

**Research Review: A Comparison of Two Studies using the Media
System Dependency Theory**

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Variations in the Use of Media Dependency Theory: A Comparison of Two Studies

Media dependency theory, as conceived by DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1975), suggests that media operate to fill a void that is created during the transition from a pre- to post-industrial society. In the past, this transition resulted in many people's informal social relationships weakening. The media's role in providing information, once obtained through these informal social ties, has increased in significance as our society has become more "associative" and less "communal" (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1975, p. 260). In the following pages, I will examine DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach's notion of media system dependency (MSD) through the lens of two research studies which utilize the theory to observe separate social phenomena. I will determine whether the authors of these studies selected parts of the theory to accomplish their individual goals, and/or used the whole theory as DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach describe it. I will compare and contrast the authors' individual uses of the theory and provide information about whether the studies tested the theory or simply used it to explain their findings. Finally, I will give my opinion about whether the theory was used in accordance with the ideas of the conceivers and/or whether I think the way that they used the theory hinders or advances the use of the MSD theory as a whole.

I chose to compare two studies which utilize the MSD theory in different ways. The first paper called, "Social Identity and Media Dependency in the Gay Community: The Prediction of Safe Sex Attitudes, (Morton & Duck, 2000)" focuses on the effects of media on individuals' health as it relates to sexually transmitted disease. The second, "Internet connectedness before and after September 11, 2001, (Kim, Jung, Cohen & Ball-

Rokeach, 2004)” focuses more on the use of the internet directly following a national crisis. I choose these two studies because I believe they offer us two unique perspectives into the phenomenon of media dependency. The first study offers us a perspective of everyday media use. Many people rely on media for health related information or about social norms that exist within a community. The second study provides a snapshot of what media dependency looks like in our country as a result of a national crisis. Because DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach specifically discuss the concept of ambiguity in relation to media dependency, I want to include a study that examines a moment in our own country when we faced one of these times. I want to contrast this study with a study that looks at everyday usage of media. I feel that using the study on the gay community is particularly useful because of the unique role that gay media play in connecting members of this community by distributing information and conveying social norms. In both studies, the effects of media dependency are found to be significant because people require more information than they can receive from interpersonal communication networks.

Study 1: “Social Identity and Media Dependency in the Gay Community: The Prediction of Safe Sex Attitudes. (Morton & Duck, 2000)”

This study’s objective was to examine the effect of media-based HIV prevention campaigns on a targeted population, namely the gay community in two major Australian cities. The authors of this study used the MSD theory in conjunction with the social identity theory. The social identity theory was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) and states that because social groups are associated with positive or negative value

connotations, social identity may be positive or negative according to the evaluation of the groups that contribute to an individual's social identity. (Tajfel & Turner) I believe the Morton and Duck decided to use social identity theory in conjunction with the MSD theory because it focuses on one aspect of the MSD theory, namely the role of social structures (communities) as they impact media dependency. Because the task of this assignment is to compare two studies with respect to one common theory (MSD theory), I will focus on the MSD aspect of the study, though I feel it is important to disclose the author's inclusion of the social identity theory and predict the reasons why they have done so. The author's inclusion of the social identity theory in this study will prove to be important as we examine the results of their findings and certainly offers a unique perspective on how theories can be used to conduct research.

In the assessment of the gay community, the researchers sought to find out whether dependency on media in this targeted population would impact the sexual behavior (right or wrong, they assume that behaviors and attitudes are related) of individuals within the population. To do this they began with some predictions (They had seven hypotheses. For the sake of time and space, I will summarize their predictions.). Generally, they thought that the effect of safe sex content within gay media would impact those who are dependent on gay media for such information rather than those who simply report using gay media frequently. Specifically, they predicted that the relationship between media dependency and personal attitudes toward safe sex would be stronger for more frequent users of gay media. Also, it was predicted that those who identified strongly with the gay community would be impacted by the community's social norms. These individuals, due to their identification with the community would,

then, also show the strongest reliance on gay media. These high-identifiers should then be most susceptible to media effects and their attitudes about safe sex would be most impacted by the messages in gay media.

