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Television Viewing Habits of the Arabic Migrant Community in China: An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

This study applies ethnographic methodology through studying television viewing habits of some Arabic migrate families in China, as the Arab community comprises different communities in the customs and traditions in different geographical locations. As the unit of analysis, we lived with some Arabic families to monitor the behaviours and interactions toward television, and interpret the messages and their relationship to culture and ethnic characteristics. The research concluded a relative rise in watching TV and the impact of the language factor on the viewing habits, as well as we found parental authority over their children in the selection of content that is consistent with the values and customs of Arabic Muslim families.

Keywords:

Ethnography; Viewing Habits; Television; Arabic Community

Introduction

The twentieth century saw numerous aspects of technological transformation, like the invention of the radio, television, satellite, and information networks, making researchers describe this century as the era of communication and information that changed the lives of individuals and paved the way for new patterns of behaviours and relations.

As known, television occupies a dominant place in the space of mass communication; for its adoption of the sound and picture elements in transferring various media contents, and because of its ability to address all segments of society no matter their educational levels or socioeconomic status. So, the developments of television have been accompanied by researchers' fears from the impact of this medium on family members, as the image which is characterized by television according to psychologists' maybe cause manipulation of minds, and confusion between fact and fiction, besides its ability to dismantle the social ties and transmit the violence in the receiver's mind and conscience. So, the evolution in media and communication incite researchers to find approaches that respond to the requirements of this development as "ethnographic" studies, or the so-called "ethnographic approach", whereas researchers spotlight the individual, who understands, interprets media messages, produces meanings and interacts with each other and with the media message, by going to the field to be able to describe the behaviour of people in their cultural context based on daily observations of the audience and draw what they learn during and after exposure to the media within the domestic context.

Through the above, to apply the ethnographic methodology to cover shortfalls in audience studies, which regard to the Arab audience, we have chosen to

study television viewing habits of some Arabic migrate families in China, as the Arab community comprises different communities in the customs and traditions in different geographical locations, besides it is harmonious and close-knit community, maintaining its values, customs, traditions and trying to get away from everything that suppresses those values and habits. As the unit of analysis, we lived with some Arabic families to monitor the behaviours and interactions toward television, and to observe the responsiveness or rejection of content, besides interpreting the messages and their relationship to culture and ethnic characteristics, in order to discover the communication process between the members within the Arab immigrant family

The Ethnographic Methodology in Media Studies

There is considerable interest in the ethnographic approach in research fields of Media and communication, especially in studies related to the audience, as the quantitative approaches' inability to give an accurate understanding of the audience led many researchers to use this approach. Even though this approach is pragmatic and primarily takes into account only the available resources and targeted data from research (Westbrook, 2008), it remains the most appropriate approach that allows entering the worlds of families and their contexts as part of receiving media messages and describe the actions of these families in their relationship with the usage of newmedia and communication technologies.

The ethnographic approach focuses on understanding the behaviour in the social context through the researcher's effective participation in the studied situation, (Handwerker, 2001; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Besides, the ethnographic approach provides descriptive reports by using a set of methodological tools, such as friendly interviews and participant observation.

Researchers employ this method in the study of the audience in cases where the subject of the study is unfamiliar, and when it is believed that the general context has an important influence on the study, so they focus on it to understand the study environment and form a comprehensive vision to various issues associated with the search topic, which does not necessarily require prior knowledge by the researcher, (Westbrook, 2008; Fetterman, 2009). The challenge facing researchers when studying the relationship between the audience and message receiving lies in determining the appropriate representation, which refers culturally to a particular view of the relation between the media and society, and this approach suggests a new concept in combining modern technology and society. (Reeves, Kuper, Hodges, 2008).

So, this approach starts from the recognition of social differentiation based on various considerations including the role of ethnic customs and traditions in the selection of the existing power relations between men and women, fathers and sons, and its development by dealing with domestic technology.

Ethnographic Perspectives of Audience's Research

Perhaps the first who adopted the ethnographic approach in all his studies is David Morley, as he began from the principle that television viewing is a complex process that can be understood only within its space. So, from the principle of Morley, the ethnographic approach allows the researcher to reveal the dimensions of the phenomenon within families, as the ethnographic method depends on observation and analysis of human behaviour, the main task of the scholar in the field of ethnographic objects is to clarify human experiments and the role of affiliation to social groups in the identification defining, to reach it researcher interpret some of the cultural manifestations shared

by those in local groups, especially in the cosmic community. Also, he interprets the cultural representations in a way that makes them important and complementary to understand the cultural phenomena of different peoples and nations. (Adler & Adler, 2008).

