

# Programme Element Importance: An Analysis Of Telenovelas In The Ghanaian Media

Eunice Akorfa Adia

Sr. Lecturer – Dept. of Mass Communication

Blue Crest University College

[eunikorf@yahoo.com](mailto:eunikorf@yahoo.com)

**ABSTRACT:** *In today's world, televisions could be said to be everywhere. In cities and big towns, it is virtually impossible to pass a street without seeing a shop, a bar, a restaurant or even an office without a television. Through communication satellites, reception dishes and retransmitting stations, television reception (at least Ghana Television) in Ghana now reaches people even in the most remote villages of the country.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Television, Media*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Hitherto, most people tune in to these television stations to watch programmes like local cultural dramas and theaters which, of course, have great values worth emulating. The representation of cultural elements common to viewers (folklore, customs and traditions, gastronomy, dress codes and music) acts as a means to build and strengthen national identities[3].

As the world moves into a more technological paradigm, the uses and gratification people have for watching television differ. While entertainment is the most manifest and visible function of television, research has identified other uses and effects related to the socializing role of this medium. Indeed there are significant audience segments that value entertainment products provided they offer plausible and realistic representations.

For several years now fictional stories like telenovelas have dominated primetime programming on most of the television stations in Ghana. These telenovelas are said to be designed to attract a wide viewing audience of men, women and children [10]. These stories can act as a mechanism in the

construction and reconstruction of viewers' personal identity. Mar noted that viewers can use fictional Television stories to reinforce their self-esteem, and as a self-reflective support tool to better recognize themselves. It can also be understood as a link to the experiences of others through which they can explain their own existence.

Effects of watching these fictional programmes vary from one class of people to the other. If one belongs to a class of subordinates in a social setting, the fictional text might usefully build a more positive and valuable reflection on their status. For those whose identity is in the process of construction, such as adolescents, fiction could provide values, images, rituals, symbols and models that act as reference points for their personal and group perceptions. Paradoxically, these fictions can be used to obtain information about present-day reality and provide a framework for its interpretation.

While this study will contribute to the underexplored area of effects and the viewer perceptions of telenovelas, it will also find out what actually is important in such programmes to attract such large viewership. Tobin [18] concludes that large and loyal audiences are not limited to U.S. viewers, because a program such as *The Bold and the Beautiful* (a telenovela) is the most watched television show in the world, reaching an estimated 300 million viewers in 110 countries daily.

This paper studies the viewer perception of telenovelas and answers the question of what actually are the important elements therein which pulls so large viewership and why the Ghanaian media have

suddenly shifted from traditional drama to telenovelas.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are quite a lot of researches that had been conducted in the area of telenovelas or soap operas. It is interesting to note, however that all these researchers have their angle from which they looked at this genre. Their conclusions also vary depending on the setting.

Enric Castelló writing on *Dramatizing Proximity: Cultural and Social Discourses in Soap Operas from Production to Reception* admitted that the idea that audiences prefer television fiction that is culturally proximate is well developed in studies on soap operas and telenovelas. This study is based on the Catalan television context, applying a close reading of two soap operas, in-depth interviews with producers and focus groups with viewers. He argues that the discourses on society and culture proposed at production level are received as being ‘proximate’, but that this perception is not just national, cultural or linguistic. Cultural proximity, he argued, also incorporates educative, cognitive and emotional elements and aspects related to the audience’s immediate surroundings.

Straubhaar [17] also established that the audience prefers these types of programmes because they actively seek proximity in their cultural consumption. Soap operas are often spoken of as products of proximity with a taste of localness that serve the domestic audience [5].

Buonanno [2], on the other hand, concluded that when TV fiction is more removed from its cultural sphere, productions are not only adopted, but also adapted, while the genres and programmes are adjusted, and modified to local styles – a process that Buonanno calls *indigenizzazione*. This process can also imply the application of a national television culture, which adapts television to the particular forms, contents and methods of a specific place [12]. One question then is whether the telenovelas we watch in Ghana have been adapted to suit our

condition. Maybe the viewers adapt them to suit their personal and not national condition.

Other scholars who studied the effects of telenovelas hold that long-term viewers are exposed to the possibility of being “emotionally harmed” (Jewell and Abate by persistent viewing of the soaps’ “ritual of gender subordination”. Long-term soap viewing can engender cultivation effects, in which “images on television influence a viewer’s perception of social reality” such that heavy viewers are inclined to believe that the real world resembles the television one.

