

# **Chasing Success: A Cultivated Reality**

The Honors Program

Senior Capstone Project

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### **ABSTRACT**

George Gerbner's cultivation theory claims that people who consume heavy amounts of media are more likely to be influenced by those messages to believe the media reality as opposed to actual reality. Using cultivation theory as the basis for study, I performed a cultivation analysis examining the intersection of mass media and perceptions of success among college-aged young adults living in the United States. The analysis focused on three main points: (1) How mass media perceives and subsequently demonstrates success. (2) The impact of mass media on young adults living in America. (3) What reality of success is cultivated by these young adults. The top five most-watched music videos from the past five years were analyzed for perceptions of success. Seventy-nine students from Bryant University were surveyed. A message analysis of the music videos revealed that wealth as well as conformity to certain standards of physical perfection and gender-specific behaviors were key elements of success. This study found that college-aged young adults who are heavier consumers of music videos tended to share the perceptions of success as perpetuated by the media over those who are light viewers. However, there were certain elements of success where the intersection of college-aged young adults' perceptions of success and media were more nuanced and complicated.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The goal of this project is to examine and define the intersection of mass media and perceptions of success of college-aged young adults living in the United States. Specifically, this project focuses on three major points:

1. How mass media perceives and subsequently demonstrates success
2. The impact of mass media on college-aged young adults living in America (the influence of mass media)
3. What reality of success is cultivated by these college-aged young adults

This is a relevant topic. With the evolution of technology, especially in the transportation and communication industries, information and ideas are shared in the blink of an eye. With all the data constantly streaming around us in ever increasing amounts, I believe it is important to monitor our surroundings and how they affect us. The information carriers with the greatest reach and penetration are mass media. Sometimes the messages carried in mass media are attempts at true reflections of real life. The danger comes when, for economic or production reasons, those reflections are less-than-accurate. They become not necessarily accurate reflections upon life but a distorted or incomplete version. The messages contained in the mass media should be analyzed by media literate consumers so they are aware of potential biases or even agenda setting and how it may affect what they believe.

Young adults are still in the process of molding their identities. They are especially reliant on others for guidance. A major source of guidance, whether they know it or not, comes from media. Out of all the age groups, young adults are among the most vulnerable to the messages

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of mass media. Additionally, Americans make many important decisions that may affect them for the rest of their life during their youth.

I chose to explore this topic not only because I think it is essential to be aware of the effects of media but because I am a young adult myself. I have personal and current experience with the topic. I remember what it was like being an adolescent. I remember becoming increasingly aware of how what I was reading, watching, and listening to was affecting the way I thought. It shaped what I thought was important, what I thought about myself, and what kind of person I thought I should become. Even now I am aware how messages I absorbed from mass media have affected my aspirations of success.

The purpose of this project is to determine the relationship between media consumption and perceptions of success in college-aged young adults. In doing this, I hope to help young adults increase their media literacy skills. I hope to help them become aware of the line between what they may actually believe and what they come to believe through the media they consume, detrimental or not. What they then choose to do with the information is up to them, but this way they can more consciously make choices about their futures.

It must be noted that by mass media I am referring only to what is generated by media corporations. Perceptions of success shown through user-generated content such as on platforms like YouTube and other social media platforms are not the focus. A traditional research approach will best support my investigation. I will be using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods in a cultivation analysis to conduct my research.

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### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

There is a social reality assumption behind many theories of mass communication. This assumption holds that we live in a “real” material world of circumstances and events. The media then simply provides a reflection and reports of this actuality. Yet the degree, accuracy, dependability, or completeness of what is reflected and reported on by mass media varies significantly (McQuail 8). It is from this variance that my project is rooted. It should be noted that some of the material included in my review is conducted from outside the United States. The relationship between mass media and the populace is different according to different nations and cultures, so what is found in these studies is not necessarily true to the United States. However, the included studies conducted from an international standpoint are very broad in scope and may be applicable on a general basis.

#### **Background/History**

The definition of success has changed throughout American history. What college-aged young adults aspire to today is not the same as what they aspired to even fifty years ago. One simply needs to look at the changing definition of the American Dream to see how perceptions of success had changed over time. The American Dream represents the quintessence of success in the collective American consciousness and the pinnacle of aspirations, but it is not a fixed ideal. It has changed and evolved as American society has changed and evolved. One of the reasons for the changing American Dream, for changing

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perceptions of success, in modern times is the advent of television and other mass media. My project explores if and how mass media has affected beliefs in about success for college-aged young adults. A key communication theory backing my research efforts is the cultivation theory.

In 1976 communication researcher George Gerbner, with the help of colleagues, developed the cultivation theory. It has become one of the core theories of media effects. The cultivation theory claims that people who watch television are more likely to be influenced by the messages contained within that television reality as opposed to actual reality (“Communication Theory”). The theory was derived from several large-scale projects entitled “Cultural Indicators” which comprised several comprehensive research projects. The project was part of a commission by then President Lyndon B. Johnson that addressed issues of violence in America. Of specific interest was the effects of television violence on audiences (Davie). It was through his work with the “Cultural Indicators” project that Gerbner began forming the cultivation theory. With his theory, Gerber went beyond the initial focus of violence and looked at the messages contained in television as a whole. The cultivation theory claims that not only will television viewers be influenced by what they are watching, they will actually start to alter their world view and perceptions to reflect the messages they received through watching television (“Communication Theory”). The beliefs of the people who watch television will be different from those who watch far less or do not watch at all. While this theory was first formulated in regards to the effects of watching television on viewers, it can and has been expanded to cover other forms of mass media.

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The following literature review is a summation of the traditional review of research that applies to my topic. I delve further into the idea of the American Dream, the cultivation theory, and the observed effects of mass media consumption on young Americans.

#### Changing Definitions of Success: The Example of the American Dream

When studying the perceptions of success among Americans, one has but to look at the American Dream to realize that what Americans define as success has changed through time. Historian James Truslow Adam described the first American Dream as a promise of a nation where people had the chance for upward social mobility through their own labor and ingenuity (Gale). That was the definition of success in the early days of America. That concept has since evolved. During westward expansion, the dream for success was owning land and making a life for oneself. After World War II, Americans dreamed of owning homes filled with a family that vacationed every summer. Today that ideal has changed yet again. The ability to afford all modern accessories from college educations to cars is the new ideal for success. The advent of television was a driving force behind this shift towards the acquisition of material goods as a key to success. Americans dreamed of living lives like those they saw portrayed on television (Gale). Already the influence of mass media was making itself felt with changing perceptions of success.

Young adults perhaps have their own vision of the American Dream; of what they aspire to.

*Fortune* magazine partnered with the largest staffing company in the world, Adecco, to survey young adults aged eighteen to twenty-four in 2014. The survey found that 34 percent of respondents said their biggest priority was career advancement. Only 6 percent regarded



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getting married as a priority, and only 4 percent wanted to start a family (Asghar). The results of this survey, along with others research, indicate that contemporary young adults see personal achievement as the key to success. This capstone project seeks to further define what aspects of personal achievement define success and how mass media content affects these perceptions.

### Demonstrating the Influence of Mass Media

In his book *Mass Communication Theory*, eminent communication theorist Denis McQuail argues that mass media have a lot of power. This belief is based on an observation of media's reach and apparent impact. Most doubts as to the potency of media's influence on the so-called "masses" were removed after the World Wars. The press, especially news and entertainment media, were mobilized in propaganda efforts with exceptional results (59). Even today the effect of press in shaping public opinion and beliefs can be felt. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, media coverage following government authorities' accusations of al Qaeda involvement largely shaped public opinion in support of the war effort (Curtis). Although there have been enormous changes in media institutions and technology since their advent in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been little change in public debate over the potential social significance in terms of affecting the beliefs of its consumers.