The new trend in the ethnographic study represents studying the communication behaviour of the audience and the possible interactions with media messages that are received from the various available media in the communication space (Miller & Slater, 2000). As well as new communication space with the current fallout of the tremendous technological developments summoned circular options methodology ethnographic in the new direction of research the public, which is generally located in what became known as Ethnomethodology in the audience studies, which requires identifying ethnography audience and conducting scientific investigations on translation systems of recipients. So ethnographic research steps based on different units of analysis: the individual is a social theme and has an individual self, as well as the group and its relations with the common experience of self in everyday life. (Beaulieu, 2010; Hine, 2007).

Ramaswami finds that there are two types of modern studies that started in the middle of the first decade of the previous century and focuses on the role of ethnic groups: the first type which had animated Media/Cultural Imperialism had tried to recast it in the framework of anti-globalization trends. The second type guides the search again to the role of the media in the formation of diaspora identities dispersed outside their natural habitats, especially its role in the formation of their perception of ethnic identities in new environments. (Harindranath, 2005).

The problem that Ramaswami forward it derived mainly from two examples that had

been reached by both (Katz & Liebes, 1990) and (Gillespie, 1995) relating to cross-cultural research and diaspora alienated from their roots, primarily highlight ethnic affiliations as factors of the communication behaviour pattern and media interaction.

Despite the confusion between “racism” and “ethnicity”, and the assumed goodwill in studying of the overall audience performed by (Liebes & Katz, 1990) on the response of different ethnic groups (Arabs, Jews, Russians, Moroccan, Kibbutzim, and Americans) for the Dallas, it proved wrong belief meant of believing that the broadcasting such as American television programs accepted by international audiences without discussion (Harindranath, 2000).

Kasaisa (2006) called the new trend in the audience’s approach as “Interactivity Impact Paradigm”, because it cares about the interactive relations with media and communication technologies in the partial social context and individual context and usage of modern technologies in isolation, so those are the tools that support a natural tendency in the individual as a subject of the social community.

So, this approach derives its legitimacy from many things: the flexibility of the ethnological approach itself, as the application of ethnography in the audience’s research, requires going to the field to describe and interpret the practices in a private cultural context from the direct observation of daily life activities and participate actively, the importance of this approach is in its possibilities of understanding the context provided by it, especially the possibilities of linking the various manifestations of the phenomenon, as well as the second important factor is the ability of the ethnographic approach to overcome the disadvantages of using the questionnaire in the data collecting and choosing a representative sample that faced most

researchers in audience’s research.

Research Methodology

The nature of the study relies on the ethnographic approach, which means the entire empirical methods by which the ethnographer evaluates in the case of field research the relationship between him and his field. This approach is based on field observation, the researcher chooses a community in an attempt to understand their culture and traditions through the study of humans (Lassite, 2005).

Ethnography is a description of civilizations by analyzing human habits, it is one of the oldest branches of knowledge in the science of anthropology, also known as the description of cultures and peoples’ lives, through observation. (Lassite, 2005). The ethnographic researcher is a witness or participant, thus the ethnographic research is located between the borders of sociological qualitative research and action research that aim to understand and participate in the change for the better. The ethnographic approach differs from the rest of the other researches in its methodology, procedures, and objectives, and what distinguish it from the rest of quantitative research is that the researcher can provoke reactions, and that method facilitates the discovery of the most important behaviours and values by the respondent (Reeves, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008).

To avoid risks that affect his credibility, the ethnographer is claimed to be objective, impartial to any previous terms, not surprised by anything that might seem strange, and try to live with any sample within the studied communities without falling into subjectivity. We took ethnographic steps in the study through the choice of three Arab migrant families speaking the Arabic language, we recorded the type of houses, number of rooms, televisions, and other devices. We observed their members before, during, and after exposure to TV, monitored behaviour, and took the issue of sex and educational level into account.

