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TRANSNATIONAL TV EXPOSURE BEHAVIOUR OF LAO AMERICAN WOMEN

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Abstract

This research explores transnational television, especially exposure to Thai soap operas, and the behaviour of Lao American women nowadays, for remembering their homeland and reminding them of the ethnic and cultural identity of Laos. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data in Minnesota, United States, where Thai television soap operas are on a wave of popularity. This research shows that the majority of middle-aged Lao American female audiences habitually watch Thai television programmes, including soap operas, for two to three hours every day via the Thai Global Network satellite channel or websites on the Internet. Thai television viewing considered as a cultural practice becomes the daily routine in the living room between 6 and 10 p.m. Drawing on transnational audiences and uses and gratifications communication theory, the study concludes that the television exposure behaviours of Lao American women as transnational audiences partly connect their memories of their homeland with the pleasures of viewing soaps, while at the same time reflecting the current lack of socioeconomic citizenship status amongst Lao American women due to their poverty, labouring jobs and the inequality of gender roles in family life.

Keywords

Transnational Audience, Transnational Television Viewing, Soap Operas, Women

1. Introduction

The majority of Lao people in Laos have been following Thai television for decades due to the low quality of television stations in Laos: inadequate budgets, ineffective technological systems and insufficiently entertaining programmes (Utamachant, 2001; Douangkeo, 2006; Kwanjai, 2018). In addition, global media and digital technology allow these television programmes to be viewed in other parts of the world by diasporic groups such as Lao people in the US. The emergence of globalisation arises regularly across national boundaries and leads to “diasporic public spheres” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 22), created by “contemporary media which empower emigrants to acknowledge the occurrences in their homelands” (Morley, 2000, p. 125). The ability of the broadcasting process to transmit programmes across national boundaries, using the common language in the region (Sinclair, 2005), creates “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991) which become somehow independent of circumstances of physical co-presence.

The existence of Western media power is accepted by many countries around the world. The spread of American television programmes enables the United States to possess economic dominance (Thussu, 1998; Xu, 2018). However, the cultural imperialism argument has been weakened by the rise of Latin American media industries (Fox, 1997). The global visibility of programming, especially soap operas, produced by Mexico’s Telenovela and Brazil’s TV Globe has given rise to talk of “reverse cultural imperialism” (Rogers & Antola, 1985, p.34). This pattern is also present in India, Japan and China, countries which have developed as hubs of media production, acting as instruments of cultural influence in their respective regions (Dissanayake, 1998; Flew, 2018). The panorama of international communication has therefore in the last decade become one of global media flows and contraflows. These comprise the orbits of media flow from south to north or from south to south, contrasting with the unidirectional north-to-south movement of the past (Thussu, 2007).

Contraflows such as soap operas have been seen as “culture coming fully developed, as it were, from periphery to center” (Hannerz, 1992, p. 222), although these cultural contra-discourses are unbalanced both in quantity and value (Sanchez-Ruiz, 2001). In this sense, the television contraflows bring a premise to the researcher. This means recognising that diaspora or

independent audiences consume global media and local media that are evidence of local expressions and identities. In consequence, a diversity of academic accounts has trailed the significant development of transnational corporations. In the past, Lao Americans or Hmong or Miao Americans who have left their homeland since 1975 due to political conditions have chosen to watch television programmes and listen to music from Laos' neighbouring country, Thailand (Schein, 2002). In the 21st century, however, the transnational media consumption of Lao Americans is understudied and rarely investigated. The study of transnational communities and diasporas has produced an awareness that the local is penetrated by the global. Therefore, the present study explores whether today's Lao Americans continue to consume Thai television as their ancestors did.

2. Literature Review

As this research is associated with audience studies, it is necessary to incorporate the notion of transnational audiences and the uses and gratifications approach to understand Lao Americans as transnational audiences and media uses. In this regard, there is the occurrence of contraflows in the context of television; an obvious case being that of Hispanic viewers in America who were familiar with watching television programmes from Brazil. They are also very satisfied with and fascinated by soap operas or telenovelas and sports programmes produced in Mexico (Sinclair, 2009).