The extent of influence depends on the availability and pervasiveness of media. With the advent of the Internet and game-changing innovations in the communication industry, mass media is more available and pervasive than ever and in greater varieties. Books were once the most prevalent form of mass media and wielded great influence. As they were introduced and

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developed, newspapers and magazines gained greater appeal. Film, radio, and television are perhaps the most influential of all (McQuail 61). Television today exposes viewers to untold images about advertising and marketing, suffering, relief, sexuality, violence, celebrity status and behavior, and more (Curtis). Television alone holds so many messages. One must imagine the compounded effect of the messages contained in other forms of mass media such as music, film, print, and the Internet.

Americans today are reliant on information and communication. Even in daily life they rely on it for work, education, health, relationships, and many other activities. According to Dr. Anthony R. Curtis, mass media exposure is everywhere in the daily life of Americans. It is common to wake up and check the cellphone for messages and notifications, watch TV or read the newspaper for news, then make decisions based on the information gathered from those sources (Curtis). People are exposed to and absorbing mass media messages carried on an everyday basis. So much exposure and absorption must, and has been demonstrated to, have an effect on what people believe.

### **Influences on the Influencers: Differences Between Mass Media Content and Social Reality**

Before delving into specific examples of how mass media has influenced young adults, an analysis of media content itself must be performed. Decades of research and many theoretical perspectives have been proposed around the subject of the veracity and dependability of the mass media content. Communication professors Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese compiled a list of theoretical perspectives on media content. There is the previously mentioned mirror approach that media content reflects social reality with little to no

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distortion. Another approach claims that content is influenced by psychological factors intrinsic to communication personnel-- such as their professional, personal, and political attitudes. This leads them to produce their own social reality where agreement among social groups is the norm and new ideas or behaviors are treated as undesirable. Yet another theoretical approach claims that content is influenced by media routines, or the way that the communicators and their companies organize work. For example, if reporters are taught to write stories in an inverted pyramid style they are going to place what they consider important first and everything else in descending order (Shoemaker and Reese 6). In other words, outside factors influence what is portrayed in media. These subjective views are then spread to thousands of people through mass media's wide reach.

The point is that the messages contained in mass media may be an accurate reflection of reality, but sometimes they may not. However, all of the messages are reflections of someone else's reality. Therefore, difference often exists between social reality and the reality perceived by audiences. The relevance to this capstone project is that representations of success as shown in the media shape views of millions of people through their broad range.

### **Cultivation Theory**

The key concept behind this project is contained in the cultivation theory. As previously mentioned, cultivation theory was developed by George Gerbner in the 1970s and is one of the most influential theories in mass communication research ("Cultivation Theory").

Cultivation theory is a positivist theory. Positivism is an approach to studying society that specifically employs quantitative scientific evidence such as experiments and surveys to

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reveal a truth about the way society functions and operates. Positivism assumes that information derived through sensory experience and interpreted through reason and logic forms the exclusive source of all certain knowledge (Crossman). Simply put, positivism assumes that it is possible to establish reliable knowledge about how society works through observations of social life.

Cultivation theory represents a hybrid theory that combines both macroscopic and microscopic cultural theories and addresses macro-level questions about the role media in society (Baran and Davis 287). The cultivation theory first developed by Gerbner and his associates during the Cultural Indicators Project held that viewers who are exposed to greater amounts of television are more likely to display perceptions and beliefs that reflect the reality shown in television (Potter). Their main argument went beyond the idea that television viewers were more likely to give an answer closer to the reality they saw on television rather than actual reality. Instead television, as a mainstream form of communication, was a “message system” that “cultivates” a worldview that, though possibly inaccurate, people believe to represent reality (Baran and Davis 287). People live in terms of the stories they tell, argued Gerbner. Television tells stories to almost everybody all the time, through mass-produced messages and images that form the mainstream of the common symbolic environment which cultivates the most widely shared conceptions of reality (Gerbner et. al.). Early writings about cultivation theory contained no defined theoretical calculus guiding measurement methods (Potter). However, what Gerbner did conclude was that although television’s impact is perhaps beyond clear-cut scientific measurement, its impact on the collective consciousness of reality is real and important (Baran and Davis 289). Researchers

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have since developed the theory, expanding it beyond the scope of television and creating a quantifiable research method through a four-step process called a cultivation analysis.

Cultivation analyses have been used to determine the frequency of certain messages in media content, and surveys were then used to ask viewers about their perceptions and beliefs about the real world (Potter). Gerbner's initial research focused on issues of violence in the media. Communication researchers have employed cultivation analyses to investigate the impact of media issues such as acceptance of sexual stereotypes, mental health, political participation, environmental concern, and many more topics (Baran and Davis). Cultivation was expanded from television as a specific medium to the role of mass media in shaping societal beliefs as a whole.

Much research has been conducted into the effects of mass media. However, the research into the cultivation effect on other media as compared to studies on television are limited.

Oftentimes they are not directly applicable to Americans as they were performed on international subjects. Nor are they always directly applicable to college-aged young adults in America and their perceptions of success. There is a particular gap in research of media effects on college-aged young adults compared to adolescents. It is upon this lack of material that this capstone project seeks to expand and add knowledge to.

### **Criticisms and Defense of the Cultivation Theory**

Gerbner's cultivation theory is a key part of this project. Criticisms do exist over potential pitfalls to cultivation theory. One criticism delivered by Jennings Bryant postulates that cultivation theory research focuses more on the effects of the media rather than what or who

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is actually being influenced (Bryant). An additional critique of cultivation theory is that while it studies the effects of mass media on surroundings, it does not consider the “lived experience” of the consumers, and sometimes correlation is mistaken for causation (Chandler). Those who have actual experience with the subject matter are less likely to be influenced by said media content. Despite criticisms, the cultivation theory remains the preeminent theory in the study of communication today. After all, “As long as there are popular storytelling systems and purveyors of widely shared messages, Gerbner’s main ideas are likely to persist,” wrote Michael Morgan and James Shanahan (350).

#### Studies Showing Observed Effects of Mass Media on Young Adults

For young adults, exposure to mass media has increased. In fact, the impact of mass media on adolescents and young adults has been directly observed. For instance, a 2005 study of 208 young adults was conducted to measure their perceptions and responses to their favorite characters on television and wishful identification with them. Wishful identification is the desire to be or act like these characters. Aspects measured included perceived similarity and character attributes such as a character’s attractiveness, humor, or status as someone to be admired. Both male and female respondents identified more strongly with characters perceived as successful and admired, though the attributes of success differed for each gender. Males wishfully identified with male characters who were intelligent and violent. Women identified with female characters portrayed as intelligent, attractive, and admired (Buchanan and Hoffner). This study implied that after being exposed to these television characters the

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perceptions of who these young adults thought they should be changed to reflect characteristics of the fictional characters.

Another study examined the relationship between exposure to sexual themes in music videos and young adults' sexual attitudes and beliefs. A sample of 266 undergraduate students was shown a range of seventy-five music videos of varying sexual explicitness. Results indicated that exposure to more sexually explicit music videos was associated with greater permissiveness towards premarital sex. It also revealed a stronger endorsement of sexual double standards regardless of the gender, overall television exposure, or previous sexual experience of the participants (Harrison et. al.) A similar study was conducted on 314 adolescents aged eighteen to twenty. This project measured several ways television viewing related to adolescents' sexual attitudes and expectations. Results found that a greater involvement with sexual content on television was associated with higher endorsement of permissive attitudes towards sex, higher expectations of peers' sexual activity, and more extensive sexual experience (Ward and Rivadeneyra). Studies across two separate mass media types found similar results. They found that more permissive attitudes towards sex were then reflected in those who consumed the media versus those who did not.

