

**HIV/AIDS, SOAP OPERAS AND YOUNG VIEWERS:
EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF MEDIA EFFECTS
AND RECEPTION ANALYSIS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
FOR HEALTH COMMUNICATION***

Rafael Obregón

RAFAEL OBREGÓN

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, SCHOOL OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR, M.A.,
COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES, OHIO UNIVERSITY ATHENS.
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAM
UNIVERSIDAD DEL NORTE, BARRANQUILLA (COLOMBIA). PH.D.,
INTERDISCIPLINARY PROGRAM IN MASS COMMUNICATIONS, COLLEGE OF
COMMUNICATIONS, THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY. M.A.,
COMMUNICATIONS AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, OHIO UNIVERSITY.
obregon@ohiou.edu

Dirección: M.A., Communication for Development Studies Ohio
University Athens, OH 45701, U.S.A.

* This paper presents the results of the research «Young audiences and colombian telenovelas: A Focus HIV/AIDS and sexuality issues», which was made as thesis on the Pd.D., Interdisciplinary Program in Mass Communications, College of Communications, The Pennsylvania State University.

RESUMEN

Con base en grupos focales y entrevistas a profundidad, este estudio analizó cómo televidentes jóvenes se relacionan con mensajes de salud centrados en VIH/SIDA y sexualidad en dos telenovelas colombianas. Con base en datos cualitativos y en teorías como aprendizaje social, interacción parasocial, análisis de cultivación y estudios culturales, la investigación estudió los efectos de los mensajes a nivel de actitudes y comportamientos y la construcción de significados.

Los resultados sugieren la existencia de algunos efectos entre los televidentes, pero también un proceso continuo de negociación y reinterpretación de mensajes. Los participantes, en forma alterna o simultánea, negocian significados de temas de salud y reportan cambios actitudinales y de comportamiento. Los resultados tienen implicaciones para investigadores y profesionales de la comunicación en salud, quienes a menudo ignoran la experiencia de recepción de medios y privilegian una mirada centrada en efectos de los mensajes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Salud, medios de comunicación, telenovelas, estudios culturales, estudios de cultivación, jóvenes y adolescentes.

ABSTRACT

Using data from twenty focus groups and thirty in-depth interviews, this research analyzed how young viewers related to health messages dealing with HIV/AIDS and sexuality issues in two commercial Colombian soap operas. Following a variety of theoretical elements that included social learning theory, parasocial interaction, cultivation analysis, and cultural studies this research studied the presence message effects at attitudinal and behavioral levels and active construction of meaning among young viewers.

Results showed presence of certain message effects among viewers, but also an ongoing process of negotiation and reinterpretation of meanings. The study suggests that viewers, both alternatively or simultaneously, can negotiate meanings of health issues and report attitudinal and behavioral changes. While this type of interaction with media messages is not new, results call for greater attention to processes of message reception when developing health media campaigns, particularly those supported by entertainment media. These findings have implications for health communication researchers and practitioners who often overlook people's experience of media reception while focusing primarily on the potential existence of message effects.

KEY WORDS: *Health, media, soap operas, cultural studies, cultivation studies, youth and adolescents.*

INTRODUCTION

Today's citizens are increasingly more exposed to health information through mass media than they are to health information from visits to doctors or health professionals (Signorielli, 1993; Montgomery, 1990). In many cases, individuals might be exposed to certain health issues only via mass media (Wahl, 1995). Research studies in Europe, North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean indicate that the majority of individuals obtain their information on health from the media. A study conducted in the U.S. showed that for every person who got their information from a physician, 25 got it from the media (Signorielli, 1990). Content analysis of the U.S. media—including magazines—revealed that about 44% of the information presented in the media was related to health (Atkin & Wallack, 1990) while in Latin America it is closed to 10% (PAHO, 1998).

Over the past two decades, international health organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) have emphasized the need to provide health information with a focus on prevention as opposed to an emphasis on treatment of diseases (WHO, 1994; PAHO, 1998). Similarly, local and international NGOs, ministries, and other organizations engaged in health communication work, increasingly rely on entertainment-based strategies to promote healthy life styles and behaviors. One of the key vehicles of these health communication campaigns is television drama, particularly soap operas.

In Latin America, *telenovelas* (soap operas) command a high degree of attention that surpasses, by far, the popularity of their counterparts in other countries, including the U.S. While numerous *telenovelas* have been produced as part of the entertainment-education strategy, which ensures careful design and production of health messages incorporated into soap opera plots and other dramatic series, commercial *telenovelas* often include health related messages. In both cases, real life situations about health

issues are recreated often aimed at promoting health behavior. One of the most important components of these health communication strategies is impact evaluation to assess whether the strategy has led to change either at attitudinal or behavioral levels.

While most evaluation components of health communication programs tend to emphasize the use of quantitative techniques, research on soap operas in Latin America has relied, primarily, on qualitative approaches using a reception perspective. This perspective assigns an active role to audiences capable of negotiating meaning, making sense of messages (Martín-Barbero, 1993; Gonzáles, 1992), and re-editing messages (Toro, 1998).

This paper¹ analyzes the convergence of potential message effects at attitudinal and behavioral levels and the active construction of meaning among young viewers, as well as the implications of these findings for health and development communication programs². A variety of theoretical elements such as social learning theory, parasocial interaction, cultivation analysis, and reception studies, are used in this study in an attempt to establish potential effects on audiences. Qualitative methods are used in order to take into account contextual factors of soap opera portrayals and soap opera viewing, a widely discussed limitation of both cultivation and empirically based effects studies. Various analyses of soap operas and dramas suggest that qualitative approaches might provide useful insights into how viewers might be affected by entertainment programs, particularly soap operas (Philo, 1996; Williams, 1992).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Entertainment-education soap operas are often part of larger communication campaigns. This approach requires an evaluation

¹ The preliminary results of this research were presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association. San Diego, CA, May 2003

² This paper is based on a larger study conducted in 1999 in Colombia's Atlantic Coast operas.

component which typically assesses attitude and behavior change among target populations. However, research on the effects of entertainment-education soap operas has been criticized lately. Sherry (1997) reviewed twenty studies on effects of pro-social soap operas. Sherry's findings question claims on the extent of previously reported attitudinal and behavioral changes resulting from exposure to soap operas' messages. However, Sherry does not find enough evidence to dismiss the potential role of *telenovelas* for social change either. He argues that although it would be a mistake to attribute powerful effects to pro-social telenovelas, there is not «strong evidence to recommend diverting scarce resources to the soap opera strategy» (p.98).

