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Canadian Television Sitcom as a Site of Public Pedagogy

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SIYIN LIANG, JUN 7 2021

This study explored which ideas about Canadian national identities came to mind for international post-secondary students after watching selected episodes of two Canadian television comedies (sitcoms), *Corner Gas* and *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (*LMP*). In the study, I conceptualized the sitcoms as a site of “public pedagogy” (Giroux, 2000)—the education and learning that occurs beyond the formal school setting. In this paper, I review some relevant literature from which I draw on the theoretical perspectives and concepts to help conceptualize my study. Then, I move on to discuss the popular sitcom *LMP* as a piece of semi-counter-hegemonic cultural text. In the findings and discussion section, I present and analyze the research data which comes from the conversations with my research participants after watching *LMP*. Finally, I close this paper by reiterating key points from my analysis and discuss the implications for the field of adult education and learning.

Drawing on the Literature: Concepts and Theoretical Perspective

Watching television shows is a practice of “cultural consumption” (Storey, 1996; Meyer, 2008). Cultural consumption refers to reception of or the engagement with cultural texts presented to the public through mass media. Cultural consumption is not merely a process of purchasing or using the cultural texts but involves the audiences making their own meaning from these texts (Meyer, 2008). Further, these ideas about cultural consumption imply that audiences—or “cultural consumers” (Hall, 1997; Kellner, 2015; Meyer, 2008)—always actively interpret, internalize, and use the cultural texts in their ways. The cultural consumers may accept, query, challenge, or oppose ideas from the texts. They may act upon the ideas that they accept in their daily life. They may try to seek more knowledge about the ideas they query. They may take actions to advocate their own opinions that have been suppressed. Whether they are aware or not, cultural consumers learn from their practices of cultural consumption (Guy, 2007; Jubas, 2015; Taber, 2015; Tisdell, Stuckey, & Thompson, 2007; Wright, 2007; Wright & Sandlin, 2009).

Some scholars have explored the pedagogical impact of cultural consumption, particularly in relation to how cultural texts can both uphold and resist hegemonic assumptions (Armstrong, 2000; Jubas, 2015; Wright, 2007). They focused more on the resistance in the cultural texts and the potential they have for critical learning. I follow these scholars, using two main theoretical concepts to analyse *LMP* and its potential for critical learning in this paper. The first is Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) notion of “hegemony”. Hegemony refers to a process whereby values and actions are regarded as common sense by the majority of people, while in fact common sense is constructed and transmitted by the powerful elite class to protect their own status quo and interests (Brookfield, 1998). Normally, the effectiveness of hegemony is not realized through direct forces but often through persuading people in their daily activities (Brookfield, 2005).

The second concept that I use to analyse my research data is Paulo Freire’s (1974) “critical consciousness”, which is also called critical transitive consciousness or critical awareness in his book *Education for Critical Consciousness*. Freire has defined critical consciousness with a detailed list of characteristics (see Freire, 1974, page 15). A tenet of having critical consciousness is that people can reflect on their shared social context and positions and acknowledge everyone’s agency (Freire, 1974). Developing critical consciousness requires people to have dialogues with others and the world (Freire, 1974). Having dialogues with the world means that people can actively reflect on the social,

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cultural, political, and economic contexts in which they are living. I assert that critical consciousness is particularly crucial for minorities, who are often marginalized in a society. This is because critical consciousness will lead them think about their social positions deeply and recognize the hegemonic power that suppresses their agency. After that, minorities are more likely to actively engage in the society, and the hegemonic social structures (e.g., sexism, racism) are more easily modified.

Methodology

This small qualitative case study involved six research participants, three female and three males. They were Chinese international students studying at University of Regina, SK. They all completed secondary education in China and came to Canada for post-secondary or graduate education. They were non-Muslims and had almost no direct contact with Muslims in real life. Following the format often used in cultural studies (Pickering, 2008), I invited participants to watch two episodes of *LMP* together and then arranged a focus group with them. A set of draft questions for the focus group was prepared in advance. The focus group was audio recorded. Since participants spoke Mandarin in the focus group, I transcribed the recording verbatim into Chinese before translating it into English. As the primary researcher in this study, I had many educational and life experiences that I assumed were similar to my participants. The participants and I share an identity of young international students coming from China to Canada. To some extent, this helps me to easily understand their stories and opinions. Still, I guarded against assuming that we shared the similar ideas and asked the participants follow-up questions to fully understand their views.

LMP: a semi-counter-hegemonic cultural text

Zarqa Nawaz, a Muslim writer, journalist, and filmmaker, who grew up in Toronto, created *LMP*. The sitcom presented the everyday life of a Muslim community in the fictional prairie town of Mercy, SK. It was produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and was broadcasted from 2007 to 2012. *LMP* was immensely popular nationally and internationally (mainly in Europe and North America) and won many television awards (Bredin, Henderson, & Matheson, 2012).