### **The White Male**

One issue that must be taken into account when defining success in the eyes of the mass media and in college-aged young adults is representation. Too often media, due largely to latent and manifest discriminatory attitudes towards non-whites and females, in the past only focused on the white experience. It defined success on the terms of the white person,

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especially the white male. He was held up as the model for which all must strive (La Pierre). This was especially prevalent in film and television. Mass media continually reproduced the ideological hegemony of the dominant culture, the white culture. Minorities such as Hispanics and African-Americans were historically ignored or misrepresented in mass media (La Pierre). Counseling psychologist Tao Liu conducted a study on how Asian-American men experience gendered racism, in a society where the white American man has become the standard for attractiveness. She surveyed 900 Asian American men and found that they often felt as if they were perceived as undesirable and too passive, lacking in masculinity. This image has been further influenced by the mass media where few Asian American male leads exist, and only recently have Asian characters been cast as love-interests in general (Soong). If non-white characters or actors had little to no presence in the mass media, how could they be used to define success except by the undesirability and inferiority implicated by their very absence?

Even when non-white characters are portrayed in mass media, they are often not fairly represented. They are frequently portrayed as minor characters with few to no lines. They are typically characterized as immoral and criminal, to which the requisite white protagonist was set in contrast. The popular 1950's television show *Amos 'n' Andy* portrayed people of African-American descent as lazy, dumb and dishonest, without skill or ethics (Scherker). This made it clear that the white characters were the models towards which viewers should aspire. Perhaps even worse was that when a non-white character played a major role, they were often white-washed. This was a very common practice in Hollywood (Lacina). Instead of casting someone of Middle-Eastern descent, white American actress Elizabeth Taylor was



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chosen to portray the famous Egyptian queen Cleopatra in the 1963 film of the same name. White actor Mickey Rooney donned yellowface to play Asian character Mr. Yunioshi in the American classic *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Scherker). Yet another white actress, Tilda Swinton, was cast in a major role as a traditionally Asian character in one of the Marvel Franchise's latest box office sensations *Doctor Strange*. An article in *Fordham Political Review* revealed that even today, only 12.4 percent of characters with lines in the top 500 grossing movies from 2007 to 2012 were cast with African-American actors. The research article went on to discuss how even though only 63.7 percent of the United States population is white, excluding Hispanics, 75.8 percent roles if those same 500 top grossing films were given to white actors (Lacina). Representation of non-white characters, and casting of non-white actors, has been on the rise in mass media. However, there is still clearly a gap in representation between representation of whites and non-whites in the mass media so vigorously consumed by college-aged young adults. The importance is that when looking to mass media as an influencing force for perceptions of success, one must consider whose success they are showing.

This historic and continued portrayal of non-whites and how representation has or has not changed will not necessarily be the focus of this project. However, this project will need to be sensitive of the historical representations in mass media, in terms of race. If the definition of success in mass media was and still is mainly through a white lens, the effect should be noted in the outcomes of this study.

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#### Cultural Considerations

Besides the white male as the traditional media representation of success, this project must take another factor into consideration. Studies have shown that media does not necessarily affect people of different backgrounds the same way.

Variations in the influence of mass media on different racial and ethnic groups has manifested over a range of topics. One study tested the relationship between consumption of sports magazines and body satisfaction among adolescents aged ten to nineteen years of age. While the study found similarities in how white and non-white participants of the study were influenced, such as a greater body satisfaction among older adolescents regardless of ethnicity, there were also differences. White participants who watched videos of lean sports, where weight and appearance are central to success, showed an increase in self-objectification. The study found that non-white participants exhibited the same reaction in increased self-objectification, but this resulted from watching non-lean sports where weight and appearance were less central to success (Fredrickson and Harrison). There is further evidence of how cultural and racial differences may lead to different perceptions of success. Prudence L. Carter wrote about how Asian, African-American, Hispanic, and White students often orient themselves in culturally different ways. This means they do not necessarily form the same perceptions of success. Carter described how some Black and Latino students perceived how those more privileged “make it” and sought to emulate their characteristics as much as possible in search of higher social mobility. They strove for the high-prestige jobs that are glamorized by mass media (25). Carter explained how many studies documented how

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minority students believed in the benefits of education as important to their future, sometimes more so than their white counterparts (26). A 2002 study for the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* examined perceptions of success between African Americans and whites, as influenced by mass media. The study found that there were two different portrayals of African Americans in media: comfortable and successful versus unemployed and criminal. Rick Buselle and Heather Crandall, who conducted the study, concluded that this dichotomized representation influenced viewers' perceptions of socio-economic success as well as perceived reasons for failure to attain such success (280). An awareness of how cultural and racial differences may change what is received from media will be necessary for this project.

### Issues and Challenges Arising from Mass Media: Why It is Important to Be Wary of the Messages in Mass Media

Mass media content holds many messages, some benign and some not. It has been shown that these mass media messages are absorbed by young adults. It is important to be aware of how the perceptions in mass media effect American youth aspirations. Case in point, mass media holds many messages about body health: what is healthy, what is beautiful and desirable, and what one should look like. A cross-sectional survey was conducted of over 500 girls ranging from fifth graders to seniors in high school by *Pediatrics*, the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics. The study measured how mass media impacted the girls' beliefs about body weight and shape, and how those beliefs then manifested into real life actions (Cheung et. al.).

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The results of the study were conclusive:

- 69 percent of those surveyed reported that magazine pictures influenced their idea of the perfect body shape
- 47 percent reported wanting to lose weight because of magazine images
- Frequent readers of fashion magazines were two to three times more likely to diet as a result of a magazine article

The study found a positive linear association between the frequency of these young girls' women's fashion magazines consumption and the prevalence of starting to diet and/or exercise to lose weight. They also wanted to lose weight to achieve what the magazines presented as the perfect body shape. The magazines had one perception of beauty, of success, and the perceptions of those who read the magazines changed to match what they saw. The girls who did not read the magazines or were infrequent readers were much more likely to retain their original perceptions.

These changes in perception could lead to a healthier life. It could be the inspiration for young people to stop harmful eating habits or pursue more active lifestyles. This would be especially helpful in a time when an obesity epidemic is sweeping the nation. Yet while these changes in perception can improve the lives of these girls, they can also be dangerous. Many girls and young women of average proportions have been influenced to want to look like the images of the ultra-thin models and celebrities they regularly see in media. Unfortunately, this has led to many acquiring eating disorders that lead to serious health issues and even death (Curtis). If these girls and women had been informed media consumers, perhaps they could be less

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unconsciously susceptible to what they see and read in these magazines or on television or the myriad other forms of mass media they are exposed to.

#### Choosing A Medium

Music was used as the medium for the purposes of this project. Specifically, music videos were the source of my content analysis. The reason I chose music is because of its prevalence in the lives of young adults, especially as other forms of traditional mass media consumption change. According to a Nielsen study conducted in 2014, 93 percent of the United States' population listens to music, spending more than twenty-five hours per week tuned in. In fact, Nielsen found that 75 percent of American actively choose to listen to music whereas only 73 percent actively watch television (Nielsen). The Entertainment Retail Association partnered with the British Phonographic Industries, surveying approximately 1000 people to get a feel for daily listening habits. They found that those in the sixteen to twenty-four age group listens to 75.1 percent more of music daily than older counterparts. Even the minority of 47 percent who listened to music fewer than three hours a day were still consuming music on a daily basis (Resnikoff). Clearly, music plays a major role in society and especially in the lives of young adults.

Cognitive psychologist and neuroscientist Daniel Levitin noted in an interview that the music of one's teenage years is fundamentally intertwined with one's social life. He explained how adolescents and college-aged young adults are discovering music on their own for the first time, often as a social experience that bonds groups (Stern). The music, and what is represented in the music, melds to one's sense of identity. Additionally, one's brain undergoes

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rapid neurological development between the ages of twelve to twenty-two. As the brain changes, neural connections are being made with the music being listened to (Stern).

Researchers at the University of Leeds proposed that the period between twelve to twenty-two years of age is when a person comes into his or her own. It is when their true personality, values, and beliefs emerge. In other words, that is the time period in which one's self emerges (Stern). This shows that the music a person listens to when young often has a lasting influence over their beliefs.

Edison Research released a study that found that 52.1 percent of Americans listen to the broadcast radio for their music, higher than any other channel for consumption. Edison found that 75 percent of Americans between ages twelve to twenty-four listen to the online radio every month (Stutz). As radio is the most prevalent channel for music consumption, the artists and songs that have been among the most popular on the radio shall be the focus of this project. The perceptions of success represented in their songs and music videos shall be set as the standard to which to compare and analyze the perceptions of success held by college-aged young adults.

