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# Mass Media and Its Effect on Children in Bhutan

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**Abstract:** *Ever since Bhutan opened to the world by allowing the mass media to enter the country, much of its changes have occurred in the society including children. The impact on children has been one of the important issues that needed attention. In order to understand the impacts, the data has been used from the survey data collected during mass media impact study conducted in 2003, 2008, and 2013. TV and internets has affected their behavior and attitude and much of transformation has occurred with economic development in Bhutan.*

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## Introduction

Mass media is any type of communication targeted to reach a large audience to convey its message or entertain through any medium, such as magazines, television, newspapers, advertisements, phones, video games, or films. Therefore, sociologist refers to mass media as channels of communication that involve transmitting information to large numbers of people. With unprecedented power to move and process information, this is impacting global trading patterns, culture, and governance—in fact, media impacts every aspect of our society today (Royal Government of Bhutan, Ministry of Information and Communication [MOIC], 2009). Media is evolving very fast, since early 1950s, trends in new forms of media upsurge have shifted people's preferences from magazines to feature films, sound recordings, television, computers, radio, and the internet. Media such as television not only have affected national advertising market, but it also took away readers (Randle, 2001). With these media entering at the household level, children are getting more exposed and have easy excess to all kinds of information.

## Age: You can't teach an old dog new tricks?

Much has been written regarding age and second language acquisition (Birdsong, 1999; Marinova-Todd, Marshall, & Snow, 2000; Scovel, 2000; Singleton, 2001) with many researchers making a strong case for critical or sensitive periods for L2 acquisition. With these theories in mind, it is rea-

sonable to ask if university-age students in Japan with the aforementioned deficits in English proficiency can be expected to function in an EMI environment.

## Literature Review

Today American children spend more time with media than any single activity other than sleeping, with 8-18 years old kids spending, on average, more than six hours daily on media use (Roberts & Foehr, 2014). Its power to reach audiences and educate children have many good results and have enriched children's lives but have negative consequences, too (Johnson, Cohen, Smailes, Kasen, & Brook 2002; Mokhtar, 2011). The potential negative consequences of children's media consumption have received a lot of attention, yet not all information consumed by children through various media is bad. However data showing the negative effects of exposure to violence, inappropriate programs, and unpleasant language are convincing according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Over the past years, the effects of media on children's lives have been one of the most researched areas, particularly by psychologists, pediatricians, and behavioral scientists, and it has also been of interest to policy makers.

Media is playing its role everywhere, and Bhutan is not an exception. Ever since Bhutan opened itself to the world from isolation in the 1960s, much of its transformation occurred with economic developmental activities and later, in the 1980s Bhutan also introduced these mediums. Before this period, the government and people in Bhutan sent information through people or wrote letters. Bhutanese media has undergone rapid change since the start of the

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country's first national newspaper and radio station in the 1980s followed by the advent of television and the Internet in 1999. Then the country's first ever information and communications media act was enacted in 2006. Thereafter, private media firms were established, which gave the public more options for receiving independent information. According to the survey conducted by Bhutan information and media impact study in 2012 with a baseline year of 2003, it was found that, the number of Bhutanese films, audio visual production houses, magazines, books, televisions sets, and mobile phones has increased more than 200 percent. Internet services connection has increased dramatically from 2117 to 133289, while radio sets have increased to 77800 in 2008, although later it decreased to 46,641 (MOIC, 2013). This trend shows the preferential level of media by Bhutanese and the evolution of media. In addition, the number of households owning of two or three TV sets has been rising. (MOIC, 2012; Pek-Dorji, 2008). This is because of the conflict in families over watching different programs between children and adults, which means children now have more freedom to watch TV, access the internet and play any games for instance. These kind of phenomena are very recent and needs proper understanding of the contents and usage of such media with regard to any underlying threats and motives. Children are exposed to so much information now and then that there is an increasing risk that these media will manipulate their attitudes and behaviors (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001). Therefore, this paper tries to explain what are the impacts of media on children's attitude and behavior. Regulating the impact that is having on our children has become very challenging, for both, parents and policymakers.