From an empirical standpoint, the crucial problem in assessing effects of pro-social soap operas lies in the difficulties to isolate the amount of behavior change that can be attributed to exposure to a soap opera's messages. Yoder, Hornik & Chirwa (1996) identified this problem in a follow-up study of the effects of an HIV/AIDS prevention radio soap opera in Zambia (*Nshilakamona* –«I have not yet seen it» in Bemba language). Results showed that reported behavior changes were more likely to have been produced by previous exposure to HIV/AIDS information or by other factors such as previous knowledge, moral values, and interpersonal beliefs.

In both studies, researchers argued in favor of more powerful research methods capable of isolating the effect of exposure to either radio or television broadcasts. Yoder, Hornik, & Chirwa suggested the use of more powerful statistical methods to control for as many variables as possible. Piotrow et al. (1997) acknowledged this limitation and discussed the need for more complex statistical measures. Sherry (1997) also recommended the use of cultivation analysis in order to account for long-term effects. In each case, however, researchers coincided on the need to, more accurately, establish effects on attitude and behavior using pro-social soap operas.

On the other hand, research on Latin American soap operas (*telenovelas*)³, perhaps the most pervasive television genre in Latin America, has been conducted primarily from an audience reception perspective (Uribe, 1995; Colina, 1996; McAnany, 1993; Martín-Barbero, 1993; Sluyter-Beltrao, 1993; Tufte, 1993; 1995; Uribe, 1993; Bustos-Romero, 1993). This emphasis on reception studies is not haphazard, but the result of trends toward critical approaches in social sciences, including communications, which have prevailed in Latin America over the past 30 years. As cultural studies and reception studies have dominated communication scholarship in the region, the notion of active audience has led to a widespread rejection of the existence of direct potential effects of media messages upon audiences among Latin American communication and media researchers.

McAnany (1993) provided a useful distinction of research conducted on Latin American soap operas by identifying two prevailing approaches over the past two decades. First, the purposive approach deals with the intentional incorporation of educational messages into media content, primarily entertainment programming. Concepts such as entertainment-education for social change (Singhal & Rogers, 1989; Piotrow et.al, 1997), and pro-social television or pro-social media (Hornik, 1988; Reeves et. al., 1991; Porter et. al, 1997) whether or not part of development communication campaigns, fall into this category. These studies are concerned with behavior, attitude change through the strategic inclusion of systematic messages into soap opera scripts, and other forms of entertainment content (Piotrow et. al., 1997; Nariman, 1993; Brown, Singhal & Rogers, 1988). For instance, back in the 1980s *Televisa* produced seven pro-social soap operas, which dealt with family planning, adult literacy, and adolescents' sexual behavior amongst other themes (Torres, 1994; Nariman, 1993).

³ In Spanish language, telenovela is the equivalent word of soap opera in English. This author will use alternatively telenovela or soap opera to refer to Latin American soap operas.

On the other hand, commercial soap operas have not enjoyed the same degree of attention by communication researchers in Latin America, but they often include health-related messages, often in tandem with local or international organizations. McAnany summarized the non-purposive approach stating that:

another option to the two described above -entertainment-education for social change and pro-social television- is to ask whether exposure to ordinary television fare on a longer term basis does not influence socially significant beliefs and behavior change (p.139).

In essence, McAnany called for additional research on commercial soap operas to determine whether these particular programs exert any type of impact upon audiences. Other researchers also share this view and contend that despite the popularity of the soap opera genre in Latin America research on soap operas audience effects has been scarce (Torres, 1994; Sanchez & Arredondo, 1988).

McAnany & La Pastina (1994) provided one of the few comprehensive attempts to analyze how Latin American research on soap operas has been conducted in the past decade. They examined 26 audience studies conducted in Latin America from 1970-1993 and drew five conclusions. First, audiences were reported to be active with a tendency to draw meanings from *telenovela* content. Second, in different ways, audiences apply content and meaning of it (understanding of new social roles in a changing economy; understanding class and gender roles; better sense of solidarity among barrio women; opportunities for families to talk about sensitive personal issues) to their lives, although such application was only conceptual and none of the studies attempted to take a step further to explore application of such meanings to actual behavior of audiences. Third, there was clarity on the part of the audiences that soap operas are part of a fictional genre although audiences reported applying it to their daily lives. Fourth, context

is taken into consideration by researchers ranging from socio-economic factors to cultural and personal values. Fifth, «behavior is not generally included in the study of telenovelas».

The authors pointed out that: «there are no studies that ask explicit questions about consumption aspirations, or behavior, for example, and none that breach other, often asserted, negative effects of *telenovelas*» (p.838). The authors provide a tentative answer to such a statement: «This may be due partly to a focus on reception models as opposed to effects models in the literature reviewed» (p.838). This perception is not far from an underlying concept among Latin American communication researchers who tend to place greater value in the negotiating and resisting power of audiences as reflected in the work of Martín-Barbero and García-Canclini. Yet, even the active audience approach implies that interpretation and meaning of *telenovelas*' messages might lead to attitude and behavior change based on such interpretations.

McAnany (1993) has emphasized the need for more studies attempting to relate content to audience behavior and attitude change beyond the simplistic modernization, powerful-effects approach. In other words, there seems to be a lack of studies designed to establish effects of soap operas on attitudes and behaviors looking at them through the lens of reception studies, but such studies must consider not only individual, but also contextual and social factors. Thus, the integration of theoretical elements from studies of audience effects and reception studies was deemed appropriate to analyze potential effects of health issues portrayed in soap operas.

