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MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND IDENTITY FORMATION: THE CASE OF THE 'HOMELAND' VIEWERS

By

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Abstract

This paper examines the television consumption patterns of a group of rural African working class students on the Grahamstown campus of Rhodes University. What is significant about their television consumption is that it is restricted to a diet of local productions and that it takes place in a viewing room, separated from the viewing spaces on the rest of the campus, which these students have named the 'homeland'. Drawing on interviews with these students, the paper uses this phenomenon to discuss two related issues: the uneven penetration of global media into local cultures and the relative importance of media, versus other modes of cultural expression, in the processes of identity formation. The paper observes that for these students their rejection of foreign television programmes is a recent phenomenon, coinciding with their arrival at Rhodes University. They experience a sense of alienation from the black and white middle class norms that dominate the cultural space of the university and, as a result, feel the need to re-affirm a traditional African identity. It is this need, the paper argues, which explains their rejection of foreign television programmes. This is a reminder, the paper concludes, that media messages themselves are mediated by other modes of cultural expression and as such, we need to understand the media as mediating, rather than determining, cultural experience.

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Introduction

In 2000, while researching the relationship between television consumption, identity formation, and the spread of global culture amongst students on the Grahamstown campus of Rhodes University in South Africa, I was informed of the existence of a television viewing room, attached to one of the male residences, used solely by local African male students. [i] Most of these students, I was informed, came from rural peasant or working class backgrounds in the Eastern Cape and they tended to isolate themselves from the rest of the student body as was evidenced in the creation of their own television viewing space.

Every evening, with the regularity of the ritual it has become, 15 to 20 of these students – a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate and from a variety of study disciplines – gather to watch their favourite programmes. The viewing sessions start at 18.30 when they gather to watch *Isidingo* a local black drama series. At 19.00 they break for supper in the residences, and return at 19.30 to view the African-language news. At 20.00 they watch another local black drama series, *Generations*. At weekends they will often meet to watch local televised soccer matches. Not only do these students feel the need to isolate themselves from the rest of the student body in their viewing of television, but equally significant, their programme diet is restricted to local productions.

The 'homeland' is what these students have chosen to call their shared viewing space and it was initially established in 1995 by a previous generation of black South African students. Given the recent history of South Africa, the choice of name for this viewing space is resonant with meaning. Apartheid, as Gilliomee and Schlemmer (1989) point out, was premised on the classification of people into different race groups and their segregation into different residential areas, educational systems and public amenities. Disenfranchised from the South African state, national 'homelands' were created for these different African groups, and it was here that they were supposed to express their political, economic and cultural aspirations – no longer as South Africans but as members of these independent states. However, since the first truly national democratic elections in 1994, the African National Congress-led government has promoted the idea of a unified South African national identity (Steenveld and Strelitz, 1998). Given this, the voluntary return to a symbolic 'homeland' by these students, and their rejection of foreign television, begs explanation.

This paper will argue that any attempt to make sense of this phenomenon needs to draw on theoretical discussions pertaining to the relationship between media consumption and identity formation and relatedly, to the supposed spread of a global culture, the result of media imperialism.

Consumption and Identity Formation

The centrality of consumption to identity formation has been argued by a number of social theorists (Featherstone, 1987; Storey, 1999). Thus according to Miller (1997), whereas a century ago the identity of the individual was rooted in production – as workers or owners – today it is consumption which confers identity because this is the one domain over which they feel they still have some power.

For some writers it is media consumption in particular that lies at the heart of this process (Kellner, 1995; Kroker and Cook, 1988; Bly, 1996; Willis, 1990). Thus Thompson (1995) writes that with the development of modern societies, the self has increasingly become a 'reflexive project' in that individuals have increasingly to fall back on their own resources in order to construct coherent identities for themselves. Central to this process of self-formation – the construction of 'a narrative of self identity' (1995: 210) – are, he asserts, mediated symbolic materials.

Yet another example of this privileging of the media in the process of identity formation is provided by Kellner who, while acknowledging the potential for resistance, argues that in contemporary industrial society a 'media culture' has emerged which helps 'produce the fabric of everyday life…shaping political views and social behaviour, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities' (1995: 1). He continues:

> Radio, television, film, and the other products of the culture industries provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless. Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of "us" and "them". Media culture helps shape the prevalent view of the world and deepest values: it defines what is considered good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil. Media stories and images provide the symbols, myths, and resources which help constitute a common culture for the majority of individuals in many parts of the world today. Media culture provides the materials to create identities whereby individuals insert themselves into contemporary techno-capitalist societies and which is producing a new form of global culture. (1995: 1)

In the passage quoted above we see the link between the thesis of media imperialism – the spread of a global culture, usually American in origin – and the notion of a media powerful enough to shape our self-identities and our views of the world.