Research tools

We have used this study participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

Direct observation, “also known as an observational study, is a method of collecting evaluative information in which the evaluator watches the subject in his or her usual environment without altering that environment. Direct observation is used when other data collection procedures, such as surveys, questionnaires, etc., are not effective; when the goal is to evaluate an ongoing behaviour process, event, or situation; or when there are physical outcomes that can be readily seen” (Drury, 1992).

Since we are studying the patterns and behaviours of Arabic families watching TV content, we have selected this tool as the most appropriate tool to monitor viewing habits objectively, it is suitable for monitoring the actual behaviour that cannot be subjected to quantitative or verbal descriptions such as non-verbal reactions shown by viewers during exposure.

Ethnographic studies considered observation as a basic research technique to note the cultural norms of using and talking about this device, so we were dependent on direct observation as a tool in our ethnographic study.

We have adopted in our study the participant observation, which is an observation carried out by the researcher within the respondent society without separation from its members, as we subject ourselves to different conditions in their normal lives and do the work as a part of them avoiding what would raise suspicions against us to maintain the normal situation in the studied field.

Semi-structured-interviews; is considered one of the most important research tools to collect information and data from the social field, which is complementary to the observation, as without facing the researcher

or interviewing respondents for facts and data related to the search topic, the researcher cannot identify or classify or analysis the facts scientifically to help him reach the final results, which he will use to detect the different aspects.

The interviews are considered an important and appropriate tool in ethnographic studies to see how people perceive, and to learn about their behaviour to understand the reasons that led to those behaviours, the interview here is face-to-face and be used to meet individuals in isolation, which mean everyone to be asked alone to see the perspective of each individual separately, as well as differences between individuals, that helps us in our study, as we can flexibly ask questions, so the respondent feels comfortable, which help us understand the mysterious behaviours.

Research sample

Because of the disparity of our community and the difficulty to study it all, besides the presence of Arabs in different regions of China; we chose Arabs, migrant families which live in Wuhan province, we have selected the sample as follows:

We chose Arabic families through non-random sampling, we selected it because the research community is unlimited and dispersed in various regions of China, as well as the difficulty of obtaining a list of all Arab families, besides the time factor and the difficulty of traveling, and all were significant impacts in our selection.

In the selection process, we chose three families intentionally from the city of Wuhan, which has conditions that make them more representative of the research community:

1- The sample consists of three families containing the parents and two children at least.

2- Children's ages vary between 10 – 20, so we can monitor the

differences and interactions that occurred between them.

3- Each of the families belongs to the same economic and social levels.

We allocated to each family 7 days, and every week we chose four days for observation, and the remaining three days for interviews and analysis, each family chose days by its circumstances.

For observational days we used the random sample, to give every day a chance to appear in the sample, we numbered weekdays from 1-7 starting on Sunday, the study days were 3- 1-5- 6 days which mean Tuesday, Sunday, Thursday and Friday, while the study time was from 10 am to 10 pm.

Findings

The researcher tried through these results to answer the main question of the research through the observation and analysis to explain the behaviour of the Arab family and their reactions during watching TV, the results were as follows

Table 1: A general description of the research area: family 1 (Annex A)

Through observation and semi-structured interviews, the researcher found that Omar's family watch TV widely, as it takes a considerable share of the entire day rate, the TV does not turn off all day, even in the time of household, whereas we noticed that the family doing household while watching programs, and everyone watches in one room (living room) that contains the Television.

The most important channels the family watching are the Arabic networks, such as MBC Channels, Arabic Songs Network (Rotana), besides News Channels.

For programs time we noticed that women (wife and daughter) do not bother with the times; because they were most of the time in the house where they were able to watch their favorite programs, while the males (husband + son) their favorite time

were evening time due to their presence in the house.

For the husband, he finds the television as a way to relax after long working hours, his watching time has been limited in the evening due to spending the morning time outside the home, he prefers political, religious programs, and gameshows, he often prefers viewing with all family's numbers because it allows him to chat, and the viewing decision-making authority is always in his hand.

The wife considers the TV as the preferred medium among all other means, she finds it as a medium of entertainment; since she stays at home all-time and goes out only for necessary things because of the social context of her society.

For her, cooking programs and social series have priorities, she hates song channels. The researcher noticed that watching TV is the most favourable work for her to the point of postponing some other households because of watching.

