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## REVIEW ARTICLE

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# Deconstructing the Delicious Paradox of Entertainment Media: A Dynamic System Theory Perspective on Shrum's Psychology of Entertainment Media

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Previous entertainment media research has mainly focused on media's pleasure-giving appeal while neglecting other psychological aspects that transform the perspectives of the audience. Shrum has developed groundbreaking studies in this overlooked area by deconstructing the delicious paradox of entertainment media. This paradox incorporates media's delivering of pleasure and enjoyment while simultaneously promoting and persuading the audience through embedded messages. The present article employs Dynamic System Theory (DST) to examine the paradoxical nature of entertainment media, which blurs the lines between message and invisible persuasion and is the central theme of Shrum's body of research.

## INTRODUCTION

Under the guise of enticing storylines, entertainment media has become a subtle paradox of leaving the audience always craving more while metaphorically selling them everything but the kitchen sink. The lines have been blurred between entertainment and

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persuasion. Shrum has spearheaded this mass communication concept through 20 years of diligent study.

Shrum began his research with a focus on television, but integrated it into the world of advertising and brand placement, essentially putting the spotlight on how the lines are blurred between entertainment media, marketing and consumption. He utilized experiments and surveys to not only create a theoretical context, but also address practical applications.

Early in his career, Shrum understood that people utilize heuristic principles and the accessibility of information from memory in creating judgments. He adapted social cognition theory regarding judgment development, and applied it to the effects of media, creating a research genre known as, “the psychology of media.” Before Shrum’s introduction of media’s psychological effect on values, judgments, and attitudes, commentaries such as McGuire’s (1986) essay on the, “myth of massive media impact” held steadfast to the contention that the effect of media was highly dramatized within the field of social sciences. In addition, as noted by Hawkins and Pingree (1981), research had primarily focused on the relationship between media information and behavior, without taking into consideration the mental processes involved.

The present biographical sketch discusses on Shrum’s research of the psychology of entertainment media and also deconstructs the delicious paradox of entertainment media utilizing a Dynamic Systems Theory perspective. With a critical interpretation of Shrum’s philosophy, research, and beliefs, the author will also elaborate on his life, academic growth, and ultimately his significant impact on the field of communications media.

## THE MAN BEHIND THE METHOD

### A Force in the Psychology of Entertainment Field

Typically, to have the breadth of academic work that extends numerous pages of a curriculum vitae, to be cited by countless other authors (500 and counting), to have constructed well respected communications models, and to be credited as one of the most influential communications researchers of all time, one would have to be close to retirement; but that is not the case for Shrum, who continues to publish insightful and relevant communications research. Shrum’s research spans two decades and has evolved from a focus on the human effects of television viewing, to impulsive spending based on media messages, consumerism, and the effects of marketing and brand placement on people’s attitudes. He was a slow starter: it took him 13 years and some 220 credit hours to get an undergraduate degree.

Shrum has published over 50 articles, three books, around 30 book chapters and presented at countless conferences. His research has received a number of awards, including a Best Article Award from *Journal of Consumer Research*, a finalist honor for

Best Article Award from *Journal of Consumer Research*, and an honorable mention for the Robert Ferber Award for best article from *Journal of Consumer Research*. He was also recently elected president of the Society for Consumer Psychology, has served as editor of *Media Psychology* (2005-06) and currently serves on the editorial review boards of *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Journal of Communication*, *Human Communication Research*, *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, *Media Psychology*, and *Communication Monographs*.

The name L. J. Shrum is synonymous with entertainment media research. During his doctoral work, cultivation theory via entertainment media was controversial, and although it has typically been held as a credible premise for mass media studies, research in this area, specifically in the early 1990's, focused heavily on the content of television, including the demographics and values portrayed. It wasn't until the breakthrough research conducted by Shrum that cultivation theory began to be associated with and quantified in a cognitive sense, and not solely in regards to television. The application of a psychological base afforded Shrum the ingenuity to construct cognitive process models that broke down media messages by when and how audience judgment was affected.