So why choose music videos? As evidenced, music has an important impact on both society and culture in general and adolescents and young adults specifically. Much research has been conducted on music. Studies have examined physiological effects; articles have researched demographic consumption. There is a proliferation of research into the effects of television consumption on the views of young adults. Yet when conducting a review of literature, there

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was little material about specific influences of music videos regarding perceptions of success though it plays such a central role in the lives of young adults.

#### Success Defined by Music: An Example

A relevant example of how success has been represented in music videos can be found in the work of Taylor Swift. Whether one likes her music or not, she has achieved massive success in the music industry. Swift is constantly plastered across magazines and headlines. She has millions of fans all listening to her music, watching her music videos, and ultimately being influenced by the messages contained with her work.

Take for example Swift's popular 2015 song "Bad Blood." The song itself was essentially a challenge to a rival. But what was really important was the highly-hyped music video that accompanied the song. For this video, Swift pulled together a large group of her friends. What was interesting was that every single one of her friends was an A-list celebrity. They were all ultra-skinny, dressed provocatively, and had flawless features. No non-famous people were shown in the video, except briefly as henchman getting defeated. So what kind of messages does this music video contain about success? It does convey images of female empowerment, which is a positive influence. However, a young woman may find herself unconsciously comparing her body and her life to the women depicted on the screen, with their perfect bodies and high-profile lives. She may start thinking that these women represent the pinnacle of success, however unrealistic and unattainable these expectations are. She may find herself believing in the reality that the ideal women should be skinny, have a perfect body and

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features, and be very popular. She conflates success with a certain physical look and social status, her views having been shaped by mass media.

#### **In Summation**

The definition of success in the minds of Americans has changed over time. The modern definition exists in part due to the influence of mass media. One must be wary of how representation in media and ethnic and racial differences may affect perceptions of success. Sometimes media content reflects reality and sometimes what is represented in media differs from social reality. However, the messages carried in mass media are influential on the perceptions of those who consume it. Those who consume media more heavily are more likely than light consumers to believe in the reality implied by the media as opposed to actual reality. This difference between social reality and media reality has the potential to change the perceptions of young adults.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: CULTIVATION ANALYSIS**

### **What is a Cultivation Analysis?**

In order to analyze young adults' perceptions of success cultivated by media, a cultivation analysis was performed. A cultivation analysis is a research technique that is used for systematically evaluating communication texts of different formats (i.e. documents, graphics, audio, visual etc.) in order to quantify and analyze concepts and patterns in communication.

The cultivation analysis involved four steps:



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1. Conduct a message system analysis, that is, a detailed content analyses of music videos as my chosen medium to assess the most recurring and consistent presentations of success.
2. Develop questions about young adults' social realities of success, based on the results from the message system analysis.
3. Survey young adults, posing the questions from step two and asking them about their amount of music video consumption.
4. Compare my participants' social realities to the "realities" of success presented in my medium of choice (music) and to success in the real world

## **RESEARCH AND RESULTS**

### **Message System Analysis**

For the first step of the cultivation analysis, I assessed artists and songs from the most popular mainstream genres to define the perceptions of success as presented by mass media. I focused on music with widespread appeal, which had the most-far reaching music videos and therefore was consumed the most by the young adult population. The most-watched music videos from the popular songs from the past five years- 2014 to 2017- were analyzed (Appendix A). How were the people showcased in these videos, which have been viewed by millions, presented? How did they act, and what characteristics were most emphasized? A frequency analysis of the most consistent messages across the videos, both visually and lyrically, revealed the following:

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1. An emphasis on physical perfection
2. Gender-specific standards of behavior for males and females
3. Importance of conformity to standards as opposed to true individuality
4. Importance of wealth

Through lyrics and visual representations, an emphasis on physical perfection was perhaps the most notable and consistent message contained within the music videos (Appendix B). Out of the twenty-five music videos, twenty-three showcased characters with no physical flaws.

Cultivation theory suggests that society holds different body standards for men versus women (Cable and Judge 1). This was evident during the course of the message analysis of the twenty-five music videos. With this stress on physical perfection, a set of standards for what constituted physical perfection was laid out for males and females respectively (Appendices C and D). The music videos constructed a reality where everyone has flawless skin. Twenty-three of the twenty-five videos showcased characters who had zero blemishes or wrinkles.

The standard varied slightly by gender. In the world constructed by the music videos, only one of the twenty-five videos showed a female character with flawed skin. Ninety-six percent of the female characters had youthful, smooth skin. Male characters were allowed to show imperfections such as age slightly more. A slightly lower percentage of 92 percent of the male characters had perfect skin. Further specific standards for male and female beauty were set out. In the case of these music videos, women were thin while men were muscled. Nineteen of the music videos showcased female characters who were very thin, while only ten showed women who had more normal bodies and were curvy or a mixture of both curvy and thin. No videos showed women who were overweight. Eighteen videos showed male characters who

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were very muscular and toned, with broad chests that narrowed into lean abs. In contrast, only twelve of the videos showcased men who were on the slim side and lacked some form of visible upper-body musculature, and only six showed men who were overweight. The music videos built a reality where women were very styled, in terms of wearing makeup and having styled as opposed to natural hair. All twenty-five of the music videos highlighted women who were wearing makeup and had put-together appearances. For males, fifteen of the twenty-five videos emphasized a suave male character who sported trendy looks and styled hair. Males characters had a little more leeway than their female counterparts. The implications of this emphasis on physical perfection, and compliance with certain standards of said perfection is that a reality was suggested by these songs and their accompanying music videos where physical looks were a key part of their success. It should be noted that there was little to no representation throughout the videos of LGBT characters.

The songs and music videos contained behavioral traits according to gender (Appendices C and D). One message was about the degree of emotional availability and vulnerability one should demonstrate, especially as a source of strength and healing. Fifteen of the songs showcased female characters openly showing their emotions. Only seven of the songs showcased male characters openly expressing their emotions. Instead, male characters were portrayed with a “tough guy” persona in fifteen of the videos. They were portrayed as tough 72 percent more than females, who were only portrayed as “tough” seven times. Female characters tended towards sexually provocative behavior. They were depicted as such 72 percent more than their male counterparts. Male characters tended to display more aggressive behavior, 43 percent more than female characters. The music videos suggested a world of

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tough men and emotional females where men tend to be aggressive and women provocative in order to achieve their ends.

Perhaps the two most important messages from across most of the twenty-five songs and accompanying music videos was the significance of wealth and importance of conformity (Appendix B). These, out of all the messages contained within these songs, were the most consistent. The importance of conformity versus true individuality was emphasized when only eleven of the twenty-five songs, 40 percent, promoted individuality over all else. True individuality was portrayed in the music videos less than half the time. While characters sported some unique looks through clothing, hairstyles, passions etc. both lyrically and visually, those differences still largely conformed to overarching standards of behavior and beauty. Perhaps a female character was wearing a red dress while all the other female characters she was leading were wearing black dresses. She was dancing slightly different steps from the others. Yet sexually provocative behavior was still central to her character and she was very thin. Truly diverse sets of characters who came in all shapes and sizes and differed from the norm, were shown at times, but not as often as sets of characters who essentially looked and behaved the same with only minor, superficial differences. The message, then, was one of how the successful person was defined by certain standards with little room for divergence. Wealth, however unconsciously, is perhaps the ultimate symbol of success in music video reality. Twenty-one out of the twenty-five music videos either alluded to or explicitly stated the importance of wealth. Many lyrics referenced money and items and experiences relating to the possession of wealth. Visually, characters were highlighted virtually flaunting a gamut of luxurious possessions. They sported designer clothing, drove

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expensive cars, consumed expensive alcohol, etc. They owned big houses or were spotted in exotic, lavish locales.