THEORETICAL ELEMENTS

Social learning/cognitive theory has been embraced as one of the most important theories to understand how individuals learn certain behaviors by observing others. It evolved from experimental studies in psychology, which demonstrated how modeled behaviors might be learned and imitated by children (Bandura, 1976).

Social learning/cognitive theory has been applied in several areas: psychology, education, and communication research, amongst others. The fact that media content is filled with a wide range of modeled behaviors prompted communication researchers to quickly apply social learning/cognitive theory in communication research to gain a better understanding of how media portrayals affect audiences.

Social learning/cognitive theory has not been exclusively used to study the effects of exposure to negative media content. This theory also has been instrumental in the design and study of effects of pro-social media content. For instance, very popular U.S. children programs such as Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers Neighborhood are examples of social learning approaches, in which children can learn not only basic knowledge but also socially acceptable behaviors. Further, new communication strategies have introduced pro-social messages in commercial entertainment programming. For instance, supporters of the entertainment-education strategy, which draws upon Bandura's social learning/cognitive theory, contend that people can learn pro-socially acceptable behaviors (family planning, HIV/AIDS prevention, non-smoking) by introducing systematically well-designed messages into entertainment programs (Singhal & Rogers, 1999; Piotrow et.al., 1997).

Although controversial and heavily criticized, cultivation analysis⁴ has remained an important theory in communication research. The fact that cultivation theory looks at effects as a long-term process as the result of heavy exposure to television, makes this theory a useful conceptual framework to understand how public health issues portrayed in *telenovelas* might affect audience's attitudes and behaviors. As Morgan & Signorielli (1990) put it:

Cultivation does not imply any sort of simple linear, linear 'stimulus-response' model of the relationships between media

⁴ The literature shows that this theory is referred to in various ways: theory, analysis, hypothesis.

content and audiences. Rather, it implies long-term cumulative consequences of exposure to an essentially repetitive and stable system of messages, not immediate short-term responses or individual interpretations of content. It is concerned with continuity, stabilization, and gradual shifts rather than outright change» (p.18).

Gerbner has added that the term cultivation is used to «distinguish the long-term cultivation of assumptions about life and values from short-term effects that are usually assessed by measuring changes as a consequence of exposure to certain messages» (1995, p.552). Cultivation effects are established by comparing social perceptions of reality by heavy and light viewers of television with media representations of issues such as violence and crime. However, cultivation analysis is not simply a comparison between heavy TV viewers' interpretation of reality and reality as portrayed by television. Rather, according to Baran & Davis (1995),

television cultivates or creates a worldview that, although possibly inaccurate, becomes the reality simply because we, as a people, believe it to be the reality and base our judgments about our own, everyday worlds on that reality (p. 303).

In this vein, it might be argued that television ultimately helps us construct a type of social reality dependent upon the reality portrayed by media content. Potter (1993) identified important areas that needed to be revised in cultivation theory: *conceptualization of cultivation indicators and conceptualization of exposure*. Potter emphasized the need to *re-conceptualize cultivation indicators* and argued that «there has been a startling lack of attention to the context of frequently occurring actions. For the viewer the meaning of action lies in its narrative contexts as much as it lies in its frequency» (p.589). In other words, Potter argued

for a qualitative approach to imply cultivation effects. Potter also argues that *Conceptualization of exposure* in cultivation studies has focused on the definition of television exposure in global terms. Research has shown that cultivation effects are stronger when television exposure is conceptualized in terms of genre viewing. For instance, heavy viewers of violent television programming might hold stronger perceptions of a violent world than heavy viewers of other type of programming do although the latter might be heavy television viewers as well. Gunter (1994) corroborates this consideration noting that cultivation effects might be program-specific as opposed to the traditional approach of total television viewing.

The latter observation is critical to this study. Participants in this research design were not heavy television viewers (understood as overall television viewing), but instead they were heavy soap opera viewers (someone who mainly watches soap operas). Latin American audiences have remained loyal to the soap opera genre for decades. Soap operas have occupied prime time schedules for the past 20 years and have been extended to morning and afternoon schedules with similar success. Unlike the U.S., where prime time is typically loaded with sitcoms, humor, action, and dramas, Latin American programmers always save the best prime-time schedules for soap operas.

Another important theoretical construct to understand effects of entertainment media is parasocial interaction, defined as the type of relationship that viewers develop with mass media characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956), such as a main character in a soap opera. Parasocial interaction is a key element in both entertainment-education programs and commercial programs. The greater the level of parasocial interaction developed between viewers and characters, the greater the chances that viewers will rely on characters to validate their own attitudes and behaviors (Shefner-Rogers, Rogers, & Singhal, 1996). For instance, in a study conducted by Spence on the soap opera *Days of Our Lives* (1995) one of the respondents reported that «she knew some characters on

the show that she had been watching for eighteen years better than she knew herself» (p.189).

Rubin and Perse (1987, 1985) argued that there are three audience dimensions in parasocial interaction: affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. Affective parasocial interaction primarily refers to the level of identification with or rejection of a media character. The more positive identification between viewers and media characters exists, the more likely it is that a character, at the attitudinal and behavioral level, will positively influence viewers. At the cognitive level, parasocial interaction occurs when viewers not only identify with characters but also process and rationalize a character's specific behavior in light of his or her own behavior. Finally, at the behavioral level parasocial interaction may occur when viewers interact with media characters either at the site of reception or outside of it. Outside the site of reception, for instance, research conducted on the popular Peruvian soap opera «*Simplemente María*» showed that viewers referred to the soap's characters as real life characters when the wedding of the leading characters was staged in a local church in Lima, Peru. Thousands of people showed up at the church dressed up as if they were attending the wedding of a friend or a relative (Singhal, Obregon & Rogers, 1994).

