narratives with roots in the early U.S. soaps, the Cuban radio and TV melodramas, and the French feuilleton. Since the late 1960s they have evolved into a more socially tuned narrative with contemporary themes, becoming on occasion a commentary on political debates in the nation. Unlike the U.S. counterpart, they are aired on prime time, traditionally attracting the highest audiences in the country among men and women. Globo network, the largest in the nation and the fourth worldwide, has dominated the market in the last twenty years.

Production in Brazil is partially subsidized by government funding, but product placement is the main source of funding, providing an extra source of income as well as a means of circumventing the government-imposed limit of 15 minutes of commercials per hour (La Pastina 2001). However, government funding has encouraged telenovela producers to go beyond commercial product placements and develop social merchandising strategies that include social and educational messages. In the mid-1990s, the strategy began to receive attention by Globo, writers, producers, non-governmental groups, and the news media as a viable means of promoting social change (Apolinario 1996; Guerini 1996; Firme 1994). Unlike commercial product placements, early social issue insertions were generally based on the writers’ personal agenda.

Both commercial and social messages in Latin American telenovelas reach a more diverse audience than soaps do in the U.S., for in Brazil they are broadcast on prime-time television and are designed to attract a wide viewing audience of men, women, and children (Lopez 1991 p. 600). Further, plots are finite in that the programs “have very definitive endings that permit narrative closure” after 180 to 200 episodes, unlike U.S. soaps, which can go on for generations. Plots center on class conflict and the promotion of social mobility (Mazziotti 1992), with a few central characters engaged not only in relationships with each other but also in activities relevant to political, cultural, and economic issues.

This presentation reported findings from a year-long ethnographic study of soap viewers in a small rural community in the backlands of northeast Brazil. The community of roughly 2,000 inhabitants is in one of Brazil’s smallest and poorest states, an area where the unpredictability of rainfall and soil exhaustion have created a culture of migration and religious devotion. Leisure options are few, and television and its main entertainment programs, the telenovelas, maintain a hold on community members’
attention. The presentation discussed the way that rural viewers appropriate telenovelas in their daily lives and assign meanings to the texts according to their own values and beliefs about gender roles, relationships, and sexuality. The geographical isolation and the local patriarchal culture mediate the process of reception, interpretation, and appropriation of telenovelas. The isolation of the community in relation to the urban characters and settings in the telenovela narratives intensify the perceived gap between the local patriarchal culture and the urban reality constructed in the telenovela text.

Findings suggest that product placements within telenovelas are not necessarily read as direct product promotion or advertising, but instead are perceived as an inherent element of the genre: the glamour of upper-class urbanites. Evidence also exists that the relationship between viewers and product placement is dynamic in that different viewers not only address the same text with different subjectivities, but also within contextual structures that enable or constrain that text-reader relationship. The role of telenovelas in promoting a vicarious participation in the modern world (Leal, 1986) cannot be overlooked: the desire to learn about fashion, lifestyle trends, and behavior is intrinsically associated with telenovelas, fueling knowledge of consumer goods and lifestyles. Nevertheless, local isolation and limited de facto access to consumer goods and purchasing power remain a hindrance to more complete participation in a global consumer culture. Technological changes may bring greater access and awareness of global consumer culture, but, as this study demonstrates, the cultural capital available to viewers remains a central element in the process of media interpretation.

“Aspirational Consumption in U.S. Soap Operas: The Process of Parasocial Attachment to Television Soap Characters”
Cristel Antonia Russell and Barbara Stern

This paper focuses on U.S. soap operas and consumers to test a model of the influence of soap characters on viewers’ consumption attitudes and behaviors. As the first presentations indicated, soap operas convey information about product symbolism, the way that people live, and the representation of consumption practices and ideologies (Larson 1996; Hirschman 1988; Hirschman and Thompson 1997). This presentation proposed that soap operas characters to whom consumers feel parasocially attached trigger a behavioral modeling process channelled through viewers’ consumption attitudes and behaviors. The model draws from literary theory to explain the romance attributes of soaps that foster emotional attachment and from social learning and persuasion theory to shed light on parasocial-referential responses. In this way, the model reflects the link between characteristic U.S. stimulus attributes (soap genre) and psychological and behavioral influence through parasocial interaction.

Unlike its Latin American counterpart, U.S. soap structure is completely open: first, the series can go on indefinitely, for it has neither a beginning nor an end, consisting only of an evolving middle; and second, each episode replicates the series structure, also having neither a beginning nor an end, but characterized by a suspenseful stopping point. The lack of closure sustains serial longevity, which ensures viewers’ long-term daily participation in the soap characters’ lives. The regularity and suspenseful nature of soaps contribute to viewers’ perception that characters exceed their textual existence and live in real-time, just as viewers do (Fiske 1987), thereby promoting the development and maintenance of viewers’ relationships with characters. Both structural longevity and long-term viewing require sustained viewer interest in the intense and complex lives typical of the large cast of characters.

The focus of U.S. soaps is on complicated sexual relationships. The relationship orientation is considered the locus of soaps’ appeal to women, long the target audience, for whom the fictions serve as fantasies about rich emotional and sexual lives in which men (as well as women) are always eager to talk about their feelings (Herzog 1941, Lavin 1995). As viewers become actively vested in the characters whose lives they closely follow and care about, they become parasocial attached to them as if they were real people (Levy 1962). Parasocial attachment affects the degree to which soap characters serve as meaningful referent others, socialization agents, and sources of influence (Russell, Norman and Heckler 2004). They become behavioral models who can influence viewers’ attitudes and behaviors (Churchill and Moschis 1979).

Even though soap characters’ emotional lives may seem the stuff of fantasy to most viewers, their consumption surroundings include familiar items that are likely to stimulate a more attainable mechanism of modeling. As Pervan and Martin pointed out, content analyses of U.S. soap operas have shown that they are ridden with cues about the characters’ consumption. We propose that parasocial relationships that viewers develop with soap characters over years of viewing help shape their attitudes toward consumption and, in turn, their own consumption behavior. This model of influence keeps with a long tradition of social learning and behavioral modeling theories that explain the processes of real-life influence received from highly-valued reinforcing agents (Bandura 1971, 1976; Fishbein and Ajzen 1975).

Our model was tested in a cross-sectional survey of female viewers of four of the longest lasting U.S. soap operas (Young and Restless, General Hospital, All My Children and Days of Our Lives). On average, respondents had watched the soaps for over 20 years, and had watched over 5,000 episodes. The research instrument addressed the respondent’s history with and attitude towards the program in general; it then measured attitude toward and levels of parasocial attachment to two characters of the respondent’s choice, one male and one female; finally, respondents were asked to comment and rate different aspects of each character’s consumption, with measures of attitude toward and the consumer’s own behavior across five product categories. Survey data were analyzed using structural equations modeling to test the hypothesized relationships about the direct and mediated effects of parasocial attachment on viewers’ attitudes and behavior.

We find that the level of parasocial attachment to both male and female soap characters affects viewers’ own consumption behaviors. Consistent with theories of social learning and behavioral modeling, the process of influence through parasocial attachment on viewers’ behaviors is both direct and indirect, via its effects on viewers’ attitudes such that fictional characters have the power to influence real-life attitudes and subsequent behavioral modeling.

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