

Batswana Adolescents' Interpretation of American Music Videos: So That's What That Means!*

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Abstract:

Understanding the impact of mass media communication from developing countries on Black populations continues to be an important research topic. This study assessed the impact of television, specifically, music video programming from the United States, on 191 Black adolescents from Botswana, a developing country located in southern Africa. Results indicated that television programming originating in America has a significant impact on the Batswana youth, with greater than two thirds of adolescents having weekly exposure to this form of American culture. However, the majority of African youth failed to demonstrate accurate perceptions of culture-specific language and images contained in the music videos. Findings also suggest that American entertainment figures are replacing the influence of African entertainers on the Batswana youth. Relations between media technology and shifts in cultural values of developing countries are discussed.

Article:

Literature from numerous fields, including marketing and advertisement, mass communication theory, and social psychology, posit that consumption of television programming affects the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of television viewers (Graham, 1996; Singer & Singer, 2001; Tan, Nelson, Dong, & Tan, 1997). Television programming produced in the United States is exported to more than 100 countries worldwide. Each year, the U.S. music industry produces thousands of music videos in scores of music genres, including dance, hip-hop, pop, heavy metal, and rock and roll. Much like the British rock of the late 1950s and early 1960s that invaded American radio airwaves, American hip-hop, dance, and pop videos have begun to occupy the television sets of many countries across the world. The popularity of American music videos among Black adolescents in Botswana, a developing country in southern Africa, is growing. As social scientists, we are faced with the important task of investigating what effect these music videos have on the social and/or psychological development of these cross-cultural adolescent consumers.

Several studies have emphasized the effects of adolescent leisure activities on adolescent behavior (Fitzgerald, Joseph, Hayes, & O'Regan, 1995; Gordon & Caltabiano, 1996; Henry, 1998; Phillipp, 1998). Two studies (Garton & Cartmel, 1986; Poole, 1983) stressed the importance of adolescent participation in worthwhile leisure activities. Both of these studies concluded that the process of gathering information about adolescent leisure and entertainment activities leads researchers to new information about the adolescent as an individual and as part of a social group. Television as a leisure time activity constitutes a major socialization experience and influence on youth development (Singer & Singer, 2001). Psychologists have hypothesized that younger viewers exposed to some types of television programming might show tendencies toward imitation of those behaviors (Bandura, 1986; Bushman & Huesmann, 2001). The present study conveys preliminary findings regarding the influx of American music videos into Botswana. This research seeks to ascertain the degree to which these adolescent viewers understand and are influenced by the cultural images, language, and attitudes expressed in American music videos.

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Culture has been defined as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one category of people from those of another” (Hofstede & Bond, 1988, p. 6). Thus, when examining the influence of American music videos on the Batswana youth, a first step is the consideration of whether these youths are processing these culturally sophisticated messages as initially intended by the American artists. Bandura (1986) noted that media from one culture can serve as a socialization agent by influencing the thoughts of individuals from another culture. Therefore, we must ascertain whether the Batswana culture, the culture of these adolescents, is similar enough to the American culture so that successful or accurate processing of music video images, language, and attitudes is likely.

Researchers investigating the impact of media within developing countries have raised critical issues. For example, an important research question involves documenting the effects that television may have on community activities to assess both positive and negative consequences for community members. This analysis is especially crucial for understanding the impact of media messages on young children and adolescents, because their interactions with the media represent a form of social interaction that may be replacing social contact with other important members of their culture. In his recommendations for media studies within developing nations, Williams (1985) stated:

Much of the available television programming in the developing world is imported from developed countries, particularly the United States. Whether and how television from one culture influences not only behavior but thinking and attitudes in the culture to which it is imported will be an important topic for future research. (p. 276)

The present study seeks to advance this research agenda by examining television influence, in particular, on Batswana adolescent attitudes and thinking regarding American music video.