These theoretical claims have, however, not gone unchallenged by media theorists. It has been observed,

for example, that those theories which purport the spread of a homogenized global culture usually focus on the production, distribution, and content of global media, as opposed to their reception (Ang, 1996; Tomlinson, 1991). Thus Chaffee (1992) notes that while it may sound convincing at face-value, those promoting the idea of the spread of global media with the resultant creation of a global culture have rarely tested their theory empirically. Those that have tested the theory, usually through ethnographic studies of media consumption, often arrive at conclusions regarding the media's power over audiences quite at odds with those claims made by media and cultural imperialists (Moores, 1993; Skovmand and Schroder, 1992; Strelitz, 2000).

In his challenge to these related claims, Tomlinson (1991) refers to the 'media-centeredness' of media theory. This exhibits itself, he argues, in 'the tendency of people working in this area to assume the cultural and ideological processes they study are at the center of social reality' (Tomlinson, 1991: 58). However, as he reminds us, media messages are themselves mediated by other modes of cultural experience. In contrast to Kellner (1995) who collapses the distinction between 'media' and 'culture', Tomlinson argues that we view their relationship as a 'subtle interplay of mediations' (1991: 61). On the one hand we have the media as the dominant representational aspect of modern culture, while on the other we have the 'lived experience' of culture. Accordingly, Tomlinson (1991) writes, overly-strong claims for media power arise as a result of media theorists seeing the media as determining rather than mediating cultural experience.

Warde (1996), critiquing the privileging of consumption in general, rather than media consumption in particular, in the process of identity formation, argues the need to consider other sources of cultural experience – for example, identification with national, ethnic, occupational and kin groups, not dependent upon shared patterns of commercial consumption. Strong claims for the centrality of consumption in this process lack, he argues, experiential and phenomenological support. He writes:

> While acknowledging that in some part the artifacts of consumer culture are deployed performatively in the attempt to differentiate the actor from others within and beyond a given relevant social circle, a more measured analysis will maintain that the answer to the question 'who am I?' is closely bound to that of 'who are we?', and that the answer to both these questions is likely to involve consideration of social location, involvement in social networks, involuntary exposure to persuasive communications, and so forth. The production view of the self not only underestimates the social context of identity formation but also <u>overemphasizes the role of cultural products</u> (particularly media outputs and icons of fashion) at the expense of the variety of practices which create and sustain social relations of kinship, friendship and association. (1996: 305, my emphasis)

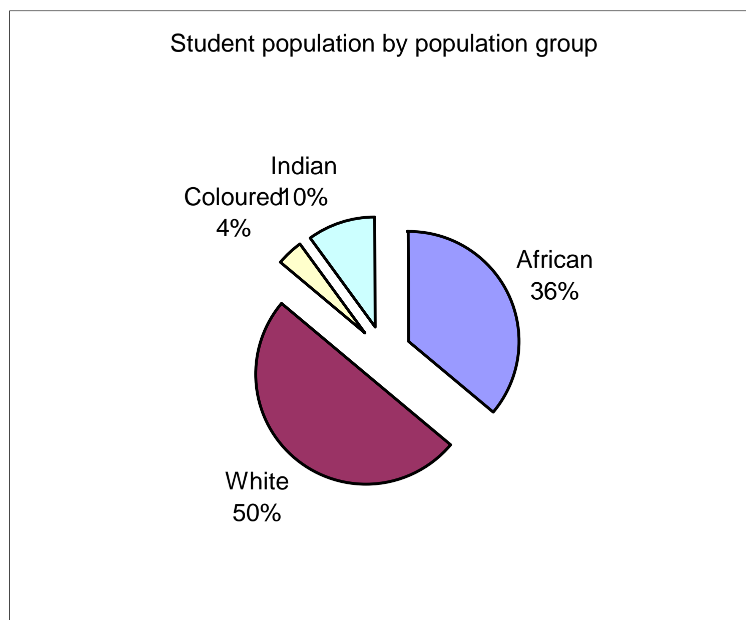
The existence of the 'homeland' enables us to examine these related claims concerning the relationship between media consumption and identity formation and the cultural impact of the penetration of global media into local cultures. Drawing on my research into the 'homeland', I will address these issues in the remainder of this paper.