They conducted their research by distributing surveys to members of the gay community through interpersonal contacts and university campus groups. The respondents completed a questionnaire which measured general demographic information, gay media use and dependencies, identification with the community and perception of the community's safe sex norms and personal attitudes toward safe sex behavior. This information provided the researchers with data that they grouped into four variables: identification, norms (these were related to social identification theory), frequency and dependency (these were related to MSD theory). The specific results of this research were rather insignificant. Each regression or interaction they performed seemed to dull the importance of previous findings. For example, "the inclusion of sexual health dependency and frequency of gay media use as predictors resulted in a significant increment accounted for in the variance, $R^2_{ch} = .10$, $F_{ch}(2,58) = 3.16$, $p < .05$, although tests of the regression coefficients revealed a significant main effect for sexual health dependency, $\beta = .29$, $t(58) = 2.20$, $p < .05$, but not for frequency of gay media use, $\beta = .14$, $t(58) = -1.12$, ns " (Morton & Duck, 2000, p. 448). It was, finally concluded, though, that there was a significant variance in attitudes about safe sex for individuals who used gay media frequently. In other words, "dependency on gay media affected personal attitudes towards safe sex both directly and indirectly via perceptions of safe sex norms" (Morton & Duck, 2000, p. 454).

It seems that the number of hypotheses that they started with proved to limit individual effect findings. While certain variables interacted as the researchers had hoped, many did not. Perhaps the most interesting of their findings was that they discovered interplay between the two theories they employed: MSD theory and social identity theory. They found that *both* dependency on media and social norms affect attitudes towards safe sex in the gay community. Certainly, we can imagine that the media reflects the norms and attitudes of the community that it serves and vice versa. As Morton & Duck point out, “Media content is used to learn about the defining attitudes and behaviors of the reference group that, when internalized as norms, bring personal attitudes in line with those presented in the media” (Morton & Duck, 2000, p. 455). With this in mind, the results of this research make it hard to say whether people’s attitudes are actually impacted by the media or if they are instead simply amplified by them.

Study 2: “Internet Connectedness before and after September 11 2001 (Kim et al., 2004)”

The second study chronicles the change in dependency on various forms of media during two specific moments in time; before September 11, 2001 and after. Specifically, Kim et al. were interested in whether the quality of individuals’ internet connections made a difference in how individuals connect to new and old media and other people after a crisis. They conducted their research by calling 331 households in a suburban city in Los Angeles county. They began collecting their survey data on August 30, 2001. They stopped due to the events on September, 11 (9/11) after 141 surveys were completed. The

survey resumed on September 21 and 190 more surveys were completed. They first assigned each respondent to one of the following categories based on the *quality* of their internet use: internet high-, low- and non- connectors. These were assigned both to pre-9/11 and post-9/11 periods. They assigned people to these groups based on a concept called, “internet connectedness,” which they had used in previous research. This concept is used to evaluate how people differ in their capacity to incorporate the internet to add social, cultural and economic value to their everyday lives.

This group of researchers also began their study with a series of predictions. First, they believed that both internet connectors and non-connectors would increase the time spent with traditional mass media post-9/11. They predicted that people who were high-connectors would spend more time online after 9/11 and low-connectors would spend less time online after 9/11. They also thought that high-connectors would rate the importance of the internet higher after 9/11 and low-connectors would rate its importance lower after 9/11. Finally, they wanted to see how these differences would effect people’s participation in civic activities such as displaying an American flag, donating money or giving blood. They predicted that high-connectors were more likely to participate in a broader scope of civic activities than low-connectors and non-connectors after 9/11.

Essentially, they found all of their hypotheses to be true. The only surprising outcome was that almost half of the internet high-connectors (45.9%) spend more time talking with other people after 9/11 than before. Only about a quarter of low-/non-connectors did so. Generally, they found that high-connectors expanded the scope of communication forms after the crisis and low-/non-connectors experienced greater dependency on traditional mass media, thus narrowing their scope of communication

forms. For high-connectors, this expanded range of connections, was used to achieve social and behavioral goals following the crisis. These connections activated these individuals to participate in a broader range of civic actions as well. Exactly the opposite was true for low-/non-connectors. Low-/Non-connectors turned away from interpersonal and internet communication channels. They became more reliant on mass media for information about the crisis. They were also less likely to find the resources which would motivate them to civic action in their local community. With all of this said, it is important to note that despite the findings of this research, the percentage of people who connected to the internet as part of their daily lives declined right after 9/11. Most people turned to mass media to get information following the tragedy.