Botswana is a small, land-locked country located in south-central Africa with a population of approximately 1 million. Gaborone is the capital city. The country shares borders with South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Zambia. Botswana has been described as a stable country both politically and economically. Economic indicators from 1993 reveal the gross national product (GNP) per capita income for Botswana in U.S. dollars was \$2,790. For comparative purposes, the GNP for South Africa was \$2,980, whereas the majority of other African countries fell below \$1,000 (Hope, 1997). During this same period, the U.S. GNP was approximately \$24,740. World Bank classifications ranked the United States as a high-income country (GNP per capita exceeding \$9,361), whereas Botswana was ranked within the middle-income country category (GNP per capita between \$761 and \$9,360).

The official language of Botswana is English; however, nearly all citizens also speak Setswana. The major media outlets of the country are drawn from either South African broadcast companies or the Gaborone Broadcast Corporation. Botswana’s television broadcast system is not as highly evolved as the broadcasting system of the United States or any other Western country. There are three to four over-the-air channels available. The programming includes local news reports, local documentaries, a few South African-based soap operas and variety shows, some reruns of American and British dramas and situational comedies, and music video programming. The music video programming consists of videos featuring American, British, and African artists. Equal proportions of African- and Western-produced videos are broadcast daily in Botswana. Based on observations regarding the level of exposure to a very specific representation of American culture (i.e., hip-hop culture), the present study is designed to investigate how much the Batswana youth actually understood and interpreted from the videos.

In our review of existing literature, we did not locate any descriptive studies that would have guided the formation of specific hypotheses. Yet, because of the increasing need to understand the global influence of American mass media, several research questions and exploratory hypotheses guided this study. First, we were interested in describing the impact of television and music video on the daily lives of adolescents. We hypothesized that adolescents who resided in homes with a television would report greater consumption of music videos. We also expected that adolescents who watched videos would also demonstrate interest in

purchasing clothing displayed by American artists. Second, we inquired about the preferences of adolescents to determine the views of adolescents regarding African artists as compared with artists from American countries. We hypothesized that more adolescents would prefer artists from their own nation and continent as compared with American artists. The final research question involved determining Batswana adolescents' knowledge of the terms and actions conveyed within American music videos. It was hypothesized that the adolescents would not accurately understand the video content but would express favorable attitudes toward clothing and fashion shown within videos.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Information was collected from 191 Black adolescents from five secondary schools in Gaborone, Botswana. Gaborone is the capital city of the country and home to the University of Botswana. The nationality of the majority of respondents was Batswana (95%). Ages of respondents ranged from 14 to 20 years old ($M = 17.26$, $SD = .91$). The percentage of females in the sample (61.4%) exceeded the percentage of males (38.6%). Most adolescents reported average family income (41%), whereas 15% of the sample reported below average family income, and 3% reported above average family income. Of the respondents, 40% indicated that they did not have knowledge regarding their family income. We surveyed only adolescent perceptions of their economic status, because actual economic data were not available. The school personnel and university leaders revealed that surveys of economic indicators would be inappropriate given the prevailing cultural view that individual wealth was not openly discussed or valued by the community.

PROCEDURES

Data collection occurred under the supervision and authority of the University of Botswana. The research project was conducted as part of a larger summer fellowship program that was directed by officials at the University. American Psychological Association guidelines for conducting research and protecting participants were used to design the procedures employed in this study. Parents were provided with a description of the rights of research participants and were offered an opportunity to decline participation for their children. Officials were involved in conveying the study objectives to families, and a university student also participated in communicating research questions and answering questions posed by students and their families.

Administrators of the 10 secondary schools within Gaborone were contacted regarding participation in this study. The project objectives and research procedures were discussed with school officials, who granted approval for the research. Out of this pool, five schools were able to participate during the study's time frame. Data were collected from randomly selected classrooms across the five sites. Informed consent and confidentiality procedures were also explained to adolescents prior to completion of the study protocol. Respondents completed a brief survey assessing their exposure, knowledge, and attitudes regarding music videos.