In a way, cross-border television enables emigrant communities to consider themselves as members of "imagined communities" that overcome national boundaries (Appadurai, 1996; Shohat & Stam, 1996). In this context, cross-border audiences can be seen as groups of people who live outside their home country, but still consume media in their native language or a language they speak. Some emblematic research examples include Annabelle Sreberny's study of media use among Iranians in London (1991, 2001), and a study of the Vietnamese diaspora's consumption of video entertainment produced in North America and Europe (Cunningham & Nguyen, 2001).

The significance of media cross-border communication or media transnationalism is that it uncovers new venues for examining the role of communication and the mass media in diasporic life; for example, in the development of transnational forms of citizenship (Mosco, 1997; Smith & Bakker, 2005). This ability resides, for example, in expressions of the "different

roles of the media in joining transnational communities with homeland regimes, preserving their cultural identities” (Cunningham, 2001, p.136). One direction of this argument shows, for example, that small groups of viewers who watch television produced in their native dialect are attempting to sustain their cultural identity; otherwise, if they aim to adapt, they will watch television in the language of the society or country they live in. This implication is regularly addressed in studying the nature of ethnic media (e.g. Viswanath & Arora, 2000); similarly in accounts of the use of particularistic media by cross-border audiences (Dayan, 1998) to maintain the cultural detachment of the diaspora.

Cunningham & Sinclair (2001) noted that “diaspora make use of communication media ... that transcend ‘the dichotomy of home and host’” (p.4). This premise remains under-researched, particularly in the case of Laotians in the United States. Statistical evidence signals, for instance, that ethnic minorities in the US continue to follow broadcast media in their native languages (NCM, 2005). Recent research in Britain suggests that while transnational audiences want to have news about their homeland, they are also avid consumers of locally produced television news (Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002). On this point, it can be assumed that some Lao American audiences continue watching Thai television programmes because of their familiarity with the language.

Moreover, uses and gratifications (U&G) communication theory focuses on studying how people use media. It attempts to explain how individuals use mass media to gratify their needs. U&G seeks to discover the underlying motives for an individual’s use of the media and to identify the positive and negative consequences of individual media use (Katz, Blumer & Gurevitch 1974). Functionalist sociology (Wright, 1974) looks at the media as responders to the variety of need among audiences in our society. For instance, the media serve their audiences with cohesion and cultural continuity, while dispersing public information in order to provide personal guidance, relaxation, adjustment and identity building.

The U&G approach is a concept of the communication field under which audiences themselves can determine what they need, what they communicate, and what content can provide them with contentment. That is, the concept focuses on the receiver as an active consumer of media in the mass communication process (Katz, Blumer & Gurevitch, 1974). U&G theory also focuses on communication behaviour and the consequences of such behaviour (Rubin, 2002), the backgrounds of audiences, and particularly their direct experiences with media. Their minds and

social conditions would seem to affect audiences' decisions on media exposure (Katz et al., 1974).

Researchers who employ this approach to study media are interested in the chain of ideas between reasons for media use and variables such as needs, goals, beneficial things, media effects and personal factors (e.g. Green & Krcmar, 2005; Haridakis & Rubin, 2005). In addition, there have been many U&G studies about Internet use, mobile phone and social media (e.g. Auter, 2007; Urista et al., 2009). Facebook and Twitter are also seen as a tool of community feedback (Syarifudin & Puspitasari, 2017). The use of technology and social media seems to become an essential part of people lifestyles (Shahid & Sumbul, 2017). Thus, the uses and gratification approach is adopted in this research to study how Lao Americans watch Thai television in everyday life. In this study, Lao American audiences may watch Thai television programmes, especially soaps, via different devices such as satellite television and websites.

3. Research Methodology

This research involves data collected from Lao diasporic groups in Minnesota, USA, in their different socioeconomic contexts. I employed two research methods to examine Lao American women's daily media consumption. First, a questionnaire survey was used to examine Lao American women's satisfactions and pleasures based on their attitudes towards Thai transnational television viewing in their everyday lives. This was based on my assumption that Lao Americans are fond of Thai media, particularly television soap operas. Data were collected through questionnaires with Lao American women in Minnesota. The respondents (124 in total) were aged from 18 to over 50, with varied demography. The questionnaires were distributed using a non-probability or accidental sampling strategy (each respondent was unknown) to Lao communities located in Worthington city, Minnesota, through Wat Lao Siri Buddharam Temple and the Lao Student Association of the University of Minnesota. In this research, the limited numbers of Lao Americans living in different places meant that the researcher did not use probability sampling.

Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 female Lao Americans living in Minnesota State, with different ages, education levels and occupations, to investigate their Thai soap opera viewing meaning in a different cultural context. Essentially, they have an important characteristic of being big fans of Thai television soap operas. I selected participants who had got

high scores in the survey and were willing to participate in the in-depth interview. For data analysis, I used descriptive statistics (percentages) to explain the questionnaire results and thematic analysis to review the interview transcripts. Moreover, I was aware of ethical issues, particularly safety and the privacy of foreign participants; all interviewees are therefore anonymous.

4. Results

Consumption of Thai television, especially soap operas, seems to be popular among Lao Americans in Minnesota. The vast majority of respondents in this research (96 %), can easily access Thai TV programmes through the Thai Global Network (TGN), a Thai satellite television channel. TGN provides 24-hour broadcasting to 170 countries on 5 continents. Moreover, cultural and linguistic proximity links with Thailand mean that Laotian immigrants/diasporas in Minnesota can watch Thai television programmes without cultural and linguistic barriers.

With regard to the different demographic variables such as gender, age, education level and careers, my study offers one explanation for individuals' reasons for media usage and viewers' motives by employing the uses and gratifications (U&G) approach to individual needs and gratifications (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1974; Ruggiero, 2000). The findings of the questionnaire survey of 124 Lao American women support the assumption that Lao Americans continue to watch Thai transnational television programmes even when they moved to another continent.

Table 1: *Results of the questionnaire survey showing the empirical evidence of Thai TV exposure behaviour of Lao American female viewers*

Lao American women watch Thai TV	Viewers (%)	
	Frequency	Percent
In a period of time		
5.00-9.00	22	17.7
10.00-13.00	16	12.9

14.00-17.00	25	20.2
18.00-22.00	50	40.3
23.00-01.00	11	8.9
Total	124	100
Duration of time viewing		
Less an hour	27	21.8
2-3 hours	54	43.4
3-4 hours	20	16.1
4-6 hours	10	8.1
More than 6 hours	13	10.5
Total	124	100
With whom		
Family	46	37.1
Friend	21	16.9
Alone	57	46.0
Total	124	100
In which room		
Living room	60	48.4
Bedroom	48	38.7
Dining room	16	12.9

Other (specify)	-	-
Total	124	100

The data also revealed that almost half (46%) of respondents prefer watching Thai television on their own, while 37.1 % prefer watching it with their families, and 16.9 % prefer watching it with friends. Of the survey respondents, 60 enjoy watching Thai television in their living room (48.4 %), 48 watch it in their bedroom (38.7 %) and 16 (12.9 %) watch it in the dining room. As for the frequency and quantity of their Thai television viewing, 43.4 % of the respondents in this study watch it for 2–3 hours per day, 21.8 % for less than an hour per day, 16.1 % for 3–4 hours per day, and 10.5 % for more than 6 hours per day, with only 8.1 % watching for 4–6 hours. The largest number of respondents watch Thai television from 6 to 10 p.m. (50 persons; 40.3 %); others watch from 2 to 5 p.m. (25 persons; 20.2 %) and a few watch from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. (11 persons; 8.9 %).

In addition, the interviews with 15 female participants show that 12 Lao American interviewees aged from 30 to over 50, who were employees and housewives with high school qualifications, usually watch Thai television, particularly Thai soap operas, on television sets as their hobby. Meanwhile, three young Lao American interviewees aged between 18–30 who were two college students and an entrepreneur sometimes watch Thai television in two ways. They either watch Thai television through the Thai TV Global Network (TGN) with their parents at home, or they browse through the Internet on the websites www.viki.com and www.dootv.tv on their own. All young interviewees engage with Thai television programmes via personal laptops, iPads and mobile phones.