Rosalind [13] found from her research that there is a mixture of fact and fiction in the narrative structure of the Mexican telenovela, that the resemblance to the world in which we live is recognizable but is more a likeness than a replica, and that the new tendency to feature a narrative style incorporating a more socially realistic treatment takes us closer to reality while keeping us firmly in the world of fantasy and illusion. She concludes that Telenovelas are a way of life in Mexico. What is the case here in Ghana?

The cultivation theory will be the major theoretical framework around which this study will revolve. Cultivation theorists argue that television has long-term effects which are small, gradual, indirect but cumulative and significant.

Gerbner argues that the mass media cultivate attitudes and values which are already present in a culture: the media maintain and propagate these values amongst members of a culture, thus binding it together.

Judith van Evra also argues that by virtue of inexperience, young viewers may depend on television for information more than other viewers do [7], although Hawkins and Pingree argue that some children may not experience a cultivation effect at all where they do not understand motives or consequences [7]. It may be that lone viewers are more open to a cultivation effect than those who view with others [7].

Uses and gratification will also form a base for the theoretical framework. The theory discusses how users proactively search for media that will not only meet a given need but enhance knowledge, social interactions and diversion. The theory also holds that audiences are responsible for choosing media to meet their needs. Early in the history of communications research, an approach was developed to study the gratifications that attract and hold audiences to the kinds of media and the types of content that satisfy their social and psychological needs.

Wimmer and Dominick [19] noted that uses and gratification began in the 1940s when researchers became interested in why audiences engaged in various forms of media behavior, such as listening to the radio or reading the newspaper. Still, others credit the uses and gratification perspective with Schramm's [14] immediate reward and delayed reward model of media gratifications [4].

### III. METHODOLOGY

This article presents a reception study whose objective is to analyze the socializing impact of a particular television fiction genre: telenovela. The study largely used the ethnographic method which uses interviews and observation to gather information.

#### A. INTERVIEWS

Twenty informal interviews, mostly with women (aged 20 to 35). The main questions asked was to find out whether they watch and are familiar with telenovelas. The aim for this question is to see if people watch telenovelas as part of their everyday life and to know which telenovela is the interviewee's favorite. Again, the focus is to know how many telenovelas they watch a day.

Other follow-up questions bothered on whether they comment on the telenovela with others; what a good telenovela is in their opinion; the resemblance of telenovelas to each other; recognition of a character that appears in most telenovelas, do the events portrayed in a telenovela resemble events of

everyday life; would they like to be characters in a telenovela; etc.

#### B. PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Many researchers argue that they are convinced by the argument that reception practices are not confined to the moment of broadcast [8]; [11]; [15]; [16]. Based on the above, the researcher focused on a broad understanding of reception, and so set out to examine how viewers incorporated telenovelas to their habits and daily practices. More precisely, the researcher decided to investigate when, why and how themes related to telenovelas spontaneously came to the fore in everyday situations. By taking such a standpoint, the focus of the study was taken away from the moment of broadcast (or from "immediate" reception and interviewing) to streets, lecture theaters, parties (class outing to The Stage), and everyday conversations and interactions.

#### C. SNOWBALL SAMPLING

Since the study is of exploratory nature, the researcher again used snowballing to gather information. By this, friends and acquaintances were consulted to assist in getting people who loved watching telenovelas that could be interviewed. The respondent were selected randomly and were interviewed some via phone and others face-to-face

#### IV. ANALYSIS

In order to do a good analysis of telenovelas, synopsis of two telenovelas that are telecast on Viasat and Metro televisions were provided.

Olivia Lamasan's *In the Name of Love* is a 2011 Filipino romantic film starring Aga Muhlach, Angel Locsin and Jake Cuenca and telecast on Viasat during the weekdays at 3pm with repeats at 10am. *In The Name of Love* tells the story of two sisters; Macarena and Carlota, who are to pay dearly, with pain and resentment for falling in love with the same man, and the consequences of that love in their years. It is also a story of two girls; Paloma and Romina, whose friendship - born in their childhood- will be put to

test in their teen years, with the arrival of first loves, jealousies envy and rivalry. Paloma is a child, who after the tragic death of her parents, is forced to live with her two spinster aunts, Macarena and Carlota.

Macarena is loving, caring and soon establishes a warm bond with her niece; whereas Carlota is repressive, authoritarian, domineering and seems to enjoy making life impossible for Paloma. There is one family secret that has been jealously guarded by aunts and that is crucial in the life of Paloma. When this secret finally came out, everything changed for her and the entire family.