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The Video Influence and Behavioral Effects Survey is a 35-question survey designed to assess adolescents' cross-cultural knowledge of music videos. Questions explored the adolescents' exposure to the content of American music videos. Items for this survey were generated through use of focus groups prompting Batswana youth to engage in discussion of their favorite music videos. The survey contained a combination of true-false, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions. Respondents were asked to define or explain colloquial language, symbols, behavioral patterns, and attitudes depicted in American music videos. For example, open-ended questions asked students, "What is a blunt?" or "What is a glock?" These questions were written to reflect slang terms that had well-established meanings within the American music video culture. A code book was developed to score the correct definitions for each term, and students were given credit for an accurate answer. Other questions asked students to identify types of clothing seen in American music videos as well as their intentions to purchase clothing worn by the artists in the videos. Students were also asked questions regarding their favorite types of music, music videos, and music video entertainers.

The survey was administered to 191 adolescents in small groups of approximately 20 students within their normal classroom setting. The classroom teacher and the research team monitored students to ensure that each respondent worked independently.

RESULTS

TELEVISION VIEWING PATTERNS

Adolescents were asked about their access to television, how much they watched, and what types of programming they preferred to watch. Almost two thirds of the sample (72%) reported that their family owned a television, whereas 28% of families did not have a television in the home. Of those who reported watching television, more than 15% ($n = 30$) watched more than 15 hours each week. Close to 50% of adolescents reported watching at least 5 hours of television per week.

Owning a television was significantly related to self-reports of music video consumption ($\chi^2 = 38.89, p < .0001$). When asked about specifically viewing music videos, two thirds ($n = 126$) of all respondents reported watching, whereas one third ($n = 60$) of the sample reported that they did not watch music videos. Table 1 depicts the range of adolescent television exposure according to adolescent age. Table 2 shows television viewing patterns across adolescent gender.

ARTIST PREFERENCE

Next, adolescents were asked open-ended questions that yielded information about their preferences for African entertainers or American entertainers. The responses were coded as either members of African or American music culture. A significant difference in preferences was obtained; however, inspection of the contingency tables reveals that the preferences did not reflect the expected pattern. With respect to music videos, two thirds of the sample reported that an American music video was their favorite music video. Only 8% of adolescents nominated a video of African origin as their favorite video. Surprisingly, 19% of adolescents reported an American movie (as opposed to music video) in response to this question. Two chi-square statistics were computed to account for this unique response pattern of the sample. In the first analysis, American movies were included within the American video category. Using this method, a significant difference in preferences

TABLE 1
Adolescent Television Viewing Patterns
According to Adolescent Age ($N = 167$)

<i>Age</i>	<i>0-5 Hours per Week</i>	<i>5-10 Hours per Week</i>	<i>10-15 Hours per Week</i>	<i>More Than 15 Hours per Week</i>
14	0	0	1	0
15	0	1	1	0
16	6	6	4	7
17	48	22	6	16
18	20	11	0	6
19	7	2	0	0
20	2	1	0	0

TABLE 2
Adolescent Television Viewing Patterns
According to Adolescent Gender ($N = 166$)

<i>Gender</i>	<i>0-5 Hours per Week</i>	<i>5-10 Hours per Week</i>	<i>10-15 Hours per Week</i>	<i>More Than 15 Hours per Week</i>
Male	38	12	5	11
Female	44	30	7	19

was found ($\chi^2 = 85.28, p < .0001$). The second procedure involved omitting responses mentioning American movies from the analysis, and the chi-square remained statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 61.12, p < .0001$). This

response pattern was not anticipated, because adolescents overwhelmingly preferred American entertainment. These findings refute our original hypothesis that most Batswana adolescents would prefer African artists.

A similar pattern existed with respect to the Batswana sample's favorite entertainer. Again, two thirds of adolescents nominated an entertainer from American culture, whereas 24% selected an entertainer from African culture. A portion of the sample either omitted this question or provided answers that were unable to be read or classified. The chi-square statistic was significant, with Batswana adolescents reporting a preference for American entertainers ($\chi^2 = 35.56, p < .0001$).