While most studies in health communication have relied on these theories to analyze soap opera's effects, in Latin America reception studies have dominated this field. This trend is the result of changes in the intellectual landscape in the region over the past few decades whereby the influential work of both Jesús Martín-Barbero, Colombia, and Néstor García-Canclini, México, have contributed to a rich analysis of the interaction among issues of media, mediation, and popular culture, and how these interactions have reshaped communication scholarship in the region.

Martín-Barbero (1993) argues that in Latin America, «cultures of urban and rural masses are increasingly products of the mass media» (p.18), although this does not occur in a passive manner. On the contrary, the assumption is that people

re-elaborate, reinterpret, and negotiate media messages. In their book *Television and Melodrama*, Martín-Barbero & Muñoz (1992) examined how women interpreted and negotiated *telenovelas*' messages in Colombia and concluded that messages were often reassigned new meanings.

Néstor García-Canclini has also significantly contributed to the analysis of media and culture, particularly on his elaboration of the notions of cultures and subcultures to which media contribute a great deal (1992). In addition, issues of everyday life, meaning and cultural mediations emerge as central elements of the ongoing conflictive interaction that takes place between media and their audiences, a process that, for instance, goes beyond the mere act of watching TV and is extended to people's daily life.

The influence of these authors is reflected in many academic areas in the region, particularly in communications. One of these areas is the research conducted on *telenovelas*, which has followed a cultural studies perspective and is manifested in a number of audience reception studies of *telenovelas* (see Fadul, 1993; McAnany, 1993; Allen, 1995). For instance, Tufte (1995) analyzed Brazilian soap operas from a social-emotional identity perspective, in an attempt to study how Brazilian *telenovelas* shape cultural identity in such a multicultural society. Tufte identified five areas within that socio-emotional identity as part of what he calls «hybrid cultures in urban peripheries».

These five elements were: a concern for responsibility for the family; a daily struggle for obtaining a beautiful and decent home; strong social networks; racial discourse among Black women; and a feeling of marginality and a class consciousness among them» (p.34). *Telenovelas*' role in shaping this hybrid cultural notion emerged from the very same role of *telenovelas* as modern storytellers. In sum, Tufte argued, *telenovelas* become a key vehicle in constructing the symbolic order of everyday life. Thus, *telenovelas* create «a sphere which is central in the constitution of the specific Latin American identity—heavily born by emotion, and with the *telenovelas* as central agents...is not comparable with the Western

conceptual dichotomies of public versus private sphere» (p.34). Studies by Sluyter-Beltrao (1992) and Uribe (1993) concluded that *telenovelas* served audiences as a tool for social and political analysis, as well as a means of resistance.

METHOD

This study used data at the level of media content and audience reception. First, a qualitative analysis of HIV/AIDS and sexuality issues portrayed in the two most popular soap operas at the time of the study –between 1998 and 1999- was conducted in two cities of Colombian Atlantic Region. Second, following some of the theoretical elements discussed above, this research studied the presence of message effects at attitudinal and behavioral levels and active construction of meaning among audience members by conducting focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with young male and female soap opera viewers. However, this paper deals primarily with audience effects and reception and leaves out details about representation and portrayal of HIV/AIDS and sexuality issues. Two Colombian soap operas, *Yo Amo a Paquita Gallego* and *Perro Amor*, were chosen based on their high ratings on prime time at the time of this research. This paper focuses primarily on *Perro Amor*, which dealt directly with HIV/AIDS and sexuality issues.

The methodological basis for this qualitative assessment is based on research procedures developed by the Glasgow Media Group, a highly reputable media research institution with a long tradition in studying media and news representations on the British media. In 1996, the Glasgow Media Group reported its findings on a study whose key objectives were to systematically analyze British media portrayals of mental health issues; and to explore «cumulative influence» of these portrayals on audience's attitudes and beliefs (Philo, 1996). Focus groups constituted the primary method employed by these researchers. Philo anticipated potential criticisms stating that although their aim was not to «make generalizations about the whole population,» they certainly sought

to «examine the process by which beliefs and attitudes develop» (p. 82). While the sample used in this study is not representative of a larger population, the process used in this research seeks to illustrate how portrayals of health issues might potentially affect attitudes and behaviors.

A total of 18 focus groups discussions were conducted with groups of 8-10 participants in each session in two cities of Colombian Atlantic Coast (Barranquilla and Soledad). Participants, selected from a high school and a public community college, provided basic demographic data and key information about their media and soap opera viewing habits. This data collection process was divided into three phases to ensure a balanced configuration of the focus groups and to promote voluntary participation in the interview process. First, participants were given a brief questionnaire to assess their media and soap opera viewing habits. Responses were classified and organized to ensure that each discussion group had a similar number of both heavy and light television viewers of *Perro Amor* and *Yo Amo a Paquita Gallego*. Heavy *telenovela* viewers were defined as those who watched three hours or more per week (including the two soap operas dealt with in the study), while light *telenovela* viewers were defined as those who watched less than three hours per week⁵. Second, focus groups discussions were conducted and each session lasted approximately 90 minutes. The third phase included in-depth interviews with a specific number of participants who participated in the focus group discussions. At the end of each session, participants were asked to volunteer to be interviewed in order to follow-up some of their observations and opinions. Sessions were audio taped for further transcription.

Themes for discussion in the focus groups and interviews included knowledge of and attitudes toward HIV/AIDS and sexuality issues, attitudes toward portrayal of these issues on soap operas, use of such information, interviewee's health-related behaviors,

⁵ This classification is also typical of cultivation studies to determine heavy and light television viewers.

and involvement with soap opera characters. The discussion also included how portrayals of HIV/AIDS issues fare against information provided by friends, family, physicians, and other sources.