This finding brings us full circle in our discussion of media dependency. While this research shows that people vary in the amount of time they spend with one form of media shortly following a crisis, it shows rather overwhelming support for Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur's supposition that these moments of crisis bring on a sense of ambiguity which mass media resolves in modern society. In fact, of those with internet access, 78% relied on television as their main source for news on the terrorist attacks. Kim and company's findings, however are not insignificant to the MSD theory. They tell us that the nature of internet connectedness is a product of other social, economic and cultural factors in society. These factors determine the capacity for individuals to reach certain information at a given time and place. It is important to note that because of this, the available information and action for high-connectors and low-/non-connectors is quite different.

Analysis of Theory Use

In the first study, the authors employed the theory of media dependency in a way that might not exactly fit DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach's initial conception. First, they don't identify a moment of crisis or a general state of ambiguity. I suppose, one could argue that sexual health in the gay community is an important factor in maintaining stability within that community (and perhaps the larger social community). However, I would argue that in today's world many people are aware of the risks involved in unsafe sex. While I think it is worthwhile to examine the effects that media dependency in the gay community bring about, I'm not sure that sexual behavior is the right thing to measure. I feel that their results suggested that social norms are more significant in this case. To me, it certainly makes sense that this would occur. In the gay community, it is often hard to connect with other members of the community for reasons of stigma or inconvenience (people who work a lot or live in rural areas, etc). The gay media, seem to satiate a need for gay people to connect with other members of the community. This connection enables social norms to be distributed outside of interpersonal networks. In this case, the members of the community experience a social norm or interpersonal connection void which the media fills. In this sense, one can argue that this study achieves its goal of illustrating an effect based on the MSD theory.

In the second study, I feel that the authors did a rather admirable job of measuring the effects that occur due to a crisis and state of heightened media dependency. While the MSD theory encompasses much more than was studied in this isolated example (media corporations, socio-economic status, etc), it does document an increase in media use in direct correlation to the most traumatic American crisis in recent memory. It seems that

because MSD theory is so large and involves interactions among so many variables, it would be nearly impossible to conduct an experiment which proves or disproves all of its claims.

While the authors of these studies used the MSD theory in different ways to learn more about discrete phenomena, I believe they both did so in a way that advances the theory, makes it more accessible and lends it credibility. The first study could have done a better job of this, in my opinion, by selecting a topic which relates more to attitudes and beliefs and less to sexual behavior (though, in their defense, these could easily be related). They successfully identified a void which occurs in a community that the media fills. More research would need to be done to examine how media producers are impacted by the community or other external forces to incorporate more of the MSD theory's fundamental claims. We might also need to look at the specific characteristics of the audience and the cognitive effects which occur to get the whole picture according to the MSD theory.

The second study examines a moment in time in which a level of ambiguity among people was high due to the unexpected terrorist attacks of 9/11. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach say that dependence on media in countries with instable governments is higher than in stable governments because of people's increased need for information. This phenomenon, if we can compare 9/11 to that of a country with an instable government, is proven to be true by Kim et al. They go a bit further than the first study and identify the effect that social economic status also plays on an individual's media dependency. They discuss the differences exist in the way that various media meet the information needs of people. More research on specific media system characteristics, audience characteristics,

cognitive effects and social systems might prove beneficial in seeing the whole 9/11 picture according to the MSD theory though.

In sum, though more work can be done to better employ the MSD theory, part of the appeal of the theory is that it aims to synthesize a broad range of media phenomena and effects. These studies both do a satisfactory job of examining part of the MSD theory and advancing its utility so that future researchers might examine other parts of this far-reaching theory, perhaps, bringing us ever closer to an over-arching theory of media effects.

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