All these messages coalesce to form a picture of success and how to achieve it. Wealth is the goal. This success is helped by achieving key factors such as physical perfection and complying with certain behavioral norms all while maintaining a sense of individuality.

### Actual Reality Versus Music Video Reality

#### *Emphasis on Physical Perfection*

When comparing the most prevalent messages in the music videos and the reality they create to the real world, differences emerge. For example, in the reality suggested by the music videos physical perfection is key. One of the standards for physical perfection is having flawless skin, with twenty-three out of twenty-five of the music videos highlighting characters with unblemished skin (Appendix B). In reality, 85 percent of people between the ages twelve to twenty-four years of age experience at least minor acne (American Academy of Dermatology). The cost of having perfect skin like the celebrities in the music videos and in other media can be far from attainable for the average person. Take the Kardashians for example. These genetically gifted sisters dominate the media. One of their signature characteristics, along with many other celebrities, is possessing “as-if-airbrushed” skin (Winter). It now goes without question that the Kardashians have enviable, flawless skin. Yet an analysis of Kim Kardashian’s skin care regimen estimates she regularly spends as much as a staggering \$2,565 (Montell). That estimated \$2,565 only includes the cost of one-time

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purchases of beauty items, and does not even calculate the full cost of year-round upkeep. She may have practically airbrushed skin, but she spent a lot of money to help make it that way.

Another standard of physical perfection was the standard of thin women and muscular men (Appendices C and D). Heavy media consumers may believe in a reality of ultra-thin females and muscular males, as presented in these music videos. Reality is different. Nineteen of the twenty-five music videos, both visually and lyrically, emphasized women who were ultra-thin. The average fashion model size in the United States, whose proportions are representational of what is seen in the music videos, is size double zero to zero. In contrast, the average American women size is around twelve to fourteen ("Body Image"). Eighteen of the videos highlighted muscular, built men. The average male model is a size 40, but the actual average size for American men is size 44. The average male model weighs 170 pounds (Williams). The average American male weighs 195 pounds, according to the CDC (Vakharia). As described by an article written under the University of Texas, the ideal man in media – as has been seen in the music videos- has little to no body fat and specific muscle groups which are overly developed (University of Texas). The media suggests a reality where everyone has flawless skin and perfect bodies. In the real world, it is a far different story.

### ***Gender-Specific Standards of Behavior***

The message analysis revealed different behavioral characteristics according to gender (Appendices C and D). One of the traits was the degree of emotional availability between males and females. Female characters were more likely to be in touch with their emotions and openly express them. Eighteen of the music videos showed female characters who were

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expressive of their deeper emotions and display vulnerability. Only seven videos showed male characters openly expressive of their emotions and willing to display vulnerability. The reality of the degree of emotional availability between men and women is a very complex question, with deep psychological underpinnings. Research on the topic has reached conflicting results. Assessing the complex question of emotional availability in men and women is not the focus of this project. However, a basic overview of research into the topic suggests that whether or not males and females experience emotions the same way, they do report what they feel differently (Cummins). A large-scale study conducted on gender differences in facial expression found that while women tend to be more obviously expressive of emotion than men, the reality is more nuanced (McDuff et. al). In tangent with characterizing women as more emotional than men, the music videos characterized men as tough 72 percent more than women. Women were only characterized as tough seven out of twenty-five times, while men were characterized as tough fifteen out of twenty-five times. While the characteristic of being “tough” is difficult to quantify in real world terms, a study conducted on the willingness of men versus women to seek mental health help in America gives some insight. The American Psychological Association published an article revealing that studies covering the past several decades have shown that males of all ages and ethnicities were less likely than females to seek help for all sorts of problems, such as depression and stress, though they experience these problems at greater rates than their female counterparts (Winerman 57). Furthermore, according to a study in the journal *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, men with higher levels of traditional masculine ideology tended to have a more negative opinion of seeking

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psychological help. Instead, the men should “tough [problems] out” on their own (Winerman 57).

Another prevalent behavioral characteristic that differed between males and females was aggression. Male characters were portrayed using aggressive behavior to achieve their ends 43 percent more times than female characters. Professor of Developmental Psychology Kaj Björkqvist performed an aggregate review of studies conducted concerning gender difference in aggressive behavior. The studies showed that males used more physical aggressions, but females used more indirect aggression. Both genders used direct verbal aggression equally (Björkqvist 39). In essence, aggression is not as specific to males as the music video reality suggests.

An analysis of the music videos revealed that when female characters were portrayed or referenced, they were depicted as displaying sexually provocative behavior through clothing and mannerisms seventeen out of twenty-five times. Male characters, on the other hand, were depicted or referenced in a sexually provocative way, where their only value came from their looks and sexual behavior, only five out of twenty-five times. The female characters who were paid the most attention to and glamourized were sexualized 48 percent more than their male counterparts. They were hyper-sexualized. Hypersexualization has been defined by the American Psychological Association as “occurring when a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior to the exclusion of other characteristics” (Melker). The socio-political ramifications of the sexualized portrayal of males and females in media, and the differing levels to which it occurs dependent on gender, is very complex and not the focus



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of this study. However, as exemplified by the music videos, women are sexualized more than men in general in media. A study conducted by sociologists at the University of Buffalo found that sexualized representations of men and women have become more common over time. However, they concluded, women were much more likely to be hypersexualized (Melker). Studies have linked this sexualized portrayal of women in media as the expense of all other traits to issues such as increased objectification of women in society, violence, and increasing levels of body dissatisfaction among young women (Awasthi).

### ***Conformity of Standards as Opposed to True Individuality***

A strong message related to the success of the characters portrayed in the music videos both lyrically and visually was how conformity to certain standards was conducive to success. Standards which had been set outside the control of the individual (Appendix B). Only ten out of the twenty-five videos analyzed emphasized true individuality, where characters notable diverged from the norm, as an important characteristic. Conformity to overarching standards was emphasized as important in 60 percent of the videos. This media reality of individualism is different to actual reality. When psychology professor Jean Twenge conducted a study on gender roles, she found that both males and females scored high on a scale that included highly individualistic traits such as being independent, ability to rely on oneself, and being a leader (Raphelson). Clark University conducted a 2014 poll about what defined adulthood. They found the top three markers of adulthood were financial independence, independent decision making, and the acceptance of responsibility for self (Raphelson). These are all individualistic traits. Research has found that this emphasis on individualism exists on a

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broader scale in America. Pew Research Center surveyed forty-four countries in 2015. They found that 57 percent of Americans disagreed with the statement that “Success in life is pretty much determined by forces out outside our control.” This was a percentage far above the global median of 38 percent, and a higher percentage than most other nations (Gao).

#### *Wealth*

The possession of wealth was perhaps the most central message about success from the music videos (Appendix B). Twenty-one out of the twenty-five music videos, 84 percent, alluded to or explicitly stated the importance of wealth. Whether they were happy or not, and happiness was only an explicit objective 40 percent of the time throughout the twenty-five music videos, a reality existed where most characters were inevitably fabulously wealthy. The reality for most young adults is different. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average estimated median income for those between ages fifteen and twenty-four was \$36,108 in 2015. The median estimated income for those in the next age group, twenty-five to thirty-four, was \$57,366 (Wang). Young adults who had degrees in higher education were likely to earn around \$50,000 average, 64 percent and those who had only completed high school at around \$30,500 (National Center for Education Statistics). An income of around \$50,000 for young adults may serve all their needs. However, most will not be able to afford the mansions and highly expensive luxury goods all the characters in the music videos so blithely owned.

#### Young Adults’ Social Realities

Seventy-nine students from Bryant University were surveyed to determine their social realities of success. The majority ranged in age between eighteen to twenty-one years old. The

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survey questions were based on the results from the message system analysis in an effort to compare the students' perceptions of success reality compared to the media presented reality of success and actual reality (Appendix E). Respondents were then broken down into quartiles, based on how many music videos they consumed per month (Appendix G). The first quartile was comprised of the lightest viewers, those who consume at most two music videos a month, with most consuming none at all. The fourth quartile comprised of respondents who were the heaviest viewers, typically watching at least seven or more music videos per month. The responses of the first and fourth quartiles, the lightest versus the heaviest viewers, were measured against each other via a cross-tabulation in order to determine any perceptual shifts with increased music video consumption (Appendix F).