A total of 129 young people participated in eighteen focus groups and twenty-seven interviews. Participants were recruited from three institutions: *Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje, SENA* (National Apprenticeship Service in Barranquilla), and *Dolores María Ucrós High School* (Soledad). Participants from the National Apprenticeship Service were recent high school graduates enrolled in two-year banking and commercial training programs. Students from *Dolores María Ucrós High School* were in their senior year. These institutions were chosen because their students represent the type of audience that commonly watches soap operas, although recent studies suggest that *telenovela* viewing, over 51% in Colombia, is very similar across socio-economic levels.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results showed presence of reported message effects among heavy viewers, but also an ongoing process of negotiation and reinterpretation of meanings. Reported message effects at the attitudinal level were established mainly during the focus group discussions, while effects at the behavioral level were mainly reported during the in-depth interviews. Heavy telenovela viewers, both men and women, reported most instances of effects, which is consistent with notions of cultivation theory and social learning theory given the possibility of repeated exposure to modeled behaviors and higher levels of message reinforcement. As Allen puts it:

The long-term, loyal viewer of the soap opera is rewarded in that her knowledge of the large and complex community of characters and their stories enables her to produce subtle and nuanced readings, whereas a single episode of any given soap opera, viewed out of context...appears to be so much pointless talk among

undistinguishable characters about events of indeterminable significance (1995, p.8).

At the attitudinal level, most heavy and light soap opera viewers indicated that *Perro Amor* provided a closer view on a number of issues highly relevant to young audiences today, particularly HIV/AIDS and sexual relations. Participants in the focus group discussions acknowledged having reinforced some of their previous knowledge and perceptions about HIV/AIDS and sexuality issues based on portrayals provided by *Perro Amor* story. One female, heavy TV viewer respondent indicated:

Perro Amor got my attention and put me on alert. Since the time I saw these episodes I am constantly reminding my husband to be careful. I always mention him what happened in the soap opera... When I saw those episodes I told him: Look!. I am very faithful! So, I emphasize the possibility of infection to him.

This testimony indicates how depiction of HIV/AIDS gave this participant a reason to emphasize a preventive attitude in her relationship with her husband. Another respondent, a female/heavy viewer, pointed out her attitude toward the importance of avoiding promiscuous sexual relations:

I think *Perro Amor*, unlike other soap operas, depicted several important health issues...such as HIV, the use of Viagra, sexual relationships with older men...and showed us that we have to be careful and be aware of all the risks that we may face if we do not act carefully.

However, the key element in this area of the research process was participants' indication that exposure to *Perro Amor* not only strongly reinforced their previous knowledge and attitudes but it seemed to trigger behavior concerning sexual relations and HIV/AIDS, both among men and women. In the case of heavy male viewers, several respondents indicated in the interviews that they

had changed their attitudes toward sex and their sexual behavior due, in part, to portrayals of HIV/AIDS and related issues in *Perro Amor*. These male respondents said they had become more faithful to their partners or girlfriends, and reported that they had become more careful regarding their sex life, particularly through the use of condoms and by engaging in monogamous relationships reportedly as a result of what they had seen in *Perro Amor*. The following statement by a male respondent exemplifies these reactions. A 19 year old, male respondent:

Watching *Perro Amor* has been very beneficial to me. It has helped me mature more and more. AIDS is a terrible problem in our communities and it destroys men and their families just because many men tend to go out with several women. This soap opera has helped me a lot to stick to one woman and not to go out with one woman, another woman, and so on.

At the behavioral level, both men and women provided most references about reported message effects during in-depth interviews. Yet, men were more open in their responses and references to specific sex-related behaviors. Men reported how portrayals of HIV/AIDS in *Perro Amor* helped them become more careful in their sexual life, despite the fact that they previously had significant knowledge of the disease as indicated in their responses during the focus groups. One of the male respondents said:

Watching *Perro Amor* has helped me...every time I have a sexual relation I protect myself with a condom...This I knew it from before but watching *Perro Amor* has made me realize how important it is to protect yourself...I do not know, but I am more careful now.

This respondent also indicated that he had discussed using condoms with his parents but perhaps had not internalized that message. *Perro Amor's* portrayal of HIV/AIDS and sexuality issues played a role in helping viewers make a decision concerning a

specific behavior, condom use in this case, particularly at the level of behavior maintenance. This phenomenon, in which a media message reinforced existing knowledge acquired via interpersonal communication, became a recurrent theme throughout the responses.

Responses showed how portrayals of HIV/AIDS, particularly the risk and consequences of HIV infection, had a reported attitudinal and behavioral effect upon several male and female heavy viewers who participated in this research. Again, in most cases respondents had sufficient knowledge of the issues and knew some of the risks associated with behaviors similar to those portrayed by *Antonio Brando's* character (lead male character in *Perro Amor*). However, the dramatic portrayal of *Antonio's* potential HIV infection was instrumental in helping these young people make a decision in terms of behavior change.

Female participants also shared similar views regarding the effects *Perro Amor's* depiction of HIV/AIDS and sexuality issues had upon them. However, in the case of women who were heavy viewers, message effects were mostly reported at the attitudinal level, perhaps because most of them indicated during the interviews that they were not sexually active. Most female respondents indicated that *Perro Amor* had helped them better understand the disease and its content reinforced certain messages taught by their parents such as having a stable relationship and avoiding sexual relations before marriage. Several respondents also indicated that *Perro Amor* had helped them approach their love relationships in a different manner and that the type of situations portrayed in *Perro Amor* encouraged them to pursue open discussion of the various aspects of the disease with their boyfriends, friends and relatives.

A comment made by a female participant reflects how this soap opera affected their attitudes on HIV/AIDS:

The way HIV/AIDS has been portrayed in *Perro Amor* has greatly influenced my current attitude. I have a boyfriend and I constantly tell him to be careful. I personally am very cautious, but you

know, men spend more time outside, consume alcohol and they may have the opportunity of having a sexual relation with another girl and they do not know how to or do not want to avoid such situation. So, I keep reminding my boyfriend of the need to be careful.

Women were less opened to report specific behavior changes based on portrayals of HIV/AIDS and sexual relations in *Perro Amor*. However, many responses provided important leads suggesting how portrayals of HIV/AIDS helped female respondents discuss HIV/AIDS and sexuality-related issues with their boyfriends and reinforce a potential preventive behavior. Although some respondents referred to their own sexual behavior, in most cases female participants referred to a third person to indicate behavior changes. Such reference to a third person often took the form of boyfriends, friends, acquaintances, relatives, and collective nouns such as youth, men and women.

