The Social Expectations Theory and The Influence of The Mass Media:

A Literature Review

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Abstract

The mass media has the potential to influence the perceptions of all who interact with it. It can influence perceptions of pain and fairness and influence expectations for businesses and relationships thus giving individuals expectations of reality. This paper focuses on the social expectations theory and the research done to support that behaviors, social norms, and one’s view of the world can be influenced by not only the mass media but also by other outside factors. Research has been conducted to provide a better understanding of how perceptions and expectations can be manipulated but the research has its limitations. The purpose of reviewing the research is not to expose limitations, but to provide an understanding of the theory and to encourage critical thinking when interacting with the mass media.

*Keywords:* social expectations theory, mass media, expectations, perceptions, influence
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Human beings often base their actions on a set of unspoken rules, or general norms, unique to different cultures and social groups. These norms can influence how people act, how they think, and what they expect. For example, in *Uneasy reaction: Workplace social events as problematic sites for communicating sexual orientation*, participants reported that arenas like workplace social events can cause individuals to weigh their personal norms against their co-workers if they wish to fit in (Dixon, 2013). These norms are learned behaviors stemming from individual expectations.

Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines expectation as, “the belief that something will happen or is likely to happen.” The social expectation theory is centered around the expectations humans have, how the mass media can influences these expectations and thus, influence an individual's perception of the world.

The mass media, “play[s] a significant role in the modern world, by broadcasting information…[at a] fast pace and giving entertainment to vast audiences” (Wolska, 2011, p. 1). It is a force that can influence things such as, social activities, behaviors and relationships. Malgorzata Wolska discusses, in *Gender Stereotypes In Mass Media*, how the mass media is also responsible for influencing and reinforcing stereotypes and gender roles within our cultures (Wolska, 2011). Interaction with the mass media can causes people to use their learned perceptions and expectations to shape their realities out of these influences.

The exposure that an individual receives from an interaction with any form of the mass media can cause not only a manipulation of their own expectations but an attempt to influence
others. This is an example of diffusion, defined as, “the process of spreading… information… through a number of individuals” (DeFleur, 2010 p. 172).

The spiral of silence is another theory related to the social expectations theory. In this theory, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann proposed that the views of the masses, could influence individuals and cause them to remain silent (Davie, 2010). If the mass media promotes an idea and an individual’s ideas go against those ideas, the individual might refuse to express his/her ideas for fear of consequence or isolation (Davie, 2010).

An additional example of a related theory is uses and gratifications. This theory suggest that audience members will actively seek out mass media mediums to satisfy their needs or provide them with gratification (Rossi, 2002).

The rationale for this paper comes from the encompassing reach of the social expectations theory. This theory has the potential to play a role in multiple theories, diffusion being one example, which encourages more research and an analysis of this theory’s total reach. In the grand scheme of things, this theory has the potential to teach about the mass media’s manipulative power and hopefully encourage critical thinking when interacting with the mass media.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a better understanding of the social expectations theory and to show its importance in correlation with other theories.

There have been multiple studies conducted around individual’s expectations. This paper will analyze a few of those studies, report the strengths and weaknesses and compare and contrast each study. It will also discuss areas for future research of the social expectations theory.

**Method**
History

There are many researcher’s who indirectly influenced the social expectations theory. For example, Walter Lippmann argued that people don’t really know the world, they just have “pictures in their heads” (Bybee, 1997). One might infer that an individual’s picture can come from, or be influenced by, the mass media.

The research that would truly lay the foundation for the social expectations theory began with the Payne Fund studies in the early 1900s. (DeFleur, 2010 p. 217) These studies, which were published in 1933, sought to understand the influence motion pictures had on audience members (Jowett & Jarvie, 1993). Specifically, the purpose was to find out if this, at the time, new and innovative form of media was contributing as a negative influence on the nations children (Jowett & Jarvie, 1993).