Being one of the last countries to introduce these media, people are enjoying the contents that these media have to offer. It is seen as a positive advance with the potential for educating, entertaining, and symbolically connecting Bhutan to the modern world, yet on the other hand the arrival of foreign channels with commercial advertisements also is considered as threat to Bhutanese unique identity and culture (McDonald, 2004; Rabten, 2001). Bhutan has only two domestic channels, both of which are subscriptions provided by the Bhutan broad casting service, while the rest are all foreign channels. There is a growing concern about the adverse effects of media and especially on children and

youth social behavior, fashion, and cultural ethics, which have resulted in our children and youth copying western culture and mimicking fights as seen in video games and on televisions. Rabten in 2001 reported that, the excessive media consumption has led to undermine the culture and traditions of Bhutan. Some people in Bhutan even believed that these have led to increase in the number of drug addiction and gang fights, in some instances even blaming media for violations of social and traditional norms. It is also observable from the children these days that they prefer brand-name products and tend to seek goods advertised through these media. In USA, purchase request studies have found a positive relationship between number of hours of TV watched and number of demands from the child for specific food items, as well as the presence of those items at home (e.g., Coon & Tucker, 2002). Thus, Bhutanese parents are also getting concerned because of the effect of TV on school children. One example was the WWE; however it has been removed from Bhutanese channel list after lots of concerns were raised by parents. Children started mimicking TV shows and do wrestling at school. Such behavior does not fit well with Bhutanese values and the government's philosophy. Some even speculated that the rise in crime was directly related to violent television shows. While some kids mimicked the fighting, other kids were confused by it (Freeman & Jackson, 2012). A nationwide study on juvenile crime by those aged between 7-18 years showed increased convictions starting from 1999 (Dorji, 2005), and surprisingly that was the year when TV and the internet were first introduced. But if these two are correlated it's yet to be determined. Whenever media effects on violence are discussed, people have a tendency to draw conclusion that media is responsible for increasing crimes and increasing lawlessness (Halloran, 1970). Experiments on college campuses by Bandura and Berkowitz (summarized in Comstock & Paik, 1991) showed that violent behavior could be learned by viewing violent media content and that a stimulation effect was more probable than a cathartic (or cleansing) effect.

So far, Bhutan has retained much of its unique ancestral heritage through the years by remaining geographically isolated and government restrictions on media (Freeman & Jackson, 2012; Khondker, 2000). The government has tried hard to preserve the traditions of the country with things like national dress, so as to avoid the risk of losing Bhutanese

culture. In order to prevent this, other channels such as MTV and Fashion TV were taken off the air (Sengupta, 2007). With urbanization on the rise, the traditional role of family and community elders in sharing values and societal norms through direct communication with the younger generation is weakening. People have less time for their children. In the evenings, many are entertained by television. With modernization, Bhutanese society is already witnessing a shift in family values, attitudes, and expectations (Wangyel, 2001). There seems to be a general consensus that, mass media have affected our attitude and behavior towards cultural values. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP; 2001) states that TV and other electronic media can influence the children's ways of doing daily activities such as playing with their friends, getting connected to their parents and developing physically and socially. These types of development are mostly repressed because many young children are watching on an average of two to four hours of television per day (Eastman, 2002) and 41 percent of Bhutanese children watch TV up to 3 hours a day (MOIC, 2012). As kids get older, too much time spent watching TV can interfere with activities such as reading, doing homework, being physically active and most importantly playing with friends, and spending time with their family. Media researchers and academics are supporting the need for media literacy programs to make people more aware of, and to be able to critically analyze, media content. Research shows that a media literate society is better able to make good use of all that the media has to offer, and to

reinforce positive values rather than being passive and unthinking adopters of new ideas driven home by global television (Pek-Dorji, 2008). Television, which used to dominate children's media consumption habits, are now joined by latest devices such as tabs, computers, video

game players, smart phones, and many other devices. So the result is that children today are totally immersed in media experiences from a very young age and already we are able to witness the impacts in their daily lives as shown in Table 1.

Regulating the impact these experiences are having on our children has become very challenging, for both parents and policymakers. Access to mass media systematically brings in social isolation and degrades cultural priorities, and if Bhutan wants to negotiate a happy balance of tradition and modernity, policymakers must become much more aware of the dramatic cultural impacts these media have (McDonald, 2008).

### Discussion and Findings

From Table 1, we can conclude that many of the respondents said TV helped children become more confident and exposed to outside world and their cultures, on the other hand, they also became more fashionable through imitation of celebrities and their favorite characters in TV shows and the demands for the products went up as they watch more TV. This is the indication of the possibilities, that the future generation of Bhutan might become more materialistic, which is in conflict with the Buddhist values as well as Bhutan's government philosophy of gross national happiness. It is also worthwhile to mention that, reading time has improved only by one percent from 2003 to 2012, which is not a good improvement, although governments are trying to motivate children to read through various programs.

