How Audiences Respond to Media Products

There are several theories that can depict how the media audience responds to media products. These theories include; Hypodermic Needle Theory, suggesting that audiences passively digest any information given to them, Uses and Gratification Theory; suggesting that the audience is active and will respond a certain way to a media product, Reception Study; suggesting that the audience is both passive and aggressive and will react differently. I will address each theory in detail below. I will also discuss the effects of explicit such as violent and sexual content and how it is moderated.

Hypodermic Needle Theory
The Hypodermic Needle Theory implies that users are passive and will consume any media they see without question. Essentially the message conveyed in the media will be received, understood and accepted by the audience similarly to the “1984 telescreens” in George Orwell’s fictional novel 1984. These television sets played propaganda videos all day that citizens would have to watch, slowly leading to them believing everything they heard from the telescreens.

This theory was very popular when TV and radio was introduced and becoming popular around the 1940s-1950s, however it is largely disproved nowadays with published books proving the theory is wrong such as - “The People’s Choice”.
A real world example of the Hypodermic Needle Theory being practised would be the American radio series War of the Worlds, first aired in October 1938. The show was written in such a way that it appeared to be a news broadcast reporting that aliens had landed in America. Due to the lack of understanding that this was just a radio show many people passively digested the show as something that was really happening. Many people fled their homes in the city trying to hide from the “alien invasion”. Fortunately there were no reports of serious injury due to the War of the Worlds broadcast.
A small mention is Two Step Flow theory. This theory is very similar to Hypodermic Needle. It operates on the idea that if a creator of media content filters their information through an influential person, such as a celebrity, the information we then perceive is more trustworthy and therefore the creator receives a more preferred response from their audience.
For example, It is thought that Oprah Winfrey had an influence in the 2008 presidential election. She supported Barack Obama and made it clear on her show. He then ended up winning the election. In this situation, Oprah Winfrey would be seen as an opinion leader and she was able to generate awareness for Barack Obama’s campaign possibly aiding to his success.

Uses and Gratification Theory
This theory focuses more on why people use media for a reason and what they get from it. The theory also suggests the user is active and will decide what media they want to view.
This theory originates around the same time as the Hypodermic Needle Theory (around 1940s) when a woman named Herta Herzog, a social scientist, interviews soap opera fans. Once her research was complete she identified 3 types of user gratification; Emotional, Wishful Thinking and Learning.

In 1970 an American Psychologist named Abraham Maslow argued that people satisfy their needs through a hierarchy, introducing a pyramid hierarchy theory or Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

This pyramid represents what motivates people, he believed that people were motivated subconsciously to unconscious desires. Maslow studied what he called exemplary people such as Albert Einstein and Frederick Douglas rather than mentally ill people stating that the study of “unhealthy specimens can yield only a cripple psychology and a cripple philosophy”.

The theory suggests once a person has achieved one level of the pyramid to completion they will unknowingly begin working to achieve the next level.

Maslow added to Herta Herzogs types of gratification with the levels from his pyramid with (from bottom to top); Biological/physical, security/Safety, social/Belonging, Ego/Self-respect and Self-actualisation. Around this time also Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail researched why people watched political programmes, from their research they added 4 more categories: Diversion, personal relationships, personal identity and surveillance.

An example of Uses and Gratification is how we all use media for certain reasons. I use media such as video games as a means of diversion to escape my normal life and play out as fictional characters in fantasy worlds. I also use sites like Reddit.com as a form of entertainment but also as an educational resource.

**Reception Theory**

Reception Theory focuses on how an audience will respond to media. It suggests that a user is passive or aggressive depending on how they react to the media. Stuart Hall, a cultural theorist, explained that the role of social positioning in the interpretation of mass media texts by different social groups.

Hall developed a philosophy known as “encoding and decoding” to explain how certain media is specifically inserted in a certain way to convey the ideal message to the audience. Essentially a producer, or encoder, will convey a message in the piece of media they are creating that the audience will then digest. However Hall argued that this message sent by the encoder will not work completely because the audience is not totally passive and will take their own meaning out of the media they see. Hall stated that the audience’s interpretation of the message will depend on that person's personal background allowing them to have a unique view on any given piece of media.