The research focused on the effects the media was having on children's attitudes and beliefs and conduct that children might be likely to adopt because of the media (Defleur, 2010 p. 217). One of the results was, “young people who see ‘undesirable’, ‘immoral’, or even criminal conduct upon the screen will go out and do likewise, or at least will tend inevitably to acquire corresponding attitudes and values” (Jowett & Jarvie, 1993). These studies were conducted years ago, but researchers are still concerned with the affect mass media has on youth. To contest these findings, Bjorn Hallerod (2014), author of, *What Do Children Know about Their Futures*, reports that expectations have the potential to influence but they don’t control everything.

Supporting Studies

The Payne Fund studies have inspired researchers to review the current effects on behavior of individuals based on their interactions with mass media. Defleur (2010) discusses
how researchers can come from either a psychological or sociological perspective in trying to understand the effects of the mass media: “[they] either search for cognitive effects and the adoption of specific forms of behavior …[or] try to understand the influences of group norms, role definitions, and other features of social organization” (p. 216). Researchers may also seek information from both perspectives in relation to the social expectations theory.

**Study One.**

The article, *The Social Experience of Entertainment Media: Effects of Other’s Evaluations on Our Experience*, provides an example of both perspectives mentioned above. The authors, Randi Shedlosky-Shoemaker, Kristi Costabile, Haylee DeLuca and Robert Arkin (2011), report how individual’s expectations can be manipulated and their experiences can be shaped by their peers.

The researchers used two experiments where the individual had to read a review of a story, actually read the story and then write their own review. In the first experiment, participants were given peer evaluations that were either supportive or dismissive of the story. Participants would then read the story and provide their own review. In the second experiment, participants were given mixed evaluations, not completely supportive or dismissive. After reviewing the evaluations and the story, participants were asked to complete their own evaluations of the story.

Researchers reported, in experiment one, that, those who read evaluations inherently supportive or dismissive reported similar evaluations. In experiment two, however, there were inconsistencies found within the reviews. Some were found favorable and some unfavorable. This proved that, “Perception is a constructive process shaped by expectations… [which] may be
formed through previous experiences or, barring previous experience, information gained from others (i.e. social informational influence)” (Shedlosky-Shoemaker, et al., 2011 p. 111).

The experiment’s inconsistencies led to limitations such as outside factors that could have impacted a participant’s evaluation (i.e. bias towards the particular story based on a previous experience). These hypothetical factors could have potentially created expectations that may have swayed the evaluations of the participants.

The strength of this study, however, is that it proved what it sought out to prove: peers have the potential to manipulate one another’s expectations and shape each other’s experiences. The research conducted also showed that, “inconsistency [for example, within the mass media] may prompt individuals to exert cognitive efforts to resolve the discordant information” (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2011 p. 117).

**Study Two.**

Another related study was conducted in order to discover if an individual’s expectations could influence their experiences. This study’s focus came from a psychological perspective in that, it looked to understand perceptions of pain. Ian Handley, Stephanie Fowler, Heather Rasinski, Suzanne Helfer and Andrew Geers (2013) authors of, *Beliefs About Expectations Moderate the Influence of Expectations on Pain Perception,* “examine the possibility that beliefs about expectation biases alter pain responses following both pain- and placebo-analgesic expectations.”

To conduct the study, researchers had participants complete a survey gauging their own belief on the influential power of expectations prior to the actual experiment. Afterwards, the participants were informed that they would partake in a potentially painful experiment. All of
the participants were given a hand cream and ask to lather it on one of their hands and submerge that hand into ice water for two minutes. The hand cream was a placebo agent, but, one set of participants was told that the cream was a pain blocking ointment.

What the researchers found was that the participants who were informed of the pain blocking capabilities of the placebo ointment reported less pain than their counterparts. Results from these findings showed what researchers anticipated: “the less participants believed in expectation biases, the more their pain perceptions would be influenced by the provided expectations (i.e., pain expectations would result in more pain)” (Handley et al., 2011). In conclusion, one’s expectations can manipulate perceptions and shape realities.

The weakness of the experiment stems from individuality. All individuals have their own thresholds for pain and so a controlled variable, or lack-there-of, is a limitation of this research. One strength of this experiment is its sample size, which was reasonable. Another strength was the results, proving the hypothesis correct and strengthening the validity of the research.