The Research Process

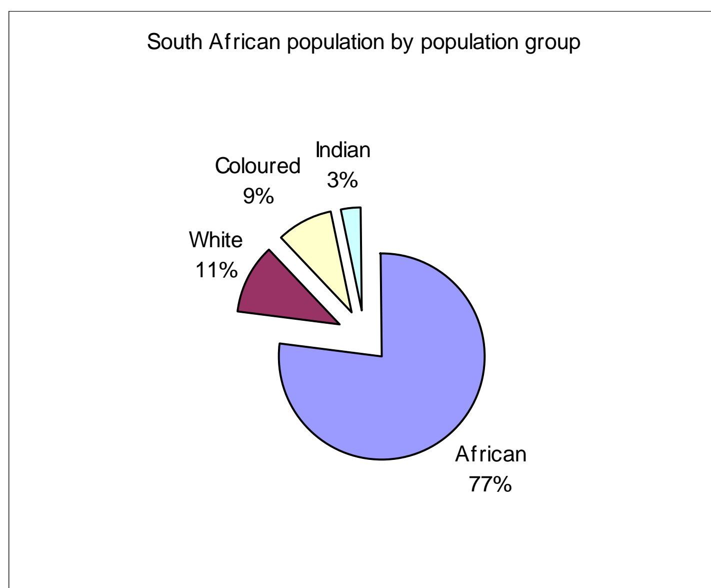
In an attempt to understand the reasons for their decision to separate from the rest of the student body, and their rejection of foreign television programmes, I conducted in-depth interviews with a number of 'homeland' students. Following on from these interviews I spent a one-week period attending the nightly 'homeland' viewing sessions. I then conducted three follow-up focus group interviews with volunteers from the 'homeland' viewing group. Finally, having written up my study, I asked one of my informants to check it for its accuracy of reportage

The Context of Consumption: the Grahamstown Campus of Rhodes University

The social and educational inequalities that existed under apartheid are still evidenced on the Grahamstown campus of Rhodes University. [ii] The campus at the time of research had 4 411 registered students: Indian (10%), African (36%), Coloured (4%), and White (50%) (Rhodes University, 2000).



This is despite the fact that African students comprise 83% of the total school population. Furthermore, the campus demographics do not reflect the demographics of the country as a whole which, according to the most recent census figures, gives the percentages of the population in South Africa by 'population group' as African (77%), White (11%), Indian (3%), and Coloured (9%) (Central Statistics, 1997).



These anomalies can, however, be explained by the history of the Apartheid education system in South Africa, which sought to entrench and 'normalise' the Apartheid ideology through a differentiated system of education. Briefly, after 1954, 'Bantu' education was administered by the Department of Education and Training (DET). The Eiselen Commission (1949-1951) had recommended schooling for African children, which in accordance with apartheid ideology, would strengthen their roots in African culture and society, and prepare them to take up their 'places' in the South African economy. From about 1960 onwards, secondary schooling for Africans was concentrated in the 'Bantustans'. Bantu education sought to 'retribalise' Africans with a heavy emphasis of teaching in the 'tribal' mother-tongues. The Homelands policy was supported by the establishment of Black Tertiary Institutions. Prior to 1994, all Coloured and Indian education was administered by the Provincial Governments. The Coloured Affairs Department (CAD) was established by the Nationalist Party Government after 1948 to serve the special social and welfare interests of the Coloured people—as determined by the Nationalist Party. In 1964 the CAD assumed control of Coloured education. According to the De Vos Malan Commission their education had to make them conscious of their separate existence and readiness to work'. Indian education followed a similar route. After 1948, the government promoted Christian National Education for white schools. White education was comparatively generously funded for the provision of buildings, amenities, teachers and so on, to accommodate the Compulsory Schooling Act. In 1992 the Nationalist Government issued an Education Renewal Strategy in preparation for the negotiations that were imminent with the ANC. This established 'Model C' schools which became non-racial, subject to the approval of parent bodies and the ability of parents to pay the required fees. After 1994, all schools became non-racial, but fee-paying. However, because of the fee structure of various schools, and the limited access of most Black students to 'Model C' and private schools, most South African students are still schooled within the old Apartheid school system.

Given this, the demographics at Rhodes University is not surprising, nor the fact that in 1996 only 12% of African students passed grade 12 compared to 30% of Indians, 12% of Coloureds, and 41% of Whites (SAIRR, 1999).

The staff complement at Rhodes University also reflects these disparities. According to the university's Digest of Statistics for the year 2000, 89% of the academic staff are White, 2% Indian, 2% Coloured, and 7% African. When it comes to senior administrative staff we find that 68% are White, 2% Indian, 13% Coloured, and 17% African. On the other hand, the service staff are largely African – 100% in academic departments and 96% in the residences (Rhodes University, 2000).

