Chapter 2: Interface between Media and Students - A Theoretical Perspective

2.1 Introduction

It is a universally approved and accepted conviction that media are powerful tools of persuasion and influence. Studies on media effects have always been pivotal for media advocates and academe.

McQuail (2010) rightly puts forth:

...the entire study of mass communication is based on the assumption that the media have significant effects, yet there is little agreement on the nature and extent of these assumed effects. This uncertainty is the more surprising since everyday experience provides countless, if minor, examples of influence. We dress for the weather as forecast, buy something because of an advertisement, go to a film mentioned in a newspaper, react in countless ways to media news, to films, to music on radio and so on (p.454).

Historical developments, including shifts in governments, changing nature of governments, environmental factors and technological advancements shaped the thinking about media effects.

McQuail (2010) writes:

The development of thinking about media effects may be said to have a ‘natural history’, in the sense of its being strongly shaped by several environment factors, including the interests of governments and law-makers, changing technology, the events of history, the activities of pressure groups and propagandists, the ongoing concerns of public opinion, and even the findings and fashion of social sciences (p.455).

Though widely criticised, Payne Fund studies became referral points for many who wished to study media effects during 1930s. Payne Fund studies researched the effect of movies on the behaviour of American children. Theories like Magic Bullet, Two Step Flow, Cultural theories, Uses and Gratification, Agenda setting and others have talked about diverse media effects. Earlier theories stressed on simple and direct media effects and later ones talked about limited media effects and active audiences. One theory contradicts the assumptions of the other and it is still in continuation. Considering the prolific nature of media, it is difficult
to build a consensus on media effects. “Four decades of media effects research have delivered inconsistent and contradictory results. Which model of media effects-direct, limited or cultural – is the most viable is a matter of conjecture. Academic debate throughout these decades has tended to see each model as being mutually exclusive” (Williams, 2003, p. 188).

The present study has been undertaken to find out the effects of media on the health of school students. Various theories in the field of mass communication and journalism help us not only to understand the role of media in society, but also attempt to illustrate why children use and consume media and how they get affected by them. There are different aspects of the problem. Hence, scholars and theorists offered varied perspectives on it. The researcher has tried to explore these perspectives with reference to media effects.

2.1.1 Students hook to media for entertainment

To begin with, entertainment can be one of the significant reasons for which teenagers (students) remain glued to media. ‘Entertainment via media’ stands true for all age groups. However, students being technologically advanced groups, make optimum utilisation of media for entertainment purpose. Entertainment as a function of media is not new.

McQuail (1983) while specifying the social functions of media writes:

According to Lasswell (1948) main communication functions were surveillance of the environment, correlation of parts of society in responding to environment and the transmission of the cultural heritage. Wright (1960) developed this basic scheme to describe many of the effects of media and added entertainment as a fourth key media function (pp. 78-79).

Mendelsohn (1966), as quoted by McQuail (1983), while laying emphasis on entertainment, holds:

Entertainment may be part of the transmitted culture but it has another aspect- that of providing individual reward, relaxation and reduction of tension, which makes it easier for people to cope with real life problems and for societies to avoid breakdown (p. 79).
Expanding the Mass Entertainment Theory, Baran & Davis (2006) assert:

Mendelsohn, in support of his Mass Entertainment Theory, admitted that a small number of people might suffer because they become addicted to television entertainment. These some people, however, would most likely have become addicted to something else, if television weren’t available. Chronic couch potatoes might otherwise become lounge lizards or fans of romance novels (p. 180).

Students get hooked to TV and other forms of media to seek pleasure, quench their thrust for information and knowledge. The new media, including the Internet, mobile phones and social networking sites offers diverse content, e.g. - funny clips, sitcoms, witty text messages, humorous pictures and others- to relax, reduce tension and stress, this can be one of the reasons why students spend a considerable share of their time with media.