Following is an example of how female participants reported on behavior changes attributed to portrayals in *Perro Amor*:

I have a boyfriend and I tell him to be very careful. Personally, I am very careful, but you know, men tend to be out most of the time, consume alcohol, and suddenly may an opportunity to have a sexual relation with some girl and sometimes they do not know or do not want to avoid that relationship.

Findings indicate the occurrence of reported message effects among male and female participants. While these reports cannot be generalized to a larger population, this analysis seems to demonstrate that dramatic representations of health issues are a contributing factor, sort of a «trigger factor», to soap opera's message effects.

Research shows that message effects do not occur in isolation. Rather, they are part of a larger web of issues, sources, and messages that add up to potential message effects upon audiences. Most participants had previously been exposed to several educational

talks and conferences on HIV/AIDS, STDs and other sexuality-related issues at school, church or via their participation in several extracurricular activities. Thus, self-reported effects, discussed in the previous question, most likely did not occur as a result of single exposure to messages conveyed by *Perro Amor*. In most cases, respondents had been previously exposed to information on HIV/AIDS and sexuality issues. This exposure came through several sources such as schools, families, friends, peers and educators, as indicated in their responses to one of the questions of the focus group protocol regarding participant's knowledge of HIV/AIDS and related issues

Throughout the focus group sessions and in-depth interviews, respondents consistently indicated that they discussed HIV/AIDS and related issues with their parents, siblings, peers, religious leaders, and friends. Consider the following brief statements by some respondents:

- At church our Pastor often warns young people about the disease. I also talk to my parents about it and tend to be very attentive when I see a special report on TV or in magazines and newspapers.
- My parents have told me to be careful about AIDS. They tell me not to have sexual relations very early, but that if I do, then I should protect myself.

In addition to indicating how interpersonal communication plays a role in the type of information young people have about the disease, these responses also suggest that each individual seeks to reinforce his/her knowledge within the specific circumstances that might best accommodate them. In some cases, participants were able to discuss sexuality and HIV/AIDS issues with their parents, while in other cases this was only possible through friends and peers or through information provided by religious leaders. This type of interpersonal communication, triggered by the act of soap opera viewing, seems to have been a critical feature of soap opera

audiences and was a constant feature in the responses provided by participants in this research. Geraghty (1991) had already stated:

Soap operas can now be defined...by the presence of stories which engage an audience in such a way that they become the subject for public interest and interrogation (p.4).

Thus, an incremental or cumulative effect phenomenon seemed to have taken place among several viewers. Previous communication approaches have posited that message reinforcement and behavior change is said to occur at the interpersonal level and is sought after exposure to media messages. However, these findings suggest that exposure to media messages, in this case through *Perro Amor*, acted as a strong reinforcing element after exposure to other interpersonal and group communication messages.

Another cumulative effect process observed in our research is strongly related to cultivation theory. In general, heavy viewers often referred to representations of HIV/AIDS portrayed in other soap operas. Most heavy viewers made references to soap operas such as *La Mujer del Presidente (The President's Woman)*, *Padres e Hijos (Parents and Siblings)*, and *May God Pay You (Dios se lo Pague)*. These Colombian television dramas were broadcasted once a week, and were approaching their final episode at the time of this research. For instance, in *The President's Woman* HIV/AIDS becomes an important element of the soap opera plot when the president's young lover finds out she is HIV positive. Examples of statements provided by heavy viewers in relation to this finding are:

I like to watch soap operas that may give me a lesson, for instance, I currently watch *Perro Amor*, which I like because it shows a lot of important themes such as drug addiction, AIDS, sexual relation with older men...and I also like other soap operas that also teach me something. For example, the *President's Woman*, which also deals with HIV/AIDS and sexual relations...»

«I have followed several soap operas such as *Paquita Gallego*, *Gotita de Amor (A Drop of Water)*, *Perro Amor*, *Parents and Siblings* and

others. For instance, I enjoy *Parents and Siblings* because it is very realistic. It discusses many family relations issues, the conflicts among relatives, AIDS, homosexuality, and other themes».

Heavy viewers often referred to these representations of HIV/AIDS in other Colombian productions. This repeated reference to HIV/AIDS representations in other soaps clearly reflects aspects discussed in the literature review concerning the importance of focusing on cultivation effects from a genre perspective as opposed to focusing on overall television viewing patterns. Heavy soap opera viewers linked similar messages received from different soap operas, and built upon these messages in a process that led to reinforcement of their knowledge of and attitude toward the disease, as well as instances of reported behavior change.

Most heavy soap opera viewers in this research seemed to have developed certain type of parasocial interaction with soap opera characters. Whether it was sympathy toward or rejection of a specific character, respondents indicated that they often talked and related to characters as they watched each episode. This parasocial relationship, which typically takes place in the context telenovela viewing (Papa *et al.*, 1998; Geraghty, 1995), would not be significantly different from traditional forms of parasocial relationship had it not been for an added element that producers of *Perro Amor* incorporated into the soap opera structure. Producers of *Perro Amor* were highly successful in aiding viewers develop a parasocial interaction with the main characters by initiating this parasocial relationship through comments inserted in poignant scenes and episodes throughout the soap opera. The following examples illustrate the approach taken by producers of *Perro Amor*:

When Antonio goes to the clinic to get his test results, a male voice, represented by a little puppy⁶ in the form of a cartoon,

⁶ This puppy had a funny appearance, which in some cases added a touch of humor.

emphatically says ;Come on, go for the results! Don't be a coward!
Do not be afraid!.

These messages had tremendous acceptance among viewers and while they are not indicative of actual behavior, they do tend to act as predisposing factors for subsequent behavior as indicated by other research on parasocial interaction and television viewing (Papa *et al.*, 1998). Respondents said they often followed the lead provided by the «little puppy» and added their own reactions. For instance, a female respondent said:

I felt bad for Antonio. I do not know what I would have done in that situation but I know it had to be terrible...