#### ***Physical Perfection***

One of the most predominant standards of physical perfection in music video reality was having flawless skin. Of those surveyed, 50 percent of respondents in the first and fourth quartiles combined considered having perfect skin as "important." Of the 50 percent who indicated having perfect skin was important, only 43 percent belonged to the first quartile. Fifty-three percent belonged to the fourth quartile, regularly watching seven or more music videos. While most respondents considered having perfect skin important, respondents with the heaviest consumption tended to believe it was more important than their counterparts in the first quartile.

Another standard was of physical perfection, and therefore success, in the music video reality was men who were muscular and women who were thin.

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Before responding to questions about the importance of muscularity, respondents were asked to visually gauge the attractiveness of the two images.

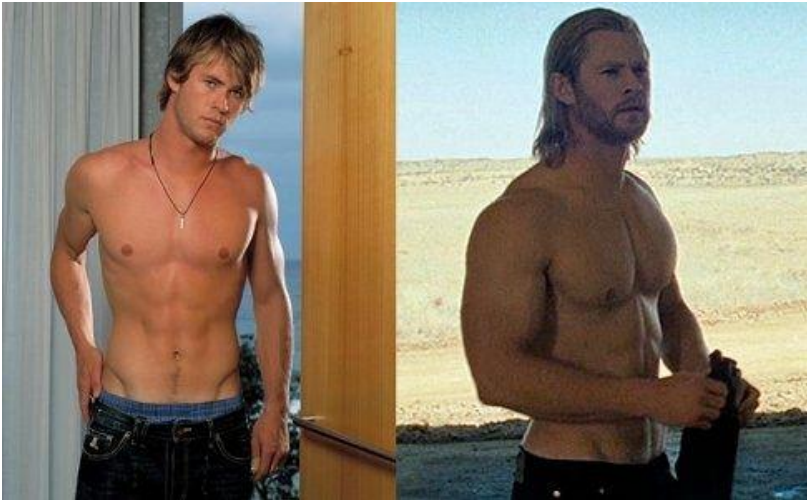


Fig. 1. Hollywood Actor Chris Hemsworth from Walt Shakes. *17 Most Amazing Hollywood Transformations for a Movie Role*. MyMindSnaps.com. 11 Dec. 2012.

The two images feature actor Chris Hemsworth in two different stages of musculature. Left features Hemsworth with a leaner, less muscular look. On the right, Hemsworth features the current media ideal of a broad, muscular chest and lean abs. Eighty-two percent of respondents in the first and fourth quartiles preferred the image on the right. Those in the first quartile almost exclusively preferred the picture on the right. While a large number of those in the fourth quartile preferred the image on the right as well, large percentages of them also preferred the left image or saw no difference compared to the light consumers. Both groups across the board preferred the more muscular Hemsworth to the leaner Hemsworth, but lighter consumers preferred it more than the heavy consumers.

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Fig. 2. Model Liza Golden-Bhojwani Before and After from Lauren Sharkey. *Model Gives Honest Insight into the Fashion Industry with Shocking Before and After Post*. Yahoo Style. 28 Mar. 2017.

In order to best evaluate young adults' beliefs about the correlation between thinness and beauty, respondents were asked to choose which of the images they found more appealing. The images show model Liza Golden-Bhojwani at two different weights. On the left, she has the dimensions of the average fashion model. On the right, she has the dimensions of the average woman. Forty-seven percent of respondents found the image on the right more attractive. Of that 47 percent, 56 percent of those who found the one on the right more attractive belonged to the first quartile and do not watch music videos regularly, a higher percentage than those of the fourth quartile. Though in general the image on the right was preferred by respondents, lighter consumers preferred the image on the right but heavier consumers preferred the image on the left. Thirty-nine percent of all respondents in the first

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and fourth quartiles preferred the image on the right, and 67 percent of the group were from the fourth quartile.

Though heavy viewers diverged from the video world when it came to male standards of physical perfection, they preferred flawless skin and thin women more than their lighter viewing counterparts. Cultivation analysis holds for physical perfection, as respondents with the heaviest music video consumption tended more to believe in the video world than the real world.

#### ***Gender-Specific Standards of Behavior***

The students were analyzed on their views about gender-specific standards of behavior. The first standard was the degree of emotional availability young adult men and women should demonstrate. Respondents were split as to whether emotional availability is an important trait for men. The largest percentages of respondent from the first and fourth quartiles were equally neutral to the idea, and thought it was important. Twenty-nine percent of respondents were neutral, and 29 percent categorized it was important. Thirteen percent of respondents considered emotional availability an unimportant trait for men, while only 3 percent of respondents considered it an unimportant trait for women. As with men, respondents from quartiles one and four were equally split between being neutral and considering it important for women to be willing to show emotion and vulnerability. Of the 37 percent of respondents who considered emotional availability an important trait for women, 64 percent belonged to the fourth quartile. Only 36 percent do not watch music videos regularly. Results are not strongly conclusive, as the largest percentage of respondents equally were neutral to the idea

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and considered it an important trait for women. However, a closer analysis of the differences between the two quartiles of heavy and light views shed light on preferences. Both quartiles were equally split in their opinion about the importance of emotional availability for men, but consumers in the fourth quartile tended to believe it was more important for women to be emotionally available and open.

The perception of being tough was another gender-specific standard of behavior in the music video reality. A majority of respondents, 45 percent, considered it important for a woman to be tough. Fifty-three percent of that 45 percent belonged to the first quartile, the non-consumers. Those who consumed more music videos did not believe it as important for a woman to be tough as lighter consumers did. The majority of respondents from both quartiles combined, 45 percent, also believed being tough was an important trait for men. An analysis by quartile reveals that heavier consumers considered toughness an important trait for men more than did light consumers. Of that 45 percent, 59 percent were from the fourth quartile and watch at least seven music videos a month. The heavier consumers leaned towards the music video reality where women were generally not tough and but men were.

A third gender-specific behavior in the music video reality was sexually provocative behavior as an element of success. The highest percentage of respondents, 35 percent, indicated that it was “important” for men to be provocative. Those in the fourth quartile who regularly watch seven or more music videos a month made up the largest percentage of that group at 69 percent. The light viewers in the first quartile only made up 41 percent of that group. This contrasted the media reality where men did not display provocative behavior as often as the

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women. The results for views on women were similar. Thirty-five percent, the highest percentage, indicated that it was important for women to be provocative. Again, as with men, those who watched music videos were more likely to believe in the importance of this characteristic than their non-music video consuming counterparts. Of that 25 percent, only 31 percent belong to the first quartile. By contrast, 69 percent of those who believed provocative behavior is an important trait for women belong to the fourth quartile. Heavy viewers believed it was equally important for men and women to display provocative behavior, more so than their light viewing counterparts. This is a slight divergence from cultivation theory because although both male and female characters are increasingly displayed with sexually provocative behavior in media, a much heavier percentage of that behavior is concentrated on the female characters as opposed to the male characters. However, looking at it from a modesty perspective reveals that heavier viewers believe, more than light viewers, that it is more important for women to display sexually provocative behavior as opposed to men. Men typically displayed more modest behavior than the female characters in the music video reality. Fifty-six percent of those in the fourth quartile said it was important for men to display modest behavior, as opposed to only 39 percent of the first quartile. For women, 60 percent of those in the first quartile believed it was important for women to be modest as opposed to 40 percent from the fourth quartile. In conclusion, although both groups believed it was important for both men and women to display provocative behavior to achieve their ends, light viewers thought it was more important for men to be provocative and women to be modest whereas the beliefs of the heavy viewers more closely aligned to the media reality.