Later on, Paloma believes she has found true love with Inaki with whom she makes marriage plans, but her aunt Carlota ruthlessly puts an end to this love forever and a second lover – Emiliano - who was again despised by the aunt.

The *Forbidden Passion*, on the other hand, is telecast on Metro television on Fridays and Saturday at 8:30am and 8:00pm respectively.

It is the story of two bodyguards; Aguirre and Camacho and two women; Paz and Barbara. Juan Manuel Aguirre Delucci falls in love with Paz, the woman he wanted the chance to guard. Nicolas Camacho Lopez falls for Barbara Sain Delucci, the girl rebellious and capricious that the bodyguard should care about.

Paz Achaval Urien is a successful business woman and married to Alejandro, a cold and unfaithful man that is involved in an affair with Carolina, the exclusive model of her brewery. Paz has never loved him, and he married her because of the social status she represents.

Barbara, Paz's daughter, is also a beautiful girl who knows very well how to manipulate others and used to having all she wants. She decides that she wants Nicolas Pacheco, her bodyguard.

Passion and love are at stake - a forbidden love. Should they dare to admit the feelings they have for one another? Juan Manuel never asked to become the bodyguard of a powerful business woman. Paz never

asked to succeed or to marry an unwanted love. So what is it that they want?

A critical look at all the telenovelas shown on the Ghanaian media are those with the theme of love. One thing becomes clear: the target audience desire elements of love and that was what I got from some interviewees as one of the reasons why they watch them. Although there are other themes that could be of essence, the media houses would want to go along the agenda being set by the audience.

The interviews revealed that a type of relationship has been developed by some viewers with the story by registering from the viewer's viewpoint, variables such as originality and verisimilitude. The reception analysis also identified the valuation viewers gave of some prominent characters and the connection they perceived in this telenovela to other behavioral traits. Even though these viewers watched several scenes, only certain portions seem to appeal to them due to how they are affected by those scenes.

They choose aspects they think they can use to gratify their intrinsic desires. Again, out of all the television stations that telecast telenovelas, not all of them appeal to every viewer at a time. The audience choose what they desire to watch and at what time. Many other reasons could be given for the high interest people have for telenovelas. This may vary from the fact that it provides entertainment and that people take it just as a matter of habit (as though it was part of their essential daily routine). Escapism and relaxation is also another pleasing reason for watching telenovelas. It means that they use these telenovelas to achieve a purpose.

Many of the interviewees, especially those in the universities say they use the telenovelas to 'release' tension and to escape from the pressures of everyday life as they delve into the world of the telenovelas.

It seems that the viewer's reasons for watching telenovelas go beyond the uses and gratifications effect. Response from many audiences is that they gain pleasure in finding their own sense of personal identity, - who they are and what place they have in the world, together with a sense of belonging. Many

viewers also watch telenovelas as they are able to identify with many of the characters, sharing opinions, life-style, and experiences.

The presence of suspense, where viewers are kept guessing about the characters and their fate, also seems to be a major element of the programming relating to telenovelas' popularity and the continuous viewership.

Again, it is established that the United States is the undisputed leader in exported television programmes [1]. In this way, many of the interviewees admit that they have learned many of the foreign cultures from these telenovelas. An open show of love in public places has not been the Ghanaian culture. An interviewee asserts that she would not mind kissing her boyfriend in public so as to show the public how much she loves him. To her, that will put off other admirers. She admitted apparently that if Makarena, one of the two sisters in *In the Name of Love*, had done that the other sister would not have also thought of dating the same guy.

Modeling some of the characters and the audiences set in motion a negative feedback loop influencing vulnerable audiences, a process intensified by the verisimilitude that some of these telenovelas convey in settings and consumption scenarios. Images of realism flood viewers, who show "fierce acceptance of the reality of soaps" [9]. Since the cultivation theory admits that the longer one is exposed to the media, the more likely it is that they will be directly influenced, the excessive exposure to these telenovelas gave way to this as some interviewees reveal that they see these series as the normal way of the world.

One other function of telenovelas as socialization tools that contribute to consumer learning as well as the concept of telenovelas as vehicles that create idealistic expectations came to light. One of the interviewees, who had followed *In the Name of Love* told me that she would not mind at all when she found out that her boyfriend is also dating her best friend. Apparently, she has built an inner defense for such things after having been exposed to telenovelas.