As indicated in the literature review, most research on telenovelas has been conducted following a cultural studies perspective. Cultural studies tend to dismiss notions of message effects and privileges audience's interpretation and transformation of media messages. This research also found numerous examples of audience's own interpretation and rejection of representations of HIV/AIDS and sexuality related issues. For instance, some respondents, both heavy and light viewers, indicated:

Not everybody interpret soap operas in the same way. You might see some telenovelas as a simple story but I do not see it that way. Soap operas present different arguments in a symbolic way...or in realistic ways such as *Perro Amor*...

I do not like the soap operas. Even if they have important themes they are treated the same way...for example, in *Perro Amor*, Antonio ends up being negative...that can only happen in a soap opera.

These responses exemplify how respondents rejected the way *Perro Amor* portrayed HIV/AIDS in regards to *Antonio's* potential HIV positive condition and ultimately negative test result. References

to audience's reaction raise an interesting option in the relationship between cultural studies and media effects studies. This study suggests that the terrain of media research and audience-message-genre interaction allows for the co-existence of instances of active audience interpretation of media messages and instances of message effects from a media effects tradition.

IMPLICATIONS

This study shows that the use of qualitative methods may be helpful in identifying reported attitudinal and behavioral changes based on theoretical elements traditionally used in audience effects studies in health and development communication programs and may deserve further exploration and research endeavors. At first glance, it might be argued that existence of message effects –especially when entertainment-based strategies are used- could also be studied through the use of extensive, rigorous qualitative methodologies, especially in regards to the role played by contextual issues.

While attitudinal and behavioral effects were self-reported and cannot be generalized to larger populations, results seem to open up an interesting discussion regarding the co-existence of message effects and audience interpretation of messages at the level of heavy telenovela viewing. While most health communication projects rely heavily on qualitative methodologies to identify beliefs, attitudes and other markers for strategy and message design, they do not seem to have the same weight or degree of validity when evaluating impact. A natural question is why is qualitative information so useful and valid for program design and not for impact evaluation? While this is often due to donor's demands, it is an issue that must be taken up by the research community.

In this study the use of qualitative methodologies from a reception studies perspective makes a contribution to our further understanding of how health related messages embedded in entertainment-based strategies might influence audiences over the long term, one of the most difficult aspects in evaluating

health communication programs. It might be argued that the rich tradition of reception studies to analyze the role of telenovelas in LA combined with the use of theoretical elements from audience effects and the use of qualitative methodologies might provide researchers with key information when evaluating impact. While most researchers might argue against this idea, some researchers are beginning to explore this possibility (i.e. Thomas Tufte in his reception study of entertainment-education dramas in South Africa; the Soul City project).

While causality should remain an important element in impact evaluation of communication programs, qualitative studies must become a more common feature in evaluation. The problem does not lie in the nature of qualitative studies but rather in how qualitative methodologies are used in program evaluation. While this is not a typical reception study, it leaves us with the necessity to explore the use of reception studies in evaluation of development and health communication programs based on entertainment media. This type of marriage would constitute one more step in bridging the gap between theory and practice.

REFERENCES

- ALLEN, R. (1995). Introduction, in Allen, R. (Ed.) *To Be Continued...Soap operas around the world*. New York, NY: Routledge, p. 1-26.
- ALLEN, R. (1985). *Speaking of Soap Operas*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- ATKIN, C. & BRATIC, E. (1990). Issues and initiatives in communicating health information, in C. Atkin & L. Wallack (Eds.). 1990. *Mass Communication and Public Health: Complexities and Conflicts*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- ATKIN, C. & WALLACK, L. (Eds.). (1990). *Mass Communication and Public Health: Complexities and Conflicts*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- BANDURA, A. (1986). *Social Foundations of Thought and Action*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- BARAN, S.J. & DAVIS, D.K. (1995). *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- BUERKEL-ROTHFUSS, N. & MAYES, S. (1985). Soap Opera Viewing: The Cultivation Effect, *Journal of Communication*, 31: 108-115.
- CORONADO, S. (1998). Lectura al Azar, *El Tiempo*, Noviembre 15, p. 4D.
- FADUL, A.M. (1993). (Ed.), *Serial Fiction in TV: The Latin American Telenovelas*, Sao Paulo: University of Sao Paulo.
- FREIMUTH, V. (1993). Introduction: The Role of Communication in Health Promotion. *Communication Research*. 20 (4): 509-516. August.
- FREIMUTH, V. Hammond, S.L., Edgar, T. & Monahan, J.L. (1990). Reaching Those at Risk: A Content-Analytic Study of AIDS PSAs, *Communication Research*, 17(6): 775-791.
- FREIMUTH, V. (1992). Theoretical Foundations of AIDS Media Campaigns. In *AIDS: A Communication Perspective*, (Eds.) T. Edgar, M.A. Fitzpatrick, V.S. Freimuth. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ: 91-110.
- GARCÍA-CANCLINI, N. (1990). *Culturas Híbridas*. Mexico City: Grijalbo.
- GARCÍA-CANCLINI, N. (1988). Culture and Power: The State of Research, *Media, Culture & Society*, vol.10: 467-97.