Thai television soap opera viewing has become a part of Lao American women’s daily routines. Lao American women are seen as active transnational audiences because of their opinions of Thai soaps. A majority “Strongly enjoy” them (68 persons; 54.8 %), 29 persons (23.4 %) “Like” them, and 17 persons (13.7 %) “Neither like or dislike”. The mean and standard deviation (SD) values of opinions of Thai soap operas are equal to 4.34 and 0.91, respectively. Lao Americans are interested in three genres of drama series – romantic comedy, period/history and action – at the “like a lot” level, with mean values of 4.05, 3.87, and 3.82 respectively.

The main reason that Lao Americans watch Thai soap operas is the popularity of actors and actresses (68.6 %). Other reasons are the storylines (41.5 %), the soundtracks (16.1 %), the settings and locations (15.3 %) and the modern productions (6.8 %). In addition, all female interviewees admire female characters who have miserable failures and successfully overcome difficulties, particularly when it is concerned with family issues and romantic relationships. The heroine characters are able to change their roles from dependent to independent women in terms of finance and personal lives. It is argued here that female protagonists as portrayed in Thai soap operas by Thai actresses become role models for some female Lao American viewers. Some young-adult interviewees accept that they face the same difficulties as leading protagonists; for example, poverty, gender inequality in the family and workplace, and intimate relationships.

Furthermore, transnational television viewing amongst Lao American women results from the interplay between their migration and citizenship. This study found that 56 respondents (45.16 %) agree that watching Thai television programmes is an activity to remember their homeland. This reflects a way to maintain their cultural identity through an “imagined community” in their daily media consumption. In addition, the middle-aged interviewees who were born in Laos and used to be Lao citizens similarly accept that speaking the Lao language, cooking Lao food, going to the Lao temple and following Thai television help them remember their country of origin. For the young interviewees who were born in the US, their Thai television viewing helps them learn their ancestors’ cultures and traditions as well as the Thai and Lao languages. The participants also tend to have family bonds and real senses of kinship with Laotians in Laos: 77.3 % of Lao American women in this research still keep contact with their relatives, while only 22.7 % do not. Exactly 63 % also transfer their money back to their relatives in Laos.

5. Limitations and future direction of the research

This project has research limitations with time constraints and travel difficulties, therefore, this research project was not able to explore all parts of the United States. This study focused on the group of Lao American women in Minnesota who make up the third largest of the Laotian American populations. Due to this obstacle, this study does not show Lao American women as transnational audiences watching Thai soap operas for remembering their homeland and reminding them of the ethnic and cultural identity of Laos, among Lao American

populations in California, Texas, Washington, Colorado, Tennessee, Illinois, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and Oregon.

According to the interviewee's televisual texts interpretation, this study should be studied in depth in the future in terms of cultural identity formation. For instance, to what extent do female characters and love storylines portrayed in Thai soaps impact on female Lao American viewers' perceptions of beauty ideals and romantic relationships? Also exploring the TV and new media exposure behaviour of Lao American men as transnational audience to partly maintain their own cultural identity, which would assist to enhance the understanding of transnational audiences in the contexts of sociocultural transformation, as well as the relations between gender and media.

6. Conclusions

This research examined the television exposure behaviour of Lao American women as transnational audiences. Through this examination, this study explored how Lao American women watch Thai television programmes, especially soap operas, in their daily media consumption. It was found that middle-aged Lao American women and the elderly are habitual consumers of Thai television soap operas, while young Lao American women sometimes watch Thai soaps because their family members watched it, considered as a choice of family routines. They tend to experience a sense of Lao-ness and their homeland, related to their Thai transnational television viewing.

Their major reasons for watching Thai soap operas include the attractiveness of actors and actresses, linguistic and cultural familiarity, and the ease of access to programmes through the Thai Global Network. The majority of these female transnational audiences like to watch Thai television on their own for two to three hours every day. Online TV and mobile TV are the other main channels for young viewers watching Thai soaps. Therefore, it is argued that Thai television soap operas are influential on their lifestyles and practices in terms of cultural identity formation.

Furthermore, the Thai transnational television soap viewing habits of Lao American women show the conceptual defects of the idea of media imperialism or Americanisation as the global flow of entertainment media. The issue of citizenship is also associated with Lao American female immigrants in Minnesota as transnational audiences. Their perceptions of the

difficulties faced by female characters in soaps relate to their similar situations in reality with the major inequalities of opportunity in the workplace and family.

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