Either the daughter considers the TV as a necessary medium but not the most important because of the availability of other devices such as DVD, computer and the Internet. the researcher noted that she prefers to exposure to television alone, especially since she does not have the authority to decide what she watches, and the refusal of some content by parents, especially those that contradict the established values in Arabic families. The researcher also noted the girl's best programs are soap operas and celebrities; she is impressed by the screen star, especially characters that have beauty and intelligence, besides showing some kind of love and passion with the oppressed characters.

The Son finds TV as a secondary medium and prefers to use the Internet instead, He prefers romance dramas and reacts with romantic shots and beautiful characters. Besides, he prefers the absence of

his parents to feel free while watching and prefers watching TV in the afternoon, especially the period after returning from school when he has decision-making authority in this period.

The researcher also noted the lack of interaction between members of the family while watching TV together, as the father's authority imposed the quality of programs that the family should see, which led to the accidental exposure to the programs often without focusing on watching.

Table 2: A general description of the research area: family 2, (Annex B)

Regarding the degree of popularity of television and its superiority among other means, the researcher concluded that the family was forced to watch television because of the non-availability of other means, despite the availability of computer connected to the Internet, but it belongs to the son and no one is allowed to use it, the researcher also noted that television for Mazen's family is a mean of leisure and relax, unlike the son who sees it boring and does not contain favorite topics.

About the program time, it is not important for the wife as she is in the house all the time, but the husband prefers the evening time when he returns to the house, while the daughter pick times to be between 14:00-17:00 (father's absence period) to feel free while choosing channels. The language is not a barrier because most of the selected channels are Arabic and some of the English-language programs which the family does not find problem to understand them by reading the translation. Although the family members are mastering the Chinese language, they are never exposed to the Chinese channels.

As for the most important programs favored by the family, for the wife, she prefers soap operas and cooking shows as well as factual programs, ie, those that talk about social problems, as we noticed a total

refusal of musical programs that her daughter preferred dramatically. The wife thinks that the television is a necessary means to leisure and education, she sees it as a way to communicate with the outside world, and as a way to keep in contact with the homeland.

The husband finds in television a way of entertainment and the best way to forget the hardships of daily work, but he refuses some content, mostly, which are incompatible with the values and customs of the Arab family, what we noticed through the viewing decision-making power to watch programs committed to ethics, which caused the lack of family interaction while watching.

The daughter finds that the TV is meant for education to learn what being around outside the house (especially she does not own a laptop to surf the Internet) and she seizes the chance of having a father away from home to watch her favorite programs, as he soon as enter the home (who comes early) her ability in viewing ends since she does not have the authority to watch her favorite programs, so she regrets about not having its own device to be able to spend as much time as possible in front of the TV screen.

As for the admiring celebrities and stars of the screen, it is not striking because of the regulatory authority like a mother, so the daughter is reluctant to profess admiration for the avoidance of mother's reaction, and she does not refuse exposure to content of which are contrary to the Arabic values and traditions unlike her mother that selecting what she and her daughter watch, and this also explains the daughter's desire to own a special TV.

Either the son, consider watching TV a way to pass the time and a secondary mean of amusement at leisure time, he believes that it derives no information or behaviour from it. The researcher also noted that the interaction between family members while

watching television together was very low, as the authority of the father often led to exposure to content that cannot satisfy all the family's tastes.

Table 3: A general description of the research area: family 3, (Annex C)

The researcher concluded, that Osman's family finds television a necessary device and a priority, despite the availability of a computer connected to the Internet, the TV to Osman's family is considered as a device for rest and a way to gather family after a stressful day.

For favorite channels, the family only watches Arab channels and programs, or some soap operas dubbed into Arabic. Preferred times are the afternoon and evening period when all finish their work for full-time watching, as the researcher noticed that TV turn on only during the watching period, either outside these periods, the family switch it off.

Regarding viewing habits, the husband finds TV necessary in the various periods, especially the afternoon and evening periods, because he prefers to spend the rest time watching his favorite shows, he chooses news programs, as well as recreational and educational programs and soap operas, but the researcher noticed discontent on certain scenes immoral and beyond the Arab family habits, even on the beloved characters, for example when it happened in some shots of the family's favourite soap opera as the husband resented heroine because of wearing short skirts and putting lots of makeup on her face.