Muslims, as with other minority groups, often receive coverage in news media only when they are associated with political or social issues (Avraham & First, 2010). Most Muslim characters are portrayed in Western films, television programs, comic books, and other popular cultural texts as backwards and in a negative light, which has been an ongoing and long-term issue (Arjana, 2017; Hamdon, 2018). In contrast, *LMP* depicted a group of positive and progressive Muslims; although a very conservative Muslim character, Baber, was also portrayed. *LMP* also explicitly presented xenophobic themes. Thus, I align with Cañas (2013) and think that *LMP* resists the orientalist, hegemonic discourses and representations of Muslims in Western cultural texts.

On the other hand, *LMP* still left out some complex and essential issues of Islam, which leads me to define this sitcom as a semi-counter-hegemonic resistance. For instance, it was especially silent on the issue of different branches of Islam having varied tenets, which has the potential for igniting disputes or even wars (Cañas, 2013). The research participants also discussed this phenomenon and criticized *LMP* for being a medium for propagandizing a certain cultural-political agenda, such as multiculturalism (Liang, 2019). In Cañas's (2013) words, *LMP* legitimized the hegemonic power as it overstressed "the forging of national unity" (p. 130). Lee (1991) pointed out a similar situation when analysing the sitcom *Roseanne*. As Lee discussed, while *Roseanne* overtly problematized some social and family relationships, it still had many contradictions that maintained some hegemonic social relationships which should be challenged.

The hegemonic aspects of *LMP*, *Roseanne*, or other sitcoms relate to the inherent nature of sitcoms, which makes them impossible to be very counter-hegemonic. Following a conflict resolution model, sitcoms end happily. Sitcoms always portray certain social problems that have been, or at least could be, properly resolved, and these ways of resolving the social problems often contain hegemonic assumptions that are regarded as common and positive (Kellner, 2015). Thus, it is important for educators to acknowledge the learning potential of cultural texts and critically consider what hegemonic assumptions they instill into students' mind.

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Findings and discussion

In this section, I will present the ethnic and religious representations that come to the participants' minds in relation to *LMP* and the mass media, and share how watching *LMP* stimulates participants' thinking about their own social roles. I will also discuss my research findings through the lens of considering *LMP* as a pedagogical medium which can serve to arouse participants' critical awareness. A small part of the research data that I present here was examined in another paper (Liang, 2019). I re-analyse these data specifically from the perspective of critical consciousness development, a perspective that was not taken in the previous paper.

Critical consciousness of understanding marginalized "others"

My research findings demonstrate that *LMP*, which overtly exposes Islamophobia, arouses consumers' critical consciousness to reflect on the public image of Muslims according to their own observations in everyday life. Participants Kang, Hong, and Zhou gave the following comments. Kang said: "People often denigrate Muslims. That is, as long as there are any issues, such as terrorist attacks or any relevant negative social issues, people always relate those issues to Muslims and think that the attackers are Muslims." Hong stated: "There are widespread misunderstandings or even xenophobia against Muslims living in North America." Zhou confessed that: "Many of us have biases against Muslims" and then recounted a conversation she had with her family as an example to indicate the public bias and fear toward Muslims.

Some findings, however, show that critical consciousness should be developed and more dialogue is needed for participants to reconsider their own assumptions, particularly the hidden biases they have. In the focus group, when Bai firstly expressed her opinion that *LMP* somehow embellished Islam and Muslims, no other participant overtly objected. They discussed how *LMP* did not portray the complex, different divisions of Islam and the conflicts among these different branches. The opinion that *LMP* embellishes Islam and Muslims, however, also comes from the participants' monolithic and stereotypical assumptions of Muslims. For instance, a Lebanese-Canadian Muslim, Yasir, was portrayed on the show as very respectful towards his wife and daughter, about which Zhou said, "To see how he spoke to his wife and daughter, it's hard to tell whether this is a male-controlled family, whether it is patriarchal family or not... I can't find any masculine characteristics that we normally think Muslim men should have." Whether she was aware it or not, Zhou still held that Islamic families should be patriarchal and Muslim males govern their families.

Critical consciousness of thinking about how hegemony works in media

In the focus group, participants discussed how hegemony works in the media. For instance, Zhou raised a question to the focus group: when a person has not come in contact with any Muslims, where does this person's biases about Islam and its followers come from? Considering this question, participants critiqued the mass media's role in transmitting stereotyped opinions about Muslims. They made the following comments:

Kang: I think most of the biases come from media.

Zhou: Yes, I think so. The power of media is huge. It brings a strong sense of fear to a person who hasn't met any Muslims in real life.

Bai: Yes. We can't deny that Chinese media often barbarizes Muslims.

Participants also discussed a satirical scenario on the show in which a journalist held many hegemonic assumptions when asking a new Imam questions. In *LMP*, the journalist asked the Imam questions, such as, "Who are you? Are you denying you are a terrorist?" Regarding this scenario, most participants thought that the journalist held stereotypes about the Imam. They moved beyond the sitcom and expressed their criticism of journalists in real life. They also talked about their doubts about news media, such as whether there is authentic news in real life given that all news media and journalists have their own standpoints. All in all, these findings indicate that watching and discussing *LMP* activates participants' critical consciousness to think about how media and journalists serve to

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(re)produce hegemonic values. The findings also demonstrate that *LMP* leads participants to reconsider how to understand the authenticity of news in their everyday lives.