MUSIC VIDEO KNOWLEDGE

Adolescents were asked several questions with respect to the language and symbols used in American music videos. The major finding was that a substantial majority of respondents did not understand most of the terminology used in American music videos. These findings contrasted with adolescents' perceptions that they did possess knowledge regarding terms and concepts specific to American videos. For example, when asked for definitions for slang terms contained in music videos, such as "glock," "blunt," or "O.G.," less than 2% of the sample responded correctly.² Yet, when asked yes-no responses regarding awareness of these terms, an overwhelming majority (greater than 90%) reported that they understood these terms. Other results indicate that adolescents are influenced by the fashion and clothing presented in the videos. When asked to report on their behavior, 70% of the sample indicated that they buy clothing they see in American music videos. This finding was further corroborated, as adolescents' reports of watching music videos were significantly related to reported purchases of clothing depicted in American videos ($\chi^2 = 22.19, p < .0001$). Inspection of contingency tables revealed that 53 out of 59 adolescents who had not watched videos also did not purchase clothing. In contrast, 45% of adolescents who did view videos also reported purchasing clothing depicted in American videos.

DISCUSSION

This study provides some initial data regarding the influence of American media on an adolescent population in a developing African country. Specifically, the findings indicate that a majority of Batswana youth in this sample currently watch music videos. Furthermore, this research provides empirical documentation of the African adolescents' lack of understanding of the symbols and language contained within American videos. Although adolescents believe that they understand terminology relevant to the American video culture, content questions substantiate the inaccuracies of the adolescents' knowledge in this area. Some evidence also suggests that music videos may have brought about attitudinal or behavioral changes in these adolescents, such that they are interested in purchasing clothing and other fashion items as depicted in videos. However, further work is necessary to discern the causal impact of music video and other facets of American culture on the lifestyles and behaviors of Batswana adolescents.

The majority of the research hypotheses were supported by the data. First, the data indicate that adolescents with access to a television at home consumed more music video programming than did their peers without television at home. Next, we hypothesized that Batswana adolescents would prefer African music video programming to American music video programming because it would represent more culturally relevant phenomena for the Batswana youth. However, these adolescents overwhelmingly reported a preference for American music videos. This finding is particularly interesting in light of the adolescents' lack of content knowledge regarding the terminology contained in the American music videos. As expected, less than 2% of the sample could correctly define the colloquial language used in American music videos.

Previous research has examined the presentation of media images as related to health promotion and educational issues (Hornik, 1978; Livingston, 1992; Naranjo, 1984). In one study involving media messages disseminated within Central America, the researcher noted that

no consideration is given to the cultural characteristics of these countries, to their need to promote national savings and avoid excessive consumption, and still less to their serious educational requirements. (Naranjo, 1984, p. 267)

With regard to media in developing countries, a greater awareness and analysis of messages is necessary to convey appropriate content. These researchers point to the need for examining the cultural content of the message, how and where the message will be delivered, the target group for the message, and the goal of the communication (Livingston, 1992). The author argues that conducting studies of media images in developing countries will reveal how different communities may be interpreting messages coming from outside sources and how these interpretations may affect their behaviors. Clearly, this study provides evidence that adolescents in Botswana are likely misinterpreting American videos due to a lack of understanding of symbols and colloquial language specific to American popular culture.³

Other studies have discussed the role that media technology will play in developing countries. Narula (1988) described the powerful influence that media can have and notes the concern over “whether media technologies will be the preserver or destroyer of cultural values” (p. 195). This issue becomes complicated when officials or communicators with political or financial power determine distribution of influential media messages. For example, the television programming within India is largely determined by the ruling political party, and messages are reflective of the language and culture of the dominant party (Narula, 1988). Therefore, the implementation of media technology may be accompanied by a variety of cultural concerns, especially in countries with diverse communities.

Additional concerns raised by those involved in distributing media technology throughout developing countries include the interpretations of images that may originate in foreign, often Western, countries. For example, in Indian communities, Narula (1988) found that “rural administrators feared that television would raise villagers’ aspirations that they would not be able to meet” (p. 205). In particular, exposure to foreign products that are not available in certain areas via attractive, interesting commercial advertisements may encourage patterns of “consumption” that are not feasible alternatives within communities (Naranjo, 1984). Adolescents’ reports in this study suggest that influx of media information is already accompanied by availability of American products, such as clothing. Changes in adolescent behavior, such as the way that Botswana adolescents dress or act, may already be taking place as a result of music video exposure. Yet, communications that originate in American culture may still be interpreted differently within developing countries due to language barriers or discrepant values. The balance between incorporating features of American culture to expand a society and maintaining values consistent with the current culture is affected by the prevalence of foreign-based versus local media programming. It has been argued that local programming may serve to convey messages that are more culturally consistent with local communities and serve to balance the influence of Western images (Naranjo, 1984).