Browsing social networking sites clears the picture in this context. Incidents, happenings, events related to any arena, say social, political or economic, the moment any of these occur social networking sites get flooded with trolls, witty messages, videos and comments. Students like and share them on their Facebook accounts, Twitter accounts, WhatsApp and many other digital platforms available. They act as agents to make such materials viral.

For instance, United Progressive Alliance (UPA)–II with so many scams to its credit and its bad performance in 16th LokSabha elections, remained a hot topic of discussion among social networking sites (of all age groups). The government was criticised using black humour, drawing parodies of Congress chief and former prime minister. Politics, though a serious domain, yet media provided an opportunity to their users to create humour out of them.

2.1.2 Media help students to empathise

“The ability to share someone’s feelings or experiences by imaging what it would be like to be in their situation” (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 1995, p.457). Media provide an opportunity to empathise. Students, while using and consuming media, get an opportunity to understand others, their situations and various aspects of lives that they may not experience in their existing environment. Laurel J. Felt (2011), while discussing empathy in his paper, “The origin of everything? Empathy in theory and practice”, quoted various researchers with their understanding of empathy.
“…A process by which persons respond emotionally to the emotions of others, and do so with some degree of affinity between witnessed emotion and their emotional reaction to it” (Zillmann, 1991, p. 136). For instance, when an incident of a certain magnitude takes place, such as a disaster or an act of brutality (e.g. rape incidents or natural calamity), people share images (photographs/videos) and other information pertaining to the incident with others on social networking sites. This act of sharing information and images, most of the time, if not always, is out of empathy for the victims and their family. Similarly, students exhibit the emotion of empathy on social networking sites when they share information and images related to a certain incident that occurred in their institutions. Besides an urge to share personal information with others, many acts of sharing of information and images are empathetic. The December 16, 2013 Delhi gang rape incident is one example where social networking sites, including students, posted and shared information related to the case and also participated in online awareness campaigns.

2.1.3 Students consume and use media as part of social learning

Apart from entertainment and empathy, it can be social learning that impacts students’ usage and consumption of media.

Baran & Davis (2006) while mentioning about the Social Learning Theory write:

Social Learning Theory encompasses both imitation and identification to explain how people learn through observation of others in their environment. Imitation is the direct mechanical reproduction of behaviour and identification is a special form of imitation that springs from wanting to be and trying to be like an observed model relative to some broader characteristics and qualities (p.194).

Albert Bandura (1965), as quoted by Pierce and Cheney (2004), had designed the Bobo doll experiment to show a form of learning by observation more complex than generalised imitation (pp.310-311).

Students learn about the government functionaries, organisations, latest marketing trends and techniques, food items, fashion statements, socio-political issues, incidents, and events through multimedia. These include advertisements, movies, songs, documentaries, news programmes, blogs, and social media, apart from other channels. Depending upon their preferences and tastes they consume the information (media messages) using various mediums. And as a result they indulge in discussions during elections; imbibe what their role
models are up to; or may follow what is in trend. For instance, boys like to wear ‘green pants’ if their idol is supporting the same. Similarly, other examples may be if girls get their hair curled or straightened up following their onscreen role models. Students may prefer ‘Thums Up’ over other soft drinks because Akshay Kumar endorses the product. They want to become a part of some NGO because Aamir Khan is endorsing it. They play a particular ‘game’ since their favourite player is best at that. Scores of promotional advertisements related to the FIFA World Cup, held in Brazil, persuaded football lovers to buy the new football and plethora of merchandise with embossed logos of various teams. Not only that, the whole process turned a large number of non-fans into fans of football. Various retail outlets like Big Bazaar encashed the opportunity and sold a large amount of the merchandise and sports gear and a lion’s share of buyers was youngsters.

Hence, if after gathering knowledge and information about things happening around the world students try to reproduce some of them in their environment, it is because they use and consume the content dished out to them by media.