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A final gender-specific behavior was aggressiveness. Respondents were asked whether it was good to be assertive to get ahead, especially in the workplace. Zero percent of those surveyed responded “no,” it was not good to be assertive to get ahead. A large majority of respondents, 68 percent, from the first and fourth quartiles combined indicated “yes.” In other words, 68 percent of respondents believed it is good to be aggressive to achieve one’s goals. Non-consumers of music videos, those from the first quartile, were the smallest percentage of those who responded “yes.” Over half of the respondents who said “yes” belong to the fourth quartile. When analyzed from a gender perspective, heavier viewers thought it was more important for males to be aggressive than females. Though both quartiles thought assertiveness was a positive trait, those who consumed more media tended to believe in the music video reality of more aggressive men than light viewers.

Cultivation theory holds in general for gender-specific behavior towards attaining success as portrayed in music videos, but it is not completely correct. The music video reality painted a world of exaggerated gender differences in behavior. It is true heavy viewers were more likely to believe in the gender-specific behavior portrayed for females in the music video world. However, heavy viewers were more ambivalent when it came to male traits.

### ***Conformity as Opposed to True Individuality***

Seventy-one percent of respondents from quartiles one and four categorized individuality as a very important trait. Zero percent of respondents categorized individuality as “not important” signifying that the characteristic of individualism had at least some significance to the lives of young adults. Although the clear majority of participants believed individuality to be a very

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important trait, the light consumers of quartile one believed it to be more important than the heavy consumers of quartile four. Of the 71 percent who considered individuality an important trait, 52 percent belonged to quartile one. A smaller percentage, 48 percent, belonged to the fourth quartile. Cultivation theory holds for individuality as the heavy viewers were more likely to believe in conformity to outside expectations of behavior, etc. than the light viewers.

#### *Wealth*

The largest percentage of respondents from the first and fourth quartiles were neutral on the importance of wealth. Over half the respondents in that group belonged to the heavy consumers of the fourth quartile. The majority of those in the fourth quartile had no strong opinions as to the relation of wealth and happiness, and which was more important. Light viewers actually perceived wealth as more important than heavy viewers. Cultivation theory does not hold in regards to wealth. The possession of wealth was one of the most significant elements of the music video reality. Yet responses show that the heaviest consumers were neutral to the idea, and did not necessarily perceive wealth as important or central to success.

#### Limitations

Before discussing conclusions, a few limitations to my research must be noted. One limitation was a lack of diversity among respondents. Eighty-one percent of the respondents identified themselves as white. The other racial categories at most only had a few respondents. There was not a significant enough example to study how cultural differences affected perceptions of success. Another limitation was the fact that the sample size of students surveyed was less

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than 100 respondents, and the resulting quartiles contained less than twenty respondents each.

A future development of this study would likely need a larger sample size, in order to better ensure accuracy and prevent any skewed results.

### **Conclusion**

What do college-aged young adults think is important to success? The reality of success cultivated by the music videos was one of wealth enabled by conformity to certain standards of behavior and physical perfection. So how did the participants' social realities and perceptions of success compare to the "realities" of success presented in mainstream music and success in the real world? Overall, Gerbner's theory of cultivation predicted the results of the study. Generally, the college-aged young adults who are heavier consumers of music videos shared the perceptions of success as perpetuated by the media more so than those who were light viewers. They tended to believe in the standards of physical perfection and behavior presented in music videos as conducive to success. However, sometimes the results presented a more nuanced picture than that of heavy viewers sharing the same beliefs as music videos and light viewer's beliefs aligning with actual reality.

At times, the perceptions of those who watch the most music videos went the opposite way of music video reality and vice versa. The most significant case where this occurred was in the case of wealth. While possession of wealth was perhaps the most important signifier of success in music video reality, the heaviest music video viewers did not agree. In fact, instead of the heavy viewers, it was those who watch few to no music videos who rated wealth as more important than not.

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Sometimes respondents agreed with the overarching ideals, but differed with specific details. The most significant case where this occurred was regarding standards of physical perfection, specifically the ideal of a muscular man. True, respondents agreed on the importance of flawless skin and slender women, and the heavier the music video consumption the more appealing the traits were. The difference occurred with the standards for men. Muscularity was set as the ideal physical look for men in music video reality. Yet when respondents were shown images of actor Chris Hemsworth with significantly different degrees of muscularity – see Fig. 1 – heavy consumers preferred the less muscular Hemsworth more than light consumers did. This stood in contradiction to cultivation theory in that the heavy viewers, as opposed to the light viewers, should be the ones more likely to believe in the reality that muscular men were more attractive and subsequently more successful. While the perceptions of the heavy consumers generally aligned with music video reality, it was not absolute especially when it came to male traits.

Even when the perceptions of success of heavy consumers aligned with music video reality, their social reality tended to be less exaggerated a difference. For example, the music video reality suggested aggression was a gender-specific behavior. Male characters were portrayed as aggressive 43 percent more times than their female counterparts. In reality, studies have shown that though men and women may utilize different types of aggressive behavior, aggression in real life is not specific to men. In this case, the social reality of the respondents more closely aligned with actual reality. It was still true that respondents who do not watch music videos were less willing to agree that assertiveness was a good way to achieve one's

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goals. Yet a clear majority of respondents, both male and female, considered it a good attribute to be assertive and employ aggressive behavior in order to get ahead.

The twenty-five music videos analyzed suggested a reality defined by physical perfection, wealth, and conformity to certain behavioral standard for males and females. These were the elements of success. The true reality is one where young adults generally do not possess great amounts of wealth, value individuality, and are not physically perfect. In general, the young adults who consume the most music videos believe in the media reality over their lighter-viewing counterparts whose beliefs more closely aligned to actual reality. Nevertheless, when studying the effects of media, particularly on consumer perceptions, one can never take anything for granted. George Gerbner's cultivation theory was correct, but not an absolute representation of the beliefs of college-aged young adults.

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## **APPENDICES**

### Appendix A: List of Music Videos Used During Message Analysis

Most-Watched Music Videos (YouTube)		
Year	Video	Artist
2013	"Roar"	Katy Perry
	"Blurred Lines"	OneRepublic
	"Wrecking Ball"	Miley Cyrus
	"We Can't Stop"	Miley Cyrus
	"Just Give Me A Reason"	Pink
2014	"Uptown Funk"	Bruno Mars
	"Shake It Off"	Taylor Swift
	"Bailando"	Enrique Inglesias
	"Blank Space"	Taylor Swift
	"Dark Horse"	Katy Perry
2015	"See You Again"	Wiz Kalifa
	"Love Me Like You Do"	Ellie Goulding
	"Sugar"	Maroon 5
	"Bad Blood"	Taylor Swift
	"Lean On"	Major Lazer
2016	"Hym for the Weekend"	Coldplay
	"Pillowtalk"	Zayn Malik
	"I Took a Pill in Ibiza"	Mike Posner (SEEB REMIX)
	"Cheap Thrills"	Sia
	"Heathens"	Twenty One Pilots
2017	"Despacito"	Luis Fonsi
	"Shape of You"	Ed Sheeran
	"Mi Gente"	J Balvin
	"That's What I Like"	Bruno Mars
	"Look What You Made Me Do"	Taylor Swift

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### Appendix B: General Message Analysis