This is the social and institutional context in which the 'homeland' students operate and which, as we shall see, has played an important part in their decision to separate themselves from the rest of the student body as well as their rejection of foreign television programmes.

The 'Homeland' Viewers

As already noted, the majority of 'homeland' students are from rural working class and peasant backgrounds. The majority have attended the educationally-inferior and uni-racial DET school system and thus coming to Rhodes University has provided them with their first close contact with urban, middle class African, White, Asian, and Coloured students the majority of whom have attended 'Model C' or private schools.

Given their different educational and social experiences it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of the 'homeland' viewers feel estranged from the dominant student and institutional culture they experience at Rhodes University. For example, the majority of the 'homeland' students have been initiated into manhood (they have "been to the bush"[iii]) and thus immediately find themselves at odds with what they regard as the infantile behaviour of other students with whom they share residential accommodation. This includes excessive drinking and 'prank-playing'.

> Andile: Because of my background I experience it [Rhodes University] as a White institution. Because I've already gone to the bush, I don't involve myself with some of the activities there. If I did, I would be compromising my manhood. I can give an example of the students water-bombing each other during exams. I don't like that. So instead of changing me, it has reinforced my sense of being a black South African.

> Luxolo: Drinking…acting stupid when you're drunk, doing stupid things like shouting and trying to tackle trees. Broadly speaking, this white culture, they feel you have to

be flexible, just take everything. If they throw water at you, you mustn't have any problems with that…everything, you must take it. If there is a formal dinner you must be seen to drink that wine big time (laughs). If you don't drink that wine you're not 'one of us'. Even the attire…you have to wear these big shoes. You have to be seen going to that gym everyday. These are some of the things that are disadvantaging us.

They feel that the majority of African middle class students, many of whom who have attended the educationally superior non-racial 'Model C' or private schools, are no different to their white counterparts who have attended the same institutions. They refer to these African students as 'coconuts' – black on the outside but white on the inside. One of the indicators of their assimilation into white culture is their preference for, and ease in speaking, the English language.

Andile: You meet someone here [at Rhodes] and you greet him in your own language, and he responds to you in English. These are things which make us say that these people are fake.

As noted earlier, there is a class dimension to this.

Luxolo: There are people from the urban areas we don't have any problems with. This again comes to the question of which people from the urban areas…If you look at them you'll find they're mainly from the middle class. They're the ones we have trouble with.

There is a general feeling amongst the 'homeland' students that the African middle classes have betrayed their cultural roots. This helps explain their antipathy towards black Zimabwean students whom they believe strongly represent this tendency.[iv]

Michael: There's one thing I don't like about (black) Zimbabwean students. I've never met one Zimbabwean person who is proud of his or her background. Everything they do is something that is done by whites. I've never seen the culture that is unique to them and them being proud of that culture. You know some white guys they drink, and then they take off their clothes and they run around campus naked. You see amongst them some Zim guys. Now you begin to ask yourself whether they grew up like that or else it was only the foreign culture they adopted. And you'll find four of them talking together and although they can all speak Shona, they'll be speaking in English.

Coming mainly from a rural peasant or working class background, the relative poverty of the 'homeland'

students, often reflected in their dress, also impacts on how they experience this university institution.

> Luxolo: Even in the administration, the way they look at you because of your dress, they think maybe you're a tsotsi (gangster) or something.

Furthermore, the lack of African content in the courses is also a source of much frustration for these students.

> Michael: The identity of the courses is still largely White. I did politics for example and we did Utopia and Saint Simone. It was really hard. It's core European history and it's really hard for us. First of all we don't have the interest and secondly, we don't have the background. We meet those things for the first time here in university and it's certainly very difficult for us to master such subjects. Blacks who master these subjects come from model C or private schools. They have the background and maybe they gained their interest while they were at school. So the content is very White.

Given their alienation from the dominant institutional and student culture, the 'homeland' represents a psychological space within which these students can re-confirm and live out their feelings of difference. As one of my informants commented, 'the 'homeland' is comforting'. Thus, during the viewing sessions I attended, the students provided a continual running commentary on what was taking place on screen. This was one way of reconfirming for each other the 'correct' reading of the texts and in the process reconfirming the traditional African value system which they hold onto. For example, in the local drama *Isidingo*, one of the African characters was asked by his wife to seek help from a therapist.