The wife finds TV an important device that cannot be abandoned, she watches TV often because she does not go out of the house, she listens to the radio sometimes as a substitute for television, she finds that the most appropriate time to watch during the afternoon, after completing household chores, as well as the absence of the son (who uses that room as a private room due to the

small size of the house). She watches the scientific and religious programs to increase her knowledge and expertise in life matters. We also noticed that the parents have preferred news channels and old sitcoms because they carry real values and reject those of love and violent stories, unlike their children, particularly the daughter who prefers songs, movies, and soap operas.

Son finds television unnecessary device, especially since he spends much time outside, plus he feels dissatisfied with television programs, but he prefers some sports programs, through what we had observed when he returned to the house as soon as his sports program had begun.

The daughter considers the television as one of the most important devices of entertainment and recreation available in the home as well as computer and mobile phone. She prefers the son's absence from home so she can watch freely, and feel sorry for not owning a TV in her room.

In total, we find that the interaction is somewhat good in this family during the combined viewing, as the daughter often yields to her parents' choices, and sometimes she is given the authority to decide the programs that like to watch, which gives more space of interaction during viewing.

Conclusions

The researcher concluded through an ethnographic study of television viewing habits for Arab families in China, a relative rise in watching TV and follow-up its programs continuously as a means of entertainment, recreation, and getting rid of daily life stress and alienation felt by a migrant Arab family. The researcher also noted that watching TV didn't affect their carrying out their duties and also didn't affect their Communication and social interaction with the environment.

There is a positive indicator of the Arab family's exposure to TV summarized in cognizance importance of global events and

issues of the day, an increase of political, economic, social, and scientific knowledge, and development of a spirit of openness to other cultures, add to learning some foreign languages.

We also concluded some changes in the Young Arab girls thinking through viewing of the Arab satellite channels, especially dubbed soap operas, which is to rebel against the traditions and values of the Arab family and the desire to be free from all social restrictions. As we concluded that the concerns of the Arabic girl often revolve around admiring television personalities, especially those that have high educational levels and belong to the elite social classes, as well as those with beauty, elegance, and intelligent characters.

Television represents for the young Arabic males a secondary way for leisure and entertainment after the internet as it provides the greatest freedom in the deal and the freedom of decision-making and viewing times.

Decision-making authority influences the choice of viewing content, especially those that contradict values, customs, and traditions of Arab families, where it was found by the study, the parental authority over their children in the selection of contents that are consistent with the values and customs of Arabic Muslim families, and refusing any extraneous incompatible cultures and religion. However, decision-making authority and imposing certain kinds of programs influence family interaction while watching television, this is what we had observed when children had turned away from viewing and had left for other things, especially when the contents do not meet their needs and desires, and their desire to watch TV on their own to get more freedom.

Although most members of the three families master the Chinese language, they watch Arabic channels and programs or only dubbed into Arabic, where the researcher

found after interviewing respondents that they do not expose to Chinese-speaking channels and programs due to the different culture and customs, which makes them feel alienated and sometimes bored, which refers to the impact of the language factor at the viewing habits.

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(Annex A)

A general description of the research area: Mr. Omar’s House					
Location	number of rooms	number of children	educational level	Occupation	Electronic devices
Wuhan City	two rooms	2	Husband: Bachelor of Commerce	Husband: Grocery store owner	TV PC InternetDVD.
		Son: 16 years old	Wife: Bachelor of Nursing	Wife: Housewife	
		Daughter: 14 years old	Children: still studying		

(Annex B)

A general description of the research area: Mr. Mazen’s House					
Location	number of rooms	number of children	educational level	Occupation	Electronic devices
Wuhan City	three rooms	2	Husband: Master in Engineering	Husband: works in an engineering office	TV PC Internet
		Son: 14 years old	Wife: Bachelor in linguistics	Wife: Housewife	
		Daughter: 15 years old	Children: still studying		

(Annex C)

A general description of the research area: Mr. Osman's House					
Location	number of rooms	number of children	educational level	Occupation	Electronic devices
Wuhan City	two rooms	2	Husband: Bachelor of Commerce.	Husband: factory worker	TV PC InternetRadio.
		Son: 13 years old			
		Daughter: 16 years old	Children: still studying		