**Study Three.**

In a third study, authors, Luke Chang and Alan Sanfey (2013) report on social norms and how that can manipulate perceptions. Their article, *Great Expectations: Neural Computations Underlying the Use of Social Norms in Decision-Making*, seeks to prove their hypothesis that: “people have context-specific beliefs about what to expect and are more likely to reject offers that violate these expectations” (Chang & Sanfey, 2013 p. 281).

Chang and Sanfey (2013) specifically focused on the participant’s perception of fairness. To assist in measuring participant’s perceptions, the researchers used fMRIs during the experiment. The experiment consisted of the participants playing an economic bargaining game.
The game consisted of a proposer, who would split a hypothetical amount of money between themselves and the responder, who would then choose to accept or reject the split. If the responder decided to reject the offer, neither player received anything.

Chang and Sanfey (2013) found that if a player was offered a portion of money that they deemed too small, they would view the offer as a violation of their expectations and reject it. Participants almost always rejected an offer that they believed was unfair. These results show that, “participants’ prior beliefs about the social norm are important in determining whether or not an offer will be accepted” (Chang & Sanfey, 2013 p. 281).

The weakness of this report is the sample size. To create more validity behind the research, the sample size needs to be increased. With more participants, the experiment could be conducted again to test if the results are similar or the same. The report’s strength is its focus. The researchers did not use too wide of a scope when looking to measure the perception of fairness. They also showed that social norms affect expectations and influence perceptions.

**Connection.**

Each of the above studies relates to one another in that the researchers all sought to understand perception, expectations and how each could be influenced. Study two and three both examined participant’s perceptions, one on pain and one on fairness. Together, the research could show a link between an individual’s perception and how it can be influenced by outside factors such as, social norms, peers, and the mass media. The results from study two and three relate to study one in that they support the findings that outside factors, such as peers, can influence expectations and help shape perceptions.
One of the main difference between the research done in studies one, two and three is the method the data was collected. Study one used surveys asking participants to write down their evaluations of a story and then the evaluations were analyzed. Study two used surveys as well, however, rather than use open ended questions, the participants were asked to rate their pain levels on a one-to-five scale. In study three, the information was gathered with the assistance of fMRIs. Although each researcher used different methods, the methods were appropriate for the type of research which is a strength of each example.

Conclusion

Research on the social expectations theory has shown that perceptions, norms, and expectations can all be influenced. Another example of this can be seen in advertising where people will use their past experiences with ads to create expectations about a company’s current or future campaigns (Chang, 2013). In, *When New Commercials Do Not Meet Expectations*, author, Chingching Chang states that, “Expectations are central…they provide a frame of reference for comparative judgement” (p. 360). Currently, research is still being done to understand the effect the mass media is having on society. Although some researchers may not explicitly use the social expectations theory, the foundation of their research can be related and applied to the theory. An example of this could be authors, Jeffrey A. Hall, Kiley A. Larson, and Amber Watts (2011) reporting on the roles of friendship standards based on gender. The authors report that, “As a consequence of forming and maintaining friendships, individuals develop expectations about how friends ought to behave” (Hall, Larson, & Watts, 2011, p. 529).

The future of this research is vast because the influence of the mass media is vast. One specific area for future research could be business. The power of the internet and social media
has given individuals a direct connection to other individuals, companies and organizations
creating relationships unlike any in the past. This connection provides a new way for
organizations to influence customer’s expectations and for customers to influence organization’s
expectations. Kristiina Tolvanen, Laura Olkkonen and Vilma Luoma-aho, authors of, *The
Legitimacy of the Media Industry-What do Advertisers Expect?*, say, “Expectations have a direct
effect on stakeholder behavior and should be recognized...as early signals for future behavior that
need[s] to be understood and monitored...failure to meet expectations can result in...abandoned
relationships” (2013, p. 18).

The social expectations theory still has room to expand. The theory’s weakness lies in its
inability to truly measure the impact of the mass media. Technology is increasing and advancing
at a rapid rate and because of this, the tools used by the mass media are increasing at the same,
rapid rate. As this increase continues it will become more difficult to measure how the mass
media is influencing our expectations and perceptions. Individuals will continue to learn and
create different expectations about social norms and appropriate behaviors. Researchers will
have to review and adapt to understand how the evolving mass media is affecting socialization.
References