- GARCÍA-CANCLINI, N. (1982). *Las Culturas Populares en el Capitalismo (Popular Culture in Capitalism)*. Mexico: Nueva Imagen.
- GERAGHTY, C. (1995). Social issues and realist soaps: A study of British soaps in the 1980s/1990s, in Allen, R. (Ed.) *To Be Continued...Soap operas around the world*. New York, NY: Routledge, p. 66-80.
- GERAGHTY, C. (1991). *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps*. London: Polity.
- GERBNER, G. (1995). Television, Violence: The Power and the Peril, in G. Dines & J.M. Humez (Eds.) *Gender, Race and Class in Media*, p. 547-557, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- GERBNER, G., GROSS, L., MORGAN, M., & SIGNORIELLI, N. (1994). Growing Up with Television: The Cultivation Perspective, in J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 17-41.
- GONZALES, J.A. (1988). La Cofradía de las emociones (interminables), *Culturas Contemporáneas*, v.2: 5-65.
- HORNIG, S. (1996). *Doing Media Research: An Introduction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- HORTON, D. & WOHL, R. (1956). Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction, *Psychiatry*, 19: 215-229.
- MCANANY, E. (1993). The Telenovela and Social Change, in A. Fadul (Ed.), *Serial Fiction in TV: The Latin American Telenovelas*, Sao Paulo: University of Sao Paulo.
- MCANANY, E., & LA PASTINA, A. (1994). Telenovela Audiences: A Review and Methodological Critique of Latin American Research, *Communication Research*, 21: 828-849.
- MARTÍN-BARBERO, J. (1993). *Communication, Culture and hegemony: From Media to Mediations*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- MARTÍN-BARBERO, J. & MUNOZ, S. (1992). *Television y Melodrama*, Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores.
- O'CONNOR, A. (1991). Emergence of Cultural Studies in Latin America, *Critical Studies in Mass Communications*, 8: 60-73
- PHILO, G., MCLAUGHLIN, G. & HENDERSON, L. (1996). Media Content, in G. Philo (Ed.) *Media and Mental Distress*, London: Addison Wesley.
- PHILO, G. (1996). Introduction, in G. Philo (Ed.) *Media and Mental Distress*, London: Addison Wesley.
- PIOTROW, P.T., KINCAID, D.L., RIMON II, J.G. & RINEHART, W. (1997). *Health Communication: Lessons from Family Planning and Reproductive Health*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- POTTER, J.W. (1997). Antisocial Acts in Reality Programming on Television, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. 41: 69-89.
- POTTER, J.W. (1993). Cultivation Theory and Research: A Conceptual Critique, *Human Communication Research*, 19(4): 564-601.
- RUBIN, A.M. & PERSE, E.M. (1987). Audience activity and soap opera involvement: A uses and effects investigation, *Human Communication Research*, 14: 246-268.
- RUBIN, A.M., PERSE, E.M. & POWELL, R.A. (1985). Loneliness, parasocial interaction, and local television news viewing. *Human Communication Research*, 12: 155-180.

- SCHLESINGER, P. (1993). Introduction, in *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- SHEFNER-ROGERS, C., ROGERS, E. & SINGHAL, A. (1996). Parasocial interaction and the television soap operas *Simplemente Maria* and *Oshin*: Implications for entertainment-education television soap operas. Paper presented at the International Communication Association Conference, May, Chicago.
- SHERRY, J. (1997). Prosocial Soap Operas for Development: A Review of Research and Theory, *The Journal of International Communication*, 4(2): 75-101.
- SIGNORIELLI, N. (1993). *Mass Media Images and Impact on Health: A Sourcebook*. Greenwood.
- SIGNORIELLI, N. (1990). Television and health: Images and impact, C. Atkin & L. Wallack (Eds.). 1990. *Mass Communication and Public Health: Complexities and Conflicts*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- SINGHAL, A. & ROGERS, E. (1999). *Entertainment-Education: A communication Strategy for Social Change*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- SINGHAL, A., OBREGON, R. & ROGERS, E. (1994). Reconstructing the story of «*Simplemente Maria*: The most popular telenovela in Latin America of all times, *Gazette*, v.54: 147-168.
- SLUYTER-BELTRAO, M. (1993). Interpreting Brazilian telenovelas, in A. Fadul (Ed.), *Serial Fiction in TV: The Latin American Telenovelas*, Sao Paulo: University of Sao Paulo.
- SMITH, L.J. (1994). A content-analysis of gender differences in children's advertising, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 38(1): 323-337.
- SPENCE, L. (1995). They killed off Marlena, but she's on another show now: Fantasy, reality, and pleasure in watching daytime soap operas, in Allen, R. (Ed.) *To Be Continued... Soap operas around the world*. New York, NY: Routledge, p. 182-198.
- TORRES, F.J. (1994). *Telenovelas, Television y Comunicacion: El Caso de Mexico*. Mexico: Ediciones Coyoacan.
- TUFTE, T. (1995). How do telenovelas serve to articulate hybrid cultures in contemporary Brazil? *Nordicom Review*, 2: 29-35.
- TUFTE, T. (1993). Everyday life, women, and telenovelas in Brazil, in A. Fadul (Ed.), *Serial Fiction in TV: The Latin American Telenovelas*, Sao Paulo: University of Sao Paulo.
- University of California, University of North Carolina, University of Texas & University of Wisconsin (1995). *National Television Violence Study: 1994-1995*. Mediascope.
- URIBE, A.B. (1993). La telenovela en la vida familiar cotidiana in Mexico, in A. Fadul (Ed.), *Serial Fiction in TV: The Latin American Telenovelas*, Sao Paulo: University of Sao Paulo.
- WAHL, O.F. (1995). *Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- WALLACK, L & ATKIN, C. (Eds.) (1990). *Mass Communication and Public Health: Complexities and Conflicts*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- WALLACK, L. (1990). Mass Media and Health Promotion: Promise, Problem, and Challenge, in Wallack, L & Atkin, C. (Eds.) 1990. *Mass Communication and Public Health: Complexities and Conflicts*. Newbury Par, CA: Sage.

- WILLIAMS, C.T. (1992). It's Time for my Story: Oral Culture in the Technological Era-Towards a Methodology for Soap Opera Audience Study, in S. Frenzt (Ed.) *Staying Tuned: Contemporary Soap Opera Criticism*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, p. 69-88.
- WINDHAL, S. & SIGNITZER, B.H. (1992). *Using Communication Theory: An Introduction to Planned Communication*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- WINDSOR, R., MIDDLESTADT, S.E. & HOLTGRAVE, D. (1994). Behavioral Science Theory, in *Handbook for HIV Prevention Community Planning*, p. A1-A7. Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development.
- YODER, P.S. HORNIK, R. & CHIRWA, B.C. (1996). Evaluating the Program Effects of a Radio Drama About AIDS in Zambia. *Studies in Family Planning*, 27: 188-203.