2.1.4 Students constitute a part of active audience

Another significant aspect is gratification that students intend to achieve through the usage and consumption of media. About Uses and Gratification theory,

Wimmer & Dominick (1994), as quoted by Ruggiero (2000), state, “Uses and Gratification began in the 1940s when researchers became interested in why audiences engaged in various forms of media behaviour, such as listening to the radio or reading the newspaper” (p.4).

Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch (1974) outlined five basic assumptions of Uses and Gratifications perspective:

First, the audience is an active component of the process rather than passive recipients. Second, individuals must take the initiative to select and incorporate media as tool to achieve certain goals. Third, media are in competition with other sources of gratification for individual’s attention. Fourth, the data showed that individuals ‘are very aware of their motives and choices and are able to explain them and fifth assumption says to understand the effects of media, the motives of the audience (users) must be explored to discover the values the users place on the media and the content (p.24).
With the passage of time media now have an active audience rather than a passive one. Unlike the Hypodermic Needle Theory which assumed the audience as passive and gave no weightage to the receivers, the Uses and Gratification theory measures media from the audience’s perspective.

Nowadays people modify, alter and personalise media according to their needs, desires and requirements. Students, young component of the population, use and consume media as per their convenience. A variety of content is available for their consumption that may range from a retro movie or a reality show or a football match to an IPL match; they may play music when they are bathing; they may use social networking sites as they want to chat with their friends; they may use mobile phones when they want to talk with their friends late at night and they use electronic mails when they feel the need to share their assignments with their friends. Thus, ‘when’, ‘how’ and ‘what’ to use is controllable, it all depends upon the user.

Also, if they want to use all media at once, even that is possible, Mobile phones enable the user to do so. Technologically advanced mobile phones have a plethora of features in them. One can read a newspaper online using a cell phone, listen to radio, watch news on YouTube and can enjoy watching a movie too.

2.1.5 Media alter sense ratio of students

While Uses and Gratification theory puts the onus on an active audience, Marshall McLuhan focuses more on what a medium does to a society in general, and to an individual in particular. His theory of media determinism, which in fact is technology determinism, talks about new media technologies having a determining impact on society, institutions, groups and/or individuals. For instance, the term is often used to signify the stance of McLuhan about printing. McLuhan holds the view that in society, printing, i.e. the typographic extension of man, ushered in nationalism, industrialism, mass markets, and universal literacy and education.

Warner & Tankard (1988) while talking about Marshall McLuhan’s determinism writes:

Marshall McLuhan startled the entire world in 1964 with his revolutionary statement “the medium is the message”. He said that the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratio or patterns of perception steadily and without resistance… the most important effect of communication media
is that they affect our habits of perception and thinking. McLuhan said that the
television generation is the first post-literate generation. He suggested that parents
today are watching their children becoming third world, and that due to television and
other new media children do not share thinking with their parents (pp. 250-251).

Considering McLuhan’s concept, we can say that students today do not perceive things as
their parents used to during their school days. Advancement in technology, availability of
media with easy and open access to students have made a huge contribution in bringing a
change in their lives. Students are now living in ‘the global village’ where they have built
their own understanding of the world with the help of media. Social Media, for instance, has
made it possible for users to interact with people living across the world and to participate in
the activities/discussions/deliberations happening on social media forums. They read blogs,
send e-mails and also share their thoughts on social networking sites.

In a similar manner, Funkhouser & Shaw (1990), as cited by Warner & Tankard (1988),
emphasise the effects of synthetic experience as:

Motion pictures, televisions, and computers shape audience perceptions of reality by
manipulating and rearranging not only the content, but the processes of communicated
experience. Heavy exposure of this kind of synthetic experience might have a number of
effects on viewers. Five possible effects are low tolerance for boredom or inactivity,
heightened expectations of perfection and of high level performance, expectations of
quick, effective, neat resolution of problems, misperceptions of certain classes of physical
and social events and limited contact with, and superficial view of, one’s own inhabitant
environment (p.252).