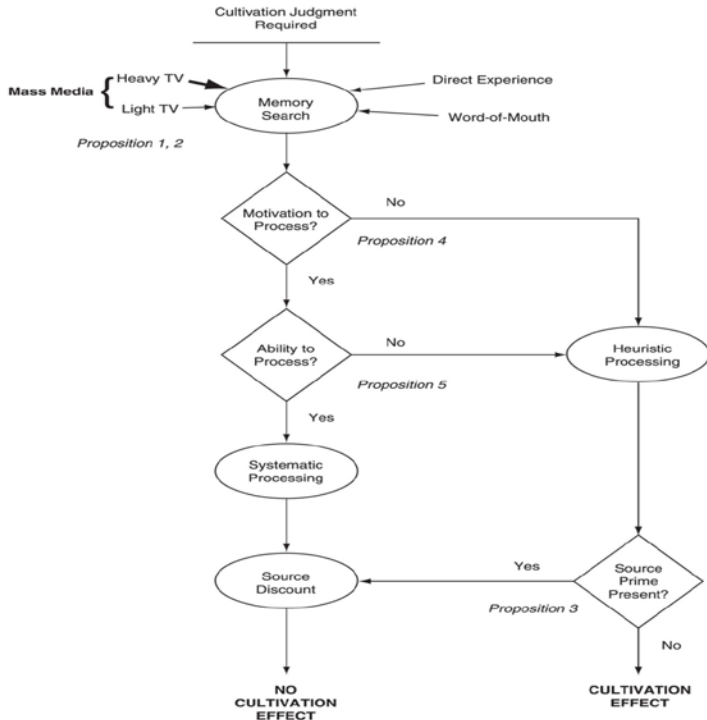
Shrum has exemplified the complexity and dynamic nature of entertainment media and its effect on attitudes, values, and beliefs. He furthered research in this area by explaining the effect rather than merely describing it, and therefore adding a multidimensional depth not previously seen. Shrum's research greatly improves the rigor and sophistication level of the field of communications media, as he is well trained in the basic disciplines such as social cognition and behavioral judgment. By introducing the methods and theories from those fields to media psychology, he made the research enquiries more systematic and interesting with vigor and diversity.

Shrum's model, referred to as the heuristic processing model of cultivation effects (see figure 1), is considered by some in the field to be largely influenced by Tversky and Kahneman's (1973) assessment that judgment can be easily influenced by information retrieved from memory (Busselle, 2001). The model consists of the following propositions, 1) television viewing influences accessibility, 2) accessibility mediates the cultivation effect, 3) television exemplars are not discounted, and 4) systemic processing reduces or eliminates the cultivation effect (Shrum, 2012).

It is Shrum's conclusion that there are ways to reduce the effect of television on social reality by encouraging viewers to carefully scrutinize messages rather than simply accept them at face value. Busselle (2001) conducted his own experiments in order to further test Shrum's assessment of social judgment effects through a heuristic process. While concluding that Shrum's model is accurate, he did also suggest more research to further refine the model.

Figure 1  
*Heuristic Processing Model of Cultivation Effects (Shrum, 2012, pp. 147-167)*

*Shrum Heuristic Processing Model of Cultivation Effects*



## Christmas heralding the Paradox of Entertainment Media

Larry Joe Shrum, the son of teachers, was born December 25, 1955 in Paragould, Arkansas, but lived the first five years of his life in Missouri. While he was a student, his mother was his fifth grade teacher and his father taught his junior high and high school math classes. His father also worked as the school principal and superintendent while he was in school. Although a good student, Shrum admits to watching a lot of television growing up.

He began his undergraduate work at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign majoring in Chemical Engineering. His first academic position came in 1992 when he took a position as assistant professor of marketing at Rutgers University. He has since moved on to his current position as professor and chair of the Department of

Marketing at the University of Texas, at San Antonio. This valuable working experience spurred his inspiration to conduct research and formulate theories within the field of marketing communications.

Shrum's research interests include the cognitive processes underlying media effects, consumer information processing, antecedents and consequences of materialism, psycholinguistic characteristics of brand names, cross-cultural psychology and impulsive consumption and self-regulation. His primary area of research investigates the dynamic system of entertainment media, which focuses on the psychological processes underlying consumer judgments, particularly the role of media information in the construction of values, attitudes, and beliefs. Until now, his perspective of interpreting the psychology of entertainment media remains unparalleled in the field of communications media.