However, when the respondents were asked the

Table 1. Impact of TV on Children in Bhutan

	2003	2008	2012
Affected school work	33%	19%	28%
Affected sports/outdoor activities	9%	2%	3%
Given them more exposure/confidence	16%	10%	25%
Made them better informed about Bhutan	7%	1%	5%
Made them better informed about other countries	13%	-	8%
Made them imitate fashion type	6%	2%	10%
Made them want to consume more/become more materialistic	3%	2%	8%
Made them read less	9%	5%	10%
Not noticed any impact	3%	6%	11%
No response	1%	54%	2%

Note. Table 1 is developed from data obtained from MIS 2003, 2008 and 2012, Ministry of Information and communication, Bhutan

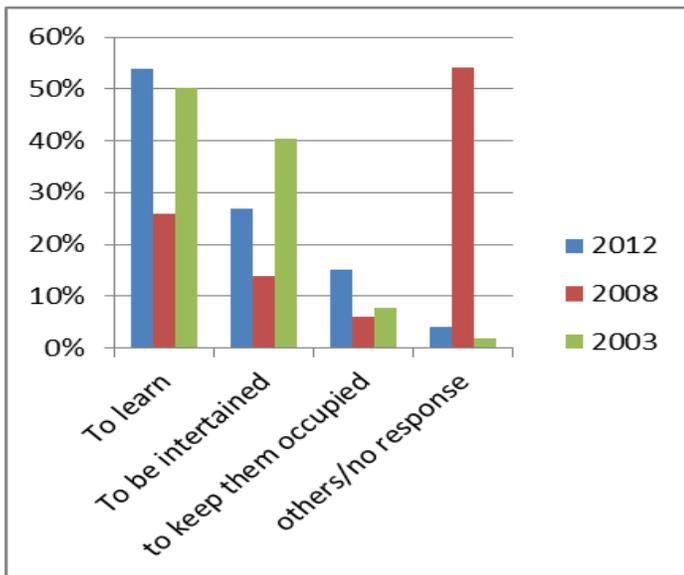


Figure 1. Reasons children were allowed to watch TV. Figures 1 and 2 were developed from data obtained from MIS 2003, 2008 and 2012, Ministry of Information and Communication.

reasons children were allowed to watch TV and if they set limit for their children. Their summaries of responses are represented in Figures 1 and 2.

From Figure 1, the reasons why parents let their children watch TV is first to learn, followed by to get entertained by different programs, and then to keep them occupied. There isn't much change in the motivation behind parents letting their children watch TV in the year from 2003 to 2012. Which means people in Bhutan perceives this media as a medium of education. Perhaps they trust that, whatever is being broadcasted in mass media is true up to some extent. It is interesting to note that, entertainment comes just next to education and keeping their children occupied is in increasing trend towards 2012. Is it because elders are becoming busier? In terms of guidance, from Figure 2, it shows that, a majority of parents let their children watch TV without limits, and relatively less time set limits on TV viewing time. However, by 2012, the number of parents allowing children to watch TV only after homework was increasing. However, setting no limits on TV viewing time tops the chart, which begs several questions: Are elders becoming busier? Do children chose mass media over family time? Regarding the negative impacts of the TV programs on children, it is not clear what age level filled out the questionnaire, but if we consider the model proposed by Deborah Roedder John (1999), which was based on Piagetian models of general development, it is possible to distinguish a perceptual stage (3- to

7-year-olds), analytical stage (7- to 11-year-olds), and reflective stage (11- to 16-years-olds) in the understanding of media content. Children can distinguish advertising from main programs based on persuasive intent only from the age of 7–8 (i.e., from the start of the analytic stage). During this analytical stage children may be able to identify that commercials are made for selling purpose, but may not be able to analyze the messages. Children at this age may understand that advertising does not always constitute the truth and are more likely to express skeptical views toward the institution of advertising (Moore & Lutz, 2000). The development of this attitude is mainly due to the result of cognitive capacity rather than a consequence of the experience of watching television advertisements (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999). Sheikh and Moleski (1977) showed that advertising intensifies the conflict between parent and child. In my opinion, this study does not provide evidence that advertising causes conflict in the family, because (a) there is no relation reported with respect to exposure to advertising and conflict, and (b) no experimental assessment has been made between children who were or were not exposed to advertising. Therefore, becoming more materialistic is just a perceptual level.