The powerful influence media brings to a country’s identity has been documented in a valuable study of one country before and after the introduction of television from the United States. Predominantly by chance, a Canadian community was discovered in 1973 that lacked television reception but was scheduled to receive media from the United States within a year (Williams, 1985). The findings of this study have multiple implications for researchers who are interested in examining media influences within developing countries. Although controlled studies such as this research effort are not always feasible, several theoretical issues and areas for investigation were discovered within this study. In addition, the effort of the researcher to obtain behavioral measures provides an objective standard for comparison across cultures.

Consistent with studies investigating displacement effects (Neuman, 1989), this study questioned how television “directly or indirectly displaced other activities” (Williams, 1985, p. 271). This research showed that adolescents and adults from the Canadian town without television participated in more organized community events than a comparison town with television. In addition, participation in these events was significantly reduced once television was implemented into the Canadian community. Specifically, adolescents were less likely to attend community dances and suppers, whereas adults were less likely to attend organizational or club meetings. Evidence within the present study suggests that American entertainers may be displacing the importance of African entertainers for a younger generation of adolescents. Specifically, only one quarter of this sample reported their favorite entertainer was of African nationality, whereas nearly two thirds cited specific American

entertainers as the most popular. Further research that monitors these attitudes will demonstrate if the overwhelmingly positive response to American entertainment culture is a temporary fad or a more permanent cultural shift in Botswana.

Changes over time in adolescents' attitudes toward community activities may have a profound impact on a key developmental challenge for adolescents, namely, identity formation. Most researchers agree that adolescence is the developmental period in which the individual has the requisite cognitive abilities to effectively complete the process of identity formation (Blos, 1962; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980; Waterman, 1984). For Black adolescents, the formation of racial and ethnic identity is a critical component of their sense of self (Phinney, 1989; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Research related to the process of identity formation also reveals the influence of important socialization agents, including parents, peers, and community members (Spencer & Dornbusch, 1990; Stevenson, 1995). Clearly, future work should also embrace the impact of media images as another source of information that affects adolescent identity formation (Lloyd, in press). The impact of the media may also be magnified or displace other influences during adolescence, especially if these images are being discussed and socially reinforced within the adolescent peer group.

An advantage of this study is that we now have some baseline data regarding the impact of American music videos on a developing country in Africa. Specifically, American entertainment culture appears to be displacing the importance of African entertainment for adolescents as well as changing adolescents' attitudes and behaviors. A significant number of adolescents currently spend a substantial amount of time each week watching American videos. Despite this level of exposure, adolescents from Botswana seem to perceive images on the surface, lacking a deeper understanding of culturally specific language and symbol usage. Close to one third of families in this study did not own a television; however, as more families obtain access to American media, the effects detected within the present study may grow exponentially.

The major limitation of this study is that it is descriptive in nature. Future research will (a) add to this line of inquiry by empirically examining the cognitive processing of media images, both with adolescents from developing countries and Western societies, and (b) statistically link this exposure to important outcome variables. Continuing to investigate the impact of media using cross-cultural research designs will refine our understanding of the role of media influence on adolescent development. This study also informs research investigating media influence among Black populations in other countries, including the United States. The results of this study highlight the need for continued consideration of American media, music videos, and popular culture as key contextual influences on the development of Black adolescents.

NOTES

1. *Batswana* is the adjective used to describe the citizens of Botswana. *Batswana* is comparable to the terms *American* or *British*.

2. The American adolescent culture defines these terms as follows: *glock* refers to an automatic handgun, *blunt* describes a marijuana cigarette, and *O. G.* stands for original gangster.

3. Some might argue that American adolescent pop culture, as expressed by performers within specific music video genres, may be so culturally specific that any individual (e.g., parent, teacher, researcher, or adolescent) outside the culture is prone to misinterpretation of symbols and language usage.

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