## THE DYNAMIC SYSTEM THEORY (DST) PERSPECTIVE

### Dynamic System Theory (DST) Defined

Dynamic System Theory (DST) is not a new concept, but has until recently been dedicated to use in the field of biology rather than that of the social sciences. It is a unique way to approach research with multiple, interchangeable variables that form complex systems, as well as explain collective, global phenomenon (Goldstein 1997; Nowak, Robin, & Stephen, 2012; Vallacher, & Nowak, 2007). DST is a blend of communications chaos and catastrophe theories, seeking to explain the interconnectivity of variables working together to create a multifaceted structure (Kozel, 2009). Within the context of media, dynamic system theory analyzes how contingent variables interact and mutually affect each other over time (Vallacher, & Nowak, 2009). DST also takes into account other theories and processes and how they may contribute to the current model.

Utilizing the DST theory, it can be argued that entertainment media is a complex system consisting of hierarchical subsystems where variables interact with each other and manipulate the ever-changing and delicate balance of amusement and persuasion. Employing the DST theory avoids a stagnant or linear approach to a very malleable research area.

### Broader DST Theoretical Framework

First and foremost, entertainment media is incredibly nonlinear and the paradox between amusement and persuasion via DST creates a butterfly effect. In a dynamic system, early phases of an emergent process, like small differences or effects can have consequences that result in larger differences or effects later down the line. Sometimes, a small change will cause a ripple effect throughout the system, because accumulation of small quantitative changes can lead to qualitative changes in a dynamic system.

In addition, individual components coordinate to create a sort of psychological social reality for the collective in the form of acceptable rules and behavior (Golstein 1997). It is through a dynamic approach that the psychology and communication fields can come together to evaluate this newly created perception.

Another characteristic of complex systems as previously mentioned is a porous boundary. In 2012, Shrum edited the book *The Psychology of Entertainment Media: Blurring the Lines between Entertainment and Persuasion*, which explained, how the lines between entertainment and persuasion have become increasingly blurred and how these blurred lines might either facilitate or inhibit changes in attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions. His analysis of the blurred lines between amusement and persuasion indicate a dynamic system in play due to the lack of boundaries within entertainment media (Michael, 2005).

The book also views the media as an ever-changing system with gains, losses and some stable stages, making it dynamic via a rich history. By using the evolution perspective, the comparatively stable stage at times achieved by entertainment media could be seen as a natural 'attractor stage.' The logic is that it takes time before audiences internalize the content of entertainment media (sleeper effect), which unconsciously change their attitude and behavior over time. Within a DST framework, this period of stagnation is a necessary adjustment before achieving dynamic balance between promotion and entertainment.

In interpreting how media affects people's judgments and behavior, Shrum never failed to create concrete examples of abstract concepts. It is his belief that the ever-changing appearance of entertainment media would draw upon the dynamic interaction between entertainment media and the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and behaviors of their audiences. The dynamic media system is more than just a collection of variables or observables we have isolated from the rest of the world. It is a complex system where the variables mutually interact. That is, each variable affects all the other variables (message, pleasure, value, belief, and attitude, etc.) contained in the system and thus also affects itself.