2.1.6 Students depend on media for information

Here it is pertinent to observe that sustained consumption of multimedia by students confine
them to the virtual world, a place without many of the features of the real world, yet the one
that ensnares the young minds by augmenting certain features that fascinate them.

This leads to the critical issue of media dependency. A person uses the media, more so in this
age of new media technologies, essentially for his information needs because the media
technologies as they grow open up the whole world connecting almost every part with other
parts and consequently creating a world of entangled reality.
While such a world becomes paradoxically simple and complex, at the same time, to comprehend, it creates a situation where individuals, groups, communities, institutions, societies and nations feel the need for more information, firstly, to make sense of the world they inhabit, and secondly, to feel empowered.

This creates a situation where media’s role as purveyors of information becomes paramount and the dependence of different human entities on media grows as a consequence.

McQuail & Windahl (1982) while mentioning about the Dependency Model stress:

The theory assumes that in a modern (mass) society, the media can be considered as information systems vitally involved in maintenance, change and conflict processes at the societal as well as the group and individual levels of social action… in such a society individuals come increasingly to depend on mass media information or knowledge of and orientation to what is happening in their own society... this dependency will vary to two main conditions-the degree to which society is undergoing change and the degree to which media are in fact central and important as an information source (p.111).

In the light of the aforementioned fact it is apparent that school students live in a society where ‘media can be considered as information systems vitally involved in maintenance’. This, in fact, is a global society that requires them to remain informed all the time for academic purposes as well as to allow them to make sense of the events happening around them in relation to themselves in an ever-changing everyday reality.

### 2.1.7 Media act as consonant for students

Sometimes to avoid certain situations students use media to relieve their stress and tension. Leon Festinger’s theory of Cognitive Dissonance talks about this phenomenon. Stephen W. Littlejohn (2002) while discussing Festinger’s theory, writes:

Two overriding premises govern dissonance theory. The first is that dissonance produces tension or stress that creates pressure to change. Second, when dissonance is present, the individual will not only attempt to reduce it but it will also avoid situations in which additional dissonance might be produced.

Considering this, we can say that a student whose academic performance is low and who is not being accepted among his or her peer group, he or she is likely to get confined to a virtual
life i.e. spending more time with the new media. “Virtual worlds are increasingly evolving into Internet-mediated “spaces”, where large groups of people meet and interact in real-time while experiencing a shared sensation of being there together” (OECD, 2011).

Secondly, there is a probability that the same student may consume those media messages showcasing success stories of academically week students. Moreover, new media provide a space to concoct identities and many students do it for social acceptance. Due to this, academically weak students might be having a long list of friends on their social network accounts. New media, in this case, act as stress buster for those students.

Similarly, an obese student may take help of media to learn about body weight losing techniques and follow them to hamper the flow of inconsistent thoughts. “It has been frequently implied, and sometimes even pointed out, that the individual strives towards consistency within himself. His opinions and attitudes, for example, tend to exist in clusters that are internally consistent” (Festinger, 1962, p: 1).

2.1.8 Media as compliance-gaining medium for students

Yet another reason for students to hook to various media is to attain mental and emotional satisfaction, fulfil their goals by selecting particular messages depending on their needs, to get motivated and sensitised. Stephen W. Littlejohn (2002) discussed Marwell and Schmitt’s 16 compliance-gaining strategies. Marwell and Schmitt drafted the said strategy using exchange–theory approach: Compliance is an exchange for something else supplied by the compliance seeker, as quoted by Littlejohn.

Marwell and Schmitt’s (1967) compliance-gaining strategies:

1. Promising: Promising reward for compliance

It is already said that students these days spend most of their time with different media. They consume media messages as per their interest. Media promise rewards for complying with messages. For instance, it is repeatedly shown in movies, soap operas and advertisements that smoking/ tobacco is injurious to health and kills. Reward in this case is good health, if they adhere to this media message.