Social psychologists has defined attitude as a mental affinity that is expressed by evaluating a particular thing or person with some degree of favour or disfavour. According to Rosenberg and Hovland

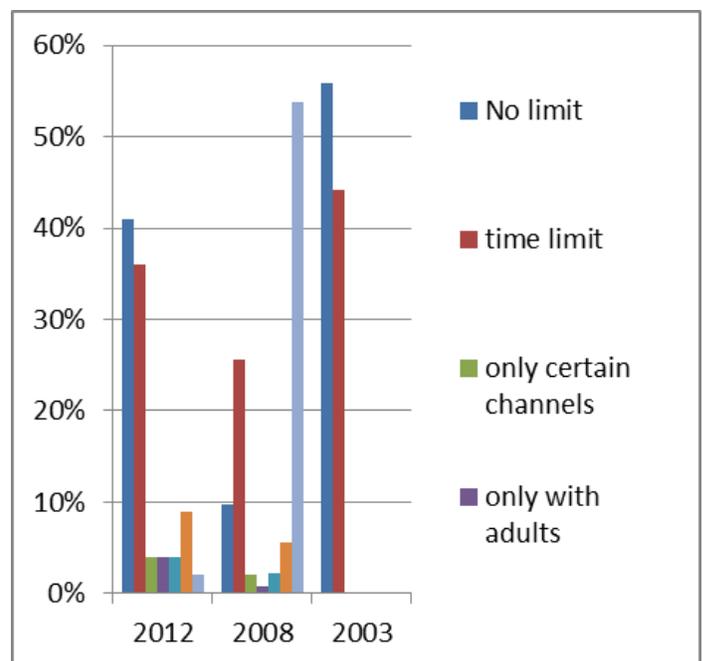


Figure 2. Setting time limit for children to watch TV

(1960), attitudes are tendencies to respond to some class of stimuli with certain classes of responses and designate the three major types of response as affective, behavioral and cognitive. The cognitive element of attitude concerns with perceptions, and beliefs regarding the particular object or event. The second affective component includes feelings toward the object. Cognition and affect don't really have to be in synchronization with one another. That is, a person might express a positive attitude toward advertisements, but he may also have negative viewpoints about it. The third factor is the action or behavior component. This aspect of attitude concerns a bias or an intention that has been gathered from previous experiences to behave in a certain way. Fishbein and Ajzen's Theory of Reasoned Action (1975) considered five concepts: beliefs, attitudes, intentions, personal norms, and behaviors. A belief here means the information an individual has about an event or an object. Attitude refers to a person's level of gradation of evaluation which may affect a target behavior. Intention is the personal likelihood that an individual will perform a stated behavior. It is considered a type of belief in which the target is always the individual and the attribute is always some behavior. Personal norm is a person's perception of the societal pressures to perform or not to perform that behavior. Behaviors are specific observable acts of the subject and may be defined with respect to the actions executed. Starting from theoretical perspectives and previous research on this topic (D'Alessio, Laghi, Baiocco, 2006; Rossiter, 1979), they defined attitude toward TV advertising as a multi-factorial conception composed of three essential aspects: belief, enjoyment and behavioral-intention.

The number of persuasive message has grown tremendously. It is observable to almost every one of us, how many advertisements you come across on a daily basis. According to several bases, the advertisements exposed to the average U.S. adult in each day ranges from around 300 to over 3,000. However for Bhutan, since the channels are mostly foreign, for example, Indian TV has advertisements every fifteen minutes between every programs.

## Conclusion

Bhutan should not succumb to the world of media imperialism, and this is the beginning. Bhutanese mass media must take precautions while making information accessible to the children, because in a

matter of no time, most of the children can copy a movie or TV personality, sing the latest song, and do many other things. Sadly, these instances may include naming a popular brand of drinks, assuming a conspicuous "sexy" pose, or wrestling. Children only have to press the remote controls button, open a magazine, search a web site or watch TV to experience all kinds of messages with a simple click. It really is so easy. Media offer entertainment, knowledge, and education. They are an important part of our lives and have much to teach, but some of what they teach is not necessary for our children to learn.

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