## DECONSTRUCTING THE DELICIOUS PARADOX

### Tension between Entertainment and Persuasion

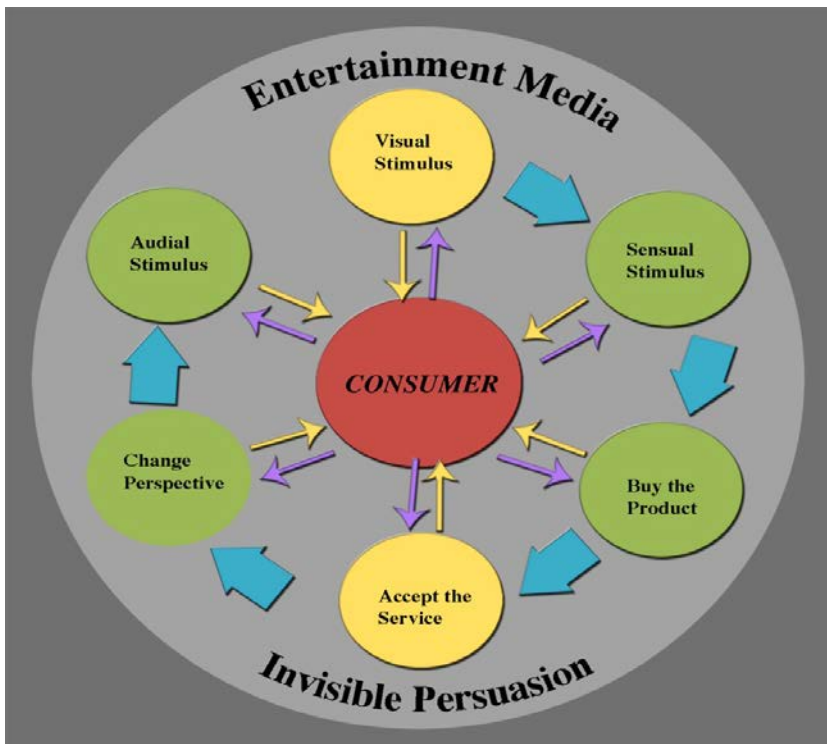
Entertainment media is volatile in nature, as its aim is somewhat sinister in the perception of manipulating and selling (Tsitsanoudis-Mallidis, 2010). While the initial intention is to amuse or even seduce, the genre has taken to using the power of persuasion to sell goods (Tsitsanoudis-Mallidis, 2011). According to Shrum, it blurs the line between the two. As a result, entertainment media forms a delicious paradox. It presents a pleasing and tantalizing visual stimulus, bringing pleasure on the one hand, while at the same time promoting its persuasive power through subtle messages. From a DST point of view, the

tug of war for achieving a transitional balance between entertainment and persuasion is ongoing and dynamic.

### Charting the Way to Mars: Model of Delicious Paradox

When it comes to space exploration or any exploration for that matter, people are generally curious about why and how they ended up in unfamiliar territory. Bewildered and perplexed, people lose their judgment and are instinctively prompted to band together in order to not only achieve psychological balance, but make some sense of their new surroundings. This example can serve as a metaphor for audiences unconsciously internalize the content of media and gradually (knowingly or unknowingly) accept its message via the subtle guidance of entertainment media. In most cases, the audience is so engrossed by the amusement of entertainment media that they don't notice or think twice about the content that is embedded within elaborately designed commercials and persuasive tactics, thus getting gratification but with strings attached.

Figure 2  
*Dynamic Model of Delicious Paradox*



This is where the delicious paradox comes into play (see Figure 2): the dichotomy between pleasure-giving and invisible persuasion. As seen in the model, the media presents consumer visual stimulus, aural stimulus, and even sensual stimulus in an effort to entertain audiences while simultaneously persuading consumers to unconsciously change perspectives, accept offers, and buy products. This process is dynamic in that the encompassing nature of the paradox is ever-changing with the compromising equilibration between entertainment media and invisible persuasion. The system as a whole consists of various subsystems including media strategy and consumer psychology, in which variables such as the consumer, input, embedded messages, and stimulus interact with each other gradually, changing the configuration of the overall system.

### The Vampire's Last Drop of Blood: Greedy Marketing & Promotional Embedding

Whereas blurred communications span all entertainment media, according to Shrum, branded entertainment specifically in the form of product placement is one of the most established forms of veiled persuasion. According to PQ Media's *Branded Entertainment Marketing Forecast* (Tedesco, 2008), paid product placement spending grew 33.7% to \$2.90 billion in 2007, with a growth rate of 40.8% from 2002 to 2007; the growth is attributed to the increase in digital video recorders that allows viewers to skip commercials, thus requiring more brand placement throughout the actual program. The media research group also predicts double digit growth for entertainment marketing through 2012 despite the current economic status.

In this day and age of glamorous vampires such as those in the widely popular *Twilight* series, perhaps it's a positive to be perceived as blood suckers. However, the fact is, advertisers are sucking every last drop of blood out of the consumer, utilizing embedded marketing, that according to Shrum stimulates the internalization process of its audience. This cycle of providing entertainment to the detriment of free thinking by the viewer via intrinsic marketing is at the heart of Shrum's conclusion that the lines between media and persuasion have been blurred, affecting cognitive responses.