2. Threatening: Indicating that punishment will be applied for non-compliance
Eve teasing related awareness programmes and news relayed by various media always showcase that those involving in such crimes get punishment as listed in Indian Penal Code (IPC). The message here is that violating a law always fetches punishment. Now, those students who prefer watching such shows either on television or on new media or love to read about such incidents in print media, always understand the importance of law and more likely abide by it. Moreover, they keep themselves aware and alert.

3. **Showing expertise about positive outcomes: Showing good things will happen to those who comply**

   Majority of the media messages (movies, reality shows, programmes, soap operas, news and others) conclude that those who obey rules and regulations, respect elders, raise their voice against wrong doers, adhere to protocols, are less likely to indulge in drugs, etc. Also they earn more appreciation from their friends and peers and consequently lead a better life. Hence, those students who get themselves exposed to such media messages and implement the learning in their life, always get positive outputs in their efforts and actions.

4. **Showing expertise and negative outcomes: Showing bad things will happen to those who do not comply**

   Similarly, as discussed in point no.3, those media consumers who do not adhere to messages bear negative results for their actions.

5. **Liking: Displaying friendliness**

   Facebook, a social network site, expands space where students display their friendliness. Students send friend requests, join groups, create pages and discuss ideas and trends among their friends. The same site also provides an option where their thoughts, ideas and observations are being liked or criticised by others.

6. **Pre-giving: Giving a reward before asking for compliance**

   New media is best at it. It provides a platform and enables people to share rewards. Let’s say if a student participates in a dance show and his performance is not liked by his family members. However, he/she posts video of his/her performance on social media and gets many ‘likes’ or positive feedback. He/she gets his/her reward without any expectations. In such a case if it was not social media the student might have been discouraged and dissatisfied for a long period or may be for life.
7. Applying aversive stimulation: Applying punishment until compliance is received.

The pertinent case in point is programmes and movies related to sports. In such programmes and movies media always showcase tough coaches/ trainers. Players are often punished while training and they get it until they achieve their goals. Best examples are movies - *Chaak De India*, *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* and the latest being *Whiplash*. Students do watch such movies or programmes.

8. Calling in a debt: Saying that person owes something for past favours

As in point no. 1 and 2 it was discussed that messages are spread through media that promise rewards for exhibiting the desired conduct. There are messages, broadcast over multimedia, that are repeated many a time in order to achieve desired results. When students come in contact with such messages they may ignore first but as these are repeated they get influenced and affected. For example, students are reminded time and again that they need to respect elders, they need to complete their homework on time, they should not indulge with bad company or sometimes, that they need to keep clean, these messages target them from almost all sides. Sometimes it’s like nagging, but still students understand the rationale behind these messages. Their parents take care of them and provide all essentials of human life, thus they need to respect them. Such messages are vital for a healthy society.

9. Making moral appeals: Describing compliance as the morally right thing to do

Media messages, including advertisements, almost always convey that fulfilling one’s desires following the right means leads to a good end. The growing trend of reality shows on televisions and video channels on new media, more precisely on YouTube, is a proof of it. These shows portray that one has to craft and draft a strategy to win the show. Students constitute a major part of the target audience to these shows.

10. Attributing positive feelings: Telling the other person how good he or she will feel if there is compliance

Interviews of successful people are usually carried by various media and the reader take inspiration from these interviews. Students choose their role models once they are convinced that the person they admire is a successful person and he has attained success with hard work, dedication and commitment. In this case, one may say that whenever there is result of any top
competitive exam- IIT-JEE, UPSC, CBSE PMT- media always conduct interviews of toppers with the message that it’s only those students who study hard and keep themselves abreast with the latest happenings, that top such exams. Toppers also share their success mantras. Hence, feeling of goodness comes with cracking the exam and qualifying an exam is an outcome of hard work.