Again, many viewers get to appreciate the cultures of those that are reflected in the telenovelas.

It can also be concluded from this study that by combining entertainment with educational content, telenovelas can appeal to the emotions (thus influencing attitudes and perhaps overt behavior) of audiences, as well as to their intellects. The mixture of entertainment and educational content can serve to attract larger audiences as many of the men contacted claimed they do not watch because to them, there are no educational benefits in telenovelas.

In all, it is obvious from this study that telenovelas provide emotional release, personal gratification, companionship and an escape from reality when viewers are continuously exposed to them.

## V. CONCLUSION

A principal goal throughout this study has been to discuss how, television viewing more especially telenovelas can influence behaviour. And again, to find out the exact contents this programme, making it so important to many people especially women. The research diverted focus from the places where immediate reception takes place to streets, lecture theaters, parties, and everyday conversations and interactions. Ethnographic fieldwork method was employed which allowed for first-hand experience from those who watch telenovelas.

To conclude, telenovelas have become part of the Ghanaian society but admit also that there is room for more telenovelas which will attract more men and educate the society as well. Indigenous telenovelas that showcase the cultural heritage of Ghana must be encouraged so as to make room for more audience.

Telenovelas today are indeed a great source where much education can take place. Great issues like HIV/AIDS, the need for regular exercising of the body and other social issues can be packaged in these forms of telenovelas as many people watch them daily.

"Television is pushed by the demand that it should entertain. It is pulled by the competition for audiences into any amount of trivia and sensationalism" [6]; television viewing is so much a

part of life now in Ghana and for some, television programmes like telenovelas are almost a reality. Life (to some) is like a telenovela.

## VI. REFERENCES

- [1] Bielby, D. D., and C. L. Harrington. 2002. Markets and Meanings: The Global Syndication of Television Programming. In *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization*, edited by D. Crane, N. Kawashima, and K. Kawasaki, 215–32. New York: Routledge.
- [2] Buonanno, M. (2006) *L'età della televisione. Experience e teorie*. Roma: Editori Laterza
- [3] Castello, E. (2009). The Nation as Political Stage: A Theoretical Approach to Television Fiction and National Identity. *International Communication Gazette*, 71, 4; 303-322.
- [4] Dozier, D. M., & Rice, R. E. (1984). Rival theories of electronic newsgathering. In R. E. Rice (Ed.), *The new media: Communication, research, and technology* (pp. 103–128). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage
- [5] Dunleavy, T. (2005) ‘Coronation Street, Neighbours, Shortlands Street: Localness and Universality in the Primetime Soap’, *Television & New Media* 6(4): 370–82
- [6] Ellis, J. 1999. Television as Working-Through. In *Television and Common Knowledge*, edited by J. Gripsrud. London: Routledge.
- [7] Evra, Judith van (1990): *Television and Child Development*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum
- [8] Grossberg, L. The In-Difference of Television. In *Screen* 28(2):28-45, 1987.
- [9] La Guardia, R. 1983. *Soap world*. New York: Arbor House.
- [10] Lopez, A. (1991). *The Melodrama in Latin America: Films, telenovelas, and the currency of a popular form*. In M. Landy (ed.) *Imitations of Life: a reader on Film and Television Melodrama*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- [11] Miller, D. The Consumption of Soap Opera: *The Young and the Restless* and Mass Consumption in Trinidad. In Allen, R. (Ed.). *To Be continued...Soap Operas Around the World*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
- [12] Moran, A. (1998) *Copycat TV: Globalisation, Program Formats and Cultural Identity*. Luton: University of Luton Press.
- [13] Rosalind C. Pearson, Fact or Fiction?: Narrative and Reality in the Mexican Telenovelas, in *Television & New Media* Vol. 6 No. 4, : 400-406, November 2005.
- [14] Schramm, W. (1949). The nature of news in *Journalism Quarterly*, 26, 259–269.
- [15] Silverstone, R. *Television and Everyday Life*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- [16] Spulnik, D. Anthropology and Mass Media. In *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22:293-315, 1993.
- [17] Straubhaar, J. (1991) ‘Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity’, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8(1): 39–59.
- [18] Tobin, F. 2002. Report to Frank Tobin Public Relations from Bell-Phillip Television Productions, Los Angeles, CA
- [19] Wimmer, R. D., & Dominick, J. R. (1994). *Mass media research: An introduction*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.