Song	Flawless Skin	No Physical Flaws	White Representation	Diversity	Happiness	Designer clothes/ brands	Wealth	Big House	Simple Living	Exotic Locales	Emotion	Vulnerable	True Individuality
"Roar"	x	x	x				x		x	x	x		x
"Blurred Lines"	x	x	x	x		x	x						
"Wrecking Ball"	x	x	x			x	x				x	x	
"We Can't Stop"	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x					x
"Just Give Me A Reason"	x	x	x							x	x	x	
"Uptown Funk"	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x			x
"Shake It Off"	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x
"Bailando"	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			
"Blank Space"	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x			
"Dark Horse"	x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x			
"See You Again"	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	x	x	
"Love Me Like You Do"	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
"Sugar"	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x
"Bad Blood"	x	x	x			x	x	x		x	x	x	
"Lean On"	x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x			
"Hymn for the Weekend"	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	x		x
"Pillowtalk"	x	x	x			x	x			x			
"I Took a Pill in Ibiza"			x			x	x			x	x	x	
"Cheap Thrills"	x	x	x		x	x	x			x	x		x
"Heathens"		x	x	x						x	x	x	x
"Despacito"	x	x		x	x	x	x			x			
"Shape of You"	x		x	x					x		x		x
"Mi Gente"	x	x	x		x	x	x			x			x
"That's What I Like"					x	x	x	x		x			
"Look What You Made Me Do"	x	x	x	x		x	x			x	x		
Total	23	23	23	16	10	17	21	11	6	20	14	8	10
Total Percentage	92%	92%	92%	64%	40%	68%	84%	44%	24%	80%	56%	32%	40%

### Appendix C: Gender Specific Message Analysis – Female

Song	Flawless Skin	Thin	Muscle	Curvy	Styled	No Physical Flaws	Aggressive	Value From Looks	Value Regardless of Looks	True Individuality	Be Provocative	Emotional	Feminine: Frilly	Feminine: Tough
"Roar"	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x
"Blurred Lines"	x	x	x		x	x		x			x		x	
"Wrecking Ball"	x	x	x		x	x	x	x			x	x		x
"We Can't Stop"	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x				
"Just Give Me A Reason"	x		x	x	x	x	x		x		x			
"Uptown Funk"	x			x	x			x					x	
"Shake It Off"	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
"Bailando"	x	x		x	x	x		x			x		x	
"Blank Space"	x	x			x	x	x	x			x	x	x	
"Dark Horse"	x	x			x	x	x	x			x			x
"See You Again"	x	x	x	x	x	x			x		x			x
"Love Me Like You Do"	x	x			x	x		x			x	x	x	
"Sugar"	x			x	x	x			x	x		x	x	
"Bad Blood"	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x
"Lean On"	x	x	x		x	x		x			x	x	x	
"Hymn for the Weekend"	x			x	x	x		x		x		x	x	
"Pillowtalk"	x	x			x	x		x			x		x	
"I Took a Pill in Ibiza"	x	x			x	x		x			x		x	
"Cheap Thrills"	x			x	x	x		x					x	
"Heathens"	x	x	x		x	x		x		x	x		x	
"Despacito"	x	x	x		x	x		x		x	x	x	x	
"Shape of You"	x	x	x		x	x			x	x	x	x		x
"Mi Gente"	x	x		x	x	x				x		x	x	
"That's What I Like"	x				x	x						x		
"Look What You Made Me Do"	x	x			x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	
Total	25	19	10	10	25	24	9	19	6	9	17	15	17	7
Total Percentage	100%	76%	40%	40%	100%	96%	36%	76%	24%	36%	68%	60%	68%	28%

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#### Appendix D: Gender Specific Message Analysis – Male

Song	Flawless Skin	Slim	Muscle	Overweight	Styled	No Physical Flaws	Aggressive	Value From Looks	Value Regardless of Looks	True Individuality	Be Provocative	Emotional	Vulnerable	"Tough" Guy
"Roar"	x		x			x								x
"Blurred Lines"	x				x	x	x	x			x			x
"Wrecking Ball"	x					x								x
"We Can't Stop"	x		x		x	x				x	x			x
"Just Give Me A Reason"	x					x	x						x	
"Uptown Funk"	x				x	x	x		x	x				x
"Shake It Off"	x	x	x	x		x			x	x				
"Bailando"	x		x		x	x	x		x		x	x		
"Blank Space"	x		x		x	x		x						x
"Dark Horse"	x		x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x			x
"See You Again"	x	x	x		x	x	x		x	x		x	x	
"Love Me Like You Do"	x		x		x	x	x	x				x		x
"Sugar"	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	
"Bad Blood"	x	x	x		x	x	x							x
"Lean On"	x	x				x			x	x				x
"Hymn for the Weekend"	x	x		x		x			x	x		x	x	
"Pillowtalk"	x		x		x	x	x		x		x			x
"I Took a Pill in Ibiza"		x	x		x			x				x	x	
"Cheap Thrills"	x	x		x		x			x	x				
"Heathens"		x	x			x	x		x	x		x	x	x
"Despacito"	x	x	x		x	x	x		x		x			x
"Shape of You"	x		x						x	x			x	
"Mi Gente"	x	x	x	x		x	x		x		x			x
"That's What I Like"	x	x	x		x	x	x		x	x				x
"Look What You Made Me Do"	x		x		x	x								
Total	23	12	18	6	15	23	14	4	15	12	8	7	7	15
Total Percentage	92%	48%	72%	24%	60%	92%	56%	16%	60%	48%	32%	28%	28%	60%

#### Appendix E: List of Survey Questions

Survey Questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Gender</li> <li>2. Do you do your makeup on a regular basis?</li> <li>3. Do you style your hair on a regular basis?</li> <li>4. Do you think it is good to be assertive in order to get ahead, especially in the workplace?</li> <li>5. Compared to being happy, how important is being wealthy?</li> <li>6. Today how important is it for a woman to be: - Trendy or Stylish</li> <li>7. Today how important is it for a woman to be: - Muscular or toned</li> <li>8. Today how important is it for a woman to be: - Confident</li> <li>9. Today how important is it for a woman to be: - Modest</li> <li>10. Today how important is it for a woman to be: - Provocative</li> <li>11. Today how important is it for a woman to be: - Willing to Show Emotion, Be Vulnerable</li> <li>12. Today how important is it for a woman to be: - Tough</li> <li>13. Today how important is it for a woman to be: - Independent</li> </ol>



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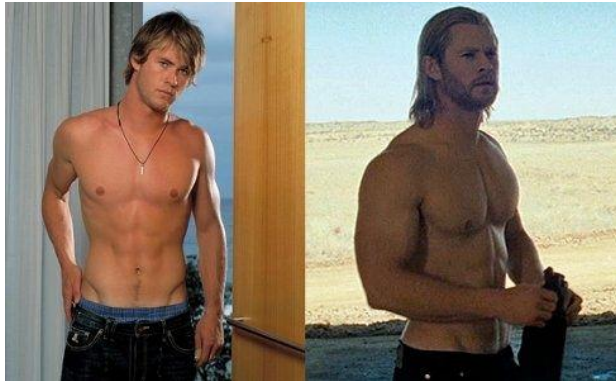
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14. Today how important is it for a man to be: - Trendy or Stylish
15. Today how important is it for a man to be: - Muscular or toned
16. Today how important is it for a man to be: - Confident
17. Today how important is it for a man to be: - Modest
18. Today how important is it for a man to be: - Provocative
19. Today how important is it for a man to be: - Willing to Show Emotion, Be Vulnerable
20. Today how important is it for a man to be: - Tough
21. Today how important is it for a man to be: - Independent
22. Which image do you find more attractive?



23. Which image do you find more attractive?



24. How important is having perfect skin to you?
25. How important is it to be yourself?
26. How important is it to be the leader or at the center of attention?
27. How many hours of media (TV, movies, music & music videos etc.) do you typically consume per week...
28. How many music videos do you typically view in a month?
29. What is your age?
30. With which race do you most identify?

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#### Appendix F: Example of Cross-Tabulation

Question		Quartile 1	Quartile 4	Total (as % of Respondents)
<i>How important is it to be yourself?</i>	<i>Not Important</i>	0%	0%	0%
	<i>Somewhat Important</i>	100%	0%	3%
	<i>Neutral</i>	0%	100%	3%
	<i>Important</i>	33%	67%	23%
	<i>Very Important</i>	52%	48%	71%

#### Appendix G: Consumption Groups by Quartile

Quartiles	# Videos Watched (Per Month)	# Respondents
1	<i>None- 2 videos</i>	19
2	<i>3-4 videos</i>	19
3	<i>5-6 videos</i>	19
4	<i>7+ videos</i>	19

\*Note: only the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> quartiles were used for comparison

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