11. **Attributing negative feelings: Telling the other persons how bad he or she will feel if there is non-compliance.**

Taking an example of drug abuse, scores of advertisements shown by various media often give the message that if one does not quit smoking or consumption of drugs then cancer or some other ailment will kill. Recently, an advertisement of Johnson and Johnson products highlighted the same concern. This advertisement conveys the messages that you need to quit smoking for the good health of your child as passive smoking also kills. Serials and films also convey similar messages most of the times. For instance, the villain in almost all films is shown consuming alcohol, tobacco or drugs.

12. **Positive Altercasting: Associating compliance with people with good qualities.**

Media content that audience consume always showcase that those who obey rules and regulations, societal norms and stick to values, always get good results. Movies, soap operas and other programmes highlight the same. Almost in all movies the protagonist is projected as responsible citizen who abides by the rules and norms set up by the society.

13. **Negative Altercasting: Associating non-compliance with people with bad qualities.**

Similarly, such media messages also inform the audience that people who deviate from social norms and are non-believers of values always violate rules and regulations. They are more prone to commit mistakes and crimes and eventually suffer for life. Juvenile delinquency is the result of it. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) (2011) report concludes that the rate of crime by juveniles is increasing every year in India. The year 2002 witnessed 1.8 % juvenile crime rate while in 2012 it rose to 2.3 %. Chandigarh has minimum crime rate. In 2012, NCRB said that eight juveniles committed suicide and one attempted to murder.

14. **Seeking Altruistic compliance: Seeking compliance simply as a favour.**

To be visible on online media is an essential step to make one’s presence felt among people. Diverse non-profit organisations (NGOs), civil societies, political candidates, communities
and ethnic groups have their accounts made on social networking sites - Facebook and Twitter, etc. They keep posting information, messages and images, etc. on such platforms for their followers and targets. Many students ‘like’ their pages and also become members. These NGOs and other communities are usually not worried whether in real life their members are following them. They seek online presences of their members and with continued efforts they usually get them.

15. Showing positive esteem: Saying that the person will be liked by others more if he or she complies.

Aam Adami Party (AAP) was launched in New Delhi with a promise to initiate political revolution in India. The party fully utilised new media and made its presence felt among youth. They used new media primarily to propagate their ideology among the target voters and as a result came to power by winning unexpected number of seats in Delhi Vidhan Sabha elections in 2014. Youth was its primary target group and hence relying on social media proved beneficial. Many students, who voted for the first time, voted for the party. There was peer pressure to join the party as they promised to bring change in India.

16. Showing negative esteem: Saying that the person will be liked less by others if he or she does not comply.

Media always seek to propagate the message among their audience that those who do not follow social norms and obligations tend to be liked less in comparison to those who abide by such rules, laws and social duties. Students possess low cognitive skills to interpret complex media messages. For example, the message ‘smoking kills’ is widespread mainly through media. Still many students in their higher secondary classes try smoking (generally due to peer pressure). In some cases it becomes a habit and as a result non-smokers start disliking them.

2.2 Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has tried to build an understating of media effects, the reason why school students are hooked to media and the kind of changes they encounter as a consequence. The process to develop the thinking about media effects evolved with historically connected changes. Various experiments were conducted to understand the nature of media effects on the population, precisely the audiences. Media effects are broadly categorised into direct, limited, and cultural effects. Later, effects were also studied from the
active audiences’ perspective. Payne Fund studies focused on the negative effects of media on children, but later suffered criticism for not adopting scientific measures for conducting research. The Hypodermic Needle theory entrusted upon the power of the media while Two Step Flow talked about the limited media effects. Adding to it, Uses and Gratification theory’s basic premise was based on active audience perspective. It was believed that students consumed and used media for entertainment, media acted as agents of social learning, media provided gratification to their users while consuming and using media, it helped students to empathise in various situations. Consumption and usage of media also altered the sense ratio of their users. Students also used media as compliance gaining medium. The next chapter would review the literature pertinent to the study. The researcher scanned various books, survey reports, news stories, published articles and blogs that talked about media, children and teenagers (also adolescents and students).