### Consumer Cultivation and False Incarnation

The dynamic nature of processing information is not fundamentally new, fostered through research known initially as the "New Look", established by Bruner in 1957 and ultimately updated to the more recent "New Look 2" by Greenwald in 1992, which have both impacted the cognitive and social psychology fields (Shrum, 2012).

Within this research, perception is a critical element in terms of the synthesizing process that impacts the dynamic aspect of the paradox between amusement and persuasion in entertainment media. However, it is Shrum's belief that the relationship between



perception and communication processes such as entertainment media is a two way street, acting in a reciprocal manner (Shrum, 2012).

In addition, according to Shrum, perception incorporates two processes: how individuals perceive entertainment media and how frequent consumption of entertainment media principles affects perception. Ultimately, it is perception of media messages that influence judgment, and thus cognitive method is the final resort. Shrum takes it a step further try assessing entertainment media's ability to construct social reality. Because entertainment media is capable of grand scale manipulation, it is his contention that media actually create pre-designed perception of society, and impose that perception on the audience that adopts it as being true to form their reality.

## EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE

Shrum has established his position in the field of communications media with his numerous publications and countless presentations that bring practical theories of media impact on psychological transformations of audience. His work is not only rewarding in theory, but also is impactful in practice, and has drawn media attention to the academic work of scholars from different fields. His colleague, Yinlong Zhang commented that Shrum's research has generated great media coverage on the connection between TV watching and impulsive consumption, demonstrating that good research is not only theoretical but also very practical. A representative of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in which Shrum is an ad hoc editorial reviewer also asserted to the author, "most of Shrum's scholarship is being done on topics relevant to the work that AEJMC advertising scholars do, but predominantly within the field of marketing research, especially as it intersects with psychology."

Despite the phenomenal contribution brought by Shrum, his theory is far from immune to some skepticism. For example, it is Shrum's contention that entertainment media provides the audience with pleasure and thus while distracted, invisibly transforms the audience's beliefs and decisions. However, the psychology of entertainment media places such an importance on the audience's passively accepting the persuasion and promotion while failing to take into consideration of the audience as independent agents who actively select, receive, and interpret information according to their own perspectives and judgments. Just as Baran and Davis (2008) noted, audiences are not as vulnerable to propaganda as had been predicted by mass society theory; they are protected from manipulation by opinion leaders and their own well informed, intensely held attitudes. As a result, there is disconnect between the expected influence of entertainment media and the practical impact media brings about.

In addition, although Shrum did methodical research on the psychological process of audience's perspective and behavior, his focus was not broad enough to encompass the complicated nature of human psychological and cognitive behavior. For example, he focused on the persuasive input on visual, audial, and sensual dimensions without

elaborating on how the stimulating input will be positively transferred to reception, which could be possibly internalized by the audience and thus creates the psychological impact on the audience. Furthermore, he didn't explain the spiral effect of entertainment media, which repeats itself on different levels. For example, when repeated at different periods with a variety of different intervals, entertainment media will generate unexpected "retrospective effects" on the cognitive and psychological configuration of the audience. Finally, it should be noted that sometimes the analysis in Shrum's works lacks clarity, explicit rationale, and convincing proofs to reach the intended conclusion. There are gaps between articles in his book, *The Psychology of Entertainment Media*, due to the compilation of the book with different authors from different perspectives.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

While entertainment media is amusing and can serve an important function in society by allowing for relaxation, the truth is, it also serves as a vehicle of manipulation. A delicious paradox exists between the entertaining aspect and persuasion implemented subtly by advertisers through various means including brand placement. Therefore, entertainment media can be viewed through a dynamic systems approach and evaluated as the complex system it has become in this age of media convergence.

Shrum's work on the psychology of entertainment media, focusing on the cognitive effects is closely linked to the declaration of entertainment media as a complex system and demonstrates the multifaceted aspects involving multiple variables. His research also exemplifies the dynamic notion that, "A butterfly beating its wings over Peking causes a thunderstorm over New York" (de Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007). After all, one Coke bottle during a prominent scene of a favorite show might be just enough to make a legion of fans prefer it over the "Right Choice." The flavor of the coke is soon vanished while the transformative effects of the delicious paradox will place its far-reaching charm longer than we could expect.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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