Hall went on to explain that there are several ways that an audience can interpret a piece of media. Preferred: the reader receives the message given in the media source and believes it. An example a magazine prints an article on a new weight loss strategy that works 100% of the time, if the reader has a preferred response to the article they will believe it without question. This response is similar to the Hypodermic Needle Theory. The second way is a
Negotiated response; The reader understands what is being told in the media source and partly accepts what it, then goes on to apply it to their own life. Continuing the previous example the reader this time would consider using the new weight loss strategy and eventually end up trying it. Finally the last response is a rejected response. In this response the user understand the media given to them but rejects it and find their own unique view on it. In our example the user would read the magazine article about a new weight loss strategy and they would refuse to even try it because they do not believe the diet could that effective or they believe the need for the diet does not apply to them.

The Effects of Media

The media can affect people in many ways. News stations can influence how people perceive certain stories by carefully controlling how the story is told to an audience. Video Games get a lot of attention in the media due to a lot of games having large amounts of extreme violence, and whether this is related to real world violence.

Focusing on video games we know the following; Firstly, unlike watching tv where the user is in a passive state, playing a videogame is an active experience and therefore a much more engaging task. People learn more from actively doing something rather than watching somebody on tv do it. So if a video game shows players the correct way to shoot a weapon the user may be able to translate some of those skills to the real world.

Second, many violent games are featured in 1st person, allowing the player to see the game through the protagonists eyes. This may lead to the player being able to personally identify with the protagonist much easier that trying to relate to a character from a tv show. A study in 2007 shows that players behave more aggressively in the real world if they associate themselves with a violent character in a video game.

Finally the use of rewards in violent games can lead to players becoming more aggressive because they are being given verbal praise or a high score based on bad behavior in the game. It has been known for years that verbal praise has a direct correlation with performance. A real world example could be somebody’s job performance increasing after being given praise or a pay rise from their boss.

To summarize these points it is clear that games, particularly violent games, can affect the way the player acts in real life outside of the game.

However many recent homicidal attacks and public shootings have led to believe that violent video games and films are to blame for these criminals actions. For these accusations to be true that would mean that The Hypodermic Needle Theory were true, that an audience member would play a mission in Grand Theft Auto where they had to shoot up a rival gang and think that it was an acceptable thing to do. However many of these accusations have been instantly disproved of due to many research papers being published that there is no correlation between violence in videogames and TV and these public shootings.
Effects of Advertising

Advertising is the promotion of a product. This promotion can be done several ways through forms of video adverts seen on tv, pictures in magazines or audio adverts for radio. Advertising can also be used to inform the public and help them make better choices on what products they want to purchase. For example many anti smoking adverts are put in place to educate the public on the dangers of smoking and how it can lead to numerous illnesses like cancer.

Negative Advertisement

Advertising constantly receives a bad reputation for having a negative impact on society. In many female fashion magazines companies will often use very slim beautiful models to showcase their clothes. By doing this they make their product seem glamorous however they can alienate people who do not look like these models and make them feel worse about their body image. Furthermore these materialistic themes are constantly pushed in advertising in the sense that people are not happy until they own the certain product that is being advertised.

Another type of advertisement seen increasingly as the general election approaches are political adverts. These can come across as very childish as candidates attack each other through advertisements, making sure the public can see how awful their opponents are rather than focus on their own points.

Positive Advertising

A newer development of advertising taken on by Dove is the use of younger women in their advertisements to help boost their self-esteem. These advertisements focus on inner beauty of women rather than the exterior that many body products choose to focus on. Dove choose to focus on this campaign of feeling good about yourself to indirectly sell their product because people may feel more inclined to purchase their products to support their cause.

Positive and Negative Advertising

This form of advertising is most popular as it allows companies to directly compare their products to others without coming across as childish as the political advertisements. An example of this could be car advertising. In these adverts car companies may compare their car to another car of a similar type. They will highlight features where their car will outperform the other through gas milage or price.

Another form of this could be in public service announcements. Like I mentioned above these adverts tend to be mainly informative and focus a lot on health of the public. These adverts
mainly aim for a shock factor, showing a gruesome picture of the effects of a certain activity to almost traumatise people into not doing it. While this is slightly unethical because it is scaring people into not doing something it is very effective at delivering its message.