Critical awareness of (re)considering their own social imaginary

A scenario in *LMP* triggered participants' reconsideration about their social imagination and social roles as Chinese people living in a Canadian society. In the sitcom, Sarah Hamoudi, a secretary of the mayor (named Ann Popowicz), felt disappointed when she knew that her business trip to China had been cancelled. Then, Popowicz consoled Sarah and said that: "I will bring you a genuine Chinese handbag. A knockoff Louis Vuitton bag." Considering this scenario, Bai expressed her dissatisfied sentiment, saying that: "This unfriendliness toward China makes me unhappy." In contrast, Kang considered it as normal in the context of a sitcom and argued that: "I think sometimes it's not necessary for us to [pause], how to say, to be so sensitive... This is a sitcom." It is not surprising that participants have different feelings when watching this scene. The interesting thing is that the participants started to discuss how other Chinese audiences might view and respond to negative representations of China and Chinese people in mass media. They came to a common view that many Chinese audiences feel uncomfortable with these negative representations but they will choose to keep silent.

Furthermore, the participants not only talked about Chinese audiences' silence towards negative media representations, but also Chinese people's taciturnity in daily life. They tried to analyze why many Chinese people choose to be silent:

Zhou: We always just keep silent and immerse ourselves in work.

Jiang: Like a pushover.

Zhou: We are the kind of people who often reflect on our own behaviors. For instance, if our lives are not good enough, we will think: We should work harder. There is no excuse. To work harder is the only thing we should do.

Bai: The education that we receive also prevents us from claiming our rights. This is so sad.

Zhou: Fatima said, "Perhaps we are causing too much trouble. Do we need to cause so much trouble because of my knee?" Then, Rayyan answered, "It's not about your knee. If you want to change the world, you have to make some noise." Considering this case, I think Chinese people will have a very different idea. We might say, "Is it too selfish to do this? Just to satisfy my personal needs, do we have to recruit a female lifeguard?" Finally, we will keep silent, and we will adjust ourselves to that situation.

Jiang: Or, rarely, a person stands up and claims our rights, but very few people will echo.

The conversations presented above involve another scene from *LMP*. Rayyan, a young Muslim female doctor, prescribed a swimming routine for her patient, Fatima, to help her hurt knee; however, they were disappointed and gave up their swimming plan when they found that there was only a male lifeguard in the public pool. Therefore, Rayyan worked hard to gather public signatures to request that the mayor hire a female lifeguard. Imagining and putting Chinese people into this story, Zhou estimated their attitudes and responses to the issues of recruiting a new lifeguard to describe how and why Chinese people often keep silent. Concerning Zhou's discussion, other participants nodded their heads or expressed concurrence in a soft voice that can be identified in the audio recording of the focus group.

Regardless of where their assumptions stem from, which might come from their firsthand experiences or representations, participants thought that reservation was a typical characteristic of Chinese people. In this study, *LMP* fostered participants' critical consciousness and made them reconsider silence and why people had this characteristic. They also reflected upon how the silence of Chinese people prevent them from exercising their rights and asserting their agency.

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Conclusions

The findings of this qualitative study demonstrate that *LMP* can serve as a text to foster dialogue between cultural consumers and the world. *LMP* helps to arouse cultural consumers' critical consciousness to think about the public image of Muslims that they learn from their everyday life. Discussing *LMP* with other people makes the cultural consumers ponder how hegemony works in media to create and propagate the hegemonic assumptions about Islam and Muslims. Additionally, *LMP* leads a group of minorities to reflect on their own social imaginary and social roles thoughtfully. In short, not only is *LMP* itself a semi-counter-hegemonic cultural text but also the discussion of this sitcom functions to raise the consumers' critical consciousness.

There is no question that my research findings give credit to the argument that media has the power to challenge cultural consumers' assumptions about structural power relations through informal learning. This argument has been noted in the scholarship exploring the pedagogical function of cultural consumption (see Armstrong, 2000; Guy, 2007; Jubas, 2015; Tisdell, Stuckey, & Thompson, 2007; Wright, 2007). Still, my research findings also note that it is important to incorporate cultural texts into the classroom or other organized adult learning settings (Lee, 1991; Jubas, 2015; Taber, Woloshyn, & Lane, 2017; Tisdell, 2008). With interventional questions from educators and other learners, cultural consumers are more likely to further develop critical consciousness and challenge the implicit, hegemonic biases that exist deeply within their subconscious. To recognize and challenge these biases are essential because they directly influence the consumers' viewpoints and behaviors. In addition, given that cultural consumers bring varied perspectives when interpreting the texts, having discussions with educators and other learners is helpful for cultural consumers to gain a comprehensive perception about the subtext of cultural texts.

It is important to note that there are a large number of overseas adult learners in Canada; but this study focused on only one group of international, Chinese students. Further studies could be conducted to include adults who represent different nationalities, ages, genders, and so on. An examination of such issues as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class could provide richer, more in-depth understanding of how Canadian popular culture influences different adult students.

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