> Andile: So we took this aspect and we talked about it. We said 'hey no, you can't go'.

> Luxolo: In our culture you don't talk to some other people about your problems. You're supposed to have the support of your family…not to go to a professional.

The importance of the local dramas is that they raise issues of cultural concern for further discussion, which in turn helps to cement a particular world-view amongst the 'homeland' viewers.

> Andile: When watching *Isidingo*, it's quick for us to select a particular aspect of what is happening and talk about it. But when it comes to these white soapies, I find it very difficult. In *Isidingo* there's this guy on the mine who doesn't want to go underground because he had this dream which said he shouldn't. Those are things that happen in our culture and they reflect the way we think.

All of the comments and subsequent discussion take place in Xhosa. English for ideological as well as practical reasons (largely to do with their inferior schooling) remains a foreign language. As Andile

noted, 'We don't like English because of its restrictions to us'.

The 'homeland', where only Xhosa is spoken, is a space which enables these students to interact with each other confidently, free from the ridicule of the better educated, urban, middle class students.

> Andile: Whenever I meet with my friends we discuss things from where we've come. So people tend to say that we are traditionalists. That perception gives us the spirit to stay together to share this one vision. They don't see traditionalism as positive, they talk about it as a negative thing…you're backwards. We don't see a reason why we have to change because we are at Rhodes. If we can tolerate them, why can't they tolerate us. When we are sitting with these people watching tv, they'll make a silly comment about someone who can't speak English. We understand that in our places we were never exposed to many things and we didn't get a good education…so how can you laugh at someone who can't speak good English. So we said, let's not sit with them because we'll always be angry. Rather sit with these people because we share the same perception of thing.

> Luxolo: The other thing I want to say is that we watch in the 'homeland' because of our interests. When I watch in the tv room with some other guys they often make comments which offend, but when I'm in the 'homeland', I know we share the same views, we share the same things. So if they comment, I know what they mean and I understand it. Those who grew up in the townships [as opposed to the rural areas] have that mentality that we are stupid, so we tend not to mix.

In contrast to many white students, whose preference for foreign television is because of the greater 'realism' it affords – defined by them in terms of better acting, staging, scripting and so on – the 'homeland' students find greater 'realism' in local productions because they connect more with their own lived reality.

> Luxolo: When I watch American movies I get bored with these technological things. I like it to be more realistic. In most cases I don't believe these overseas things…that the main actor will survive the whole movie…but he shoots everyone and everyone dies. So I don't like that…these are lies. When I watch South African dramas, these are realistic to me. They speak about what is happening, what I know. I understand why this guy is doing this. Not understanding someones culture is a problem.

> Andile: My personal response to *Isidingo* is one that is informed by my background. The very fact that our fathers and brothers were working on the mines…they used to

come back and talk and relate these stories to us. So now what is happening in *Isidingo* is the confirmation of that. So everytime I see that setting I reflect back on those things they used to tell us – tribal conflicts, faction fights within that work setting. So it's a confirmation of those things that I used to hear.

Luxolo: It's a true reflection of what is going on in South Africa. In [American] soapies, the poor person doesn't have a romantic life. They are only servants and it is only the rich who have a romantic life. *Isidingo* shows that these people also have feelings…they're not just mineworkers. They go to shebeens [drinking taverns] and they look for girls. In this soapie they show you this poor woman who works in the kitchen of a mine manager and is in love with this man who works on the mine. That is what is happening. Those are the kinds of affairs that we can get involved in ourselves, so we identify with that.

This last comment is important because it highlights the identification that these students have with the African poor in South Africa.[v] As a result, there is a need on their part to make sense of the political structures that maintain or challenge these structural inequalities. This is reflected in the need for information from the media they consume.

Andile: The media I consume are those which cater for me, which informs me about things I am interested in. For example, I don't like watching M-Net[vi] because it's full of fiction, there's no truth. I don't listen to Radio Algoa and Rhodes Music Radio because they just play music and I don't get any knowledge or information.

This interest in the fate of the rural poor goes hand-in-hand with a general interest in the current political transformation of the country and is evidenced in the relatively high readership of newspapers and viewership of television news amongst the 'homeland' students as compared to, for example, the white students on campus (Strelitz, 1998). This is unsurprising given that one of the main thrusts of the current political transformation is supposedly the economic and political empowerment of the African poor.

Lwazi: A friend of mine said something very interesting. He said white students here at Rhodes think that they are in England or somewhere else. For them to watch the news would be to force them to face the reality that they are in South Africa. To be ignorant about the news is much better for them, so that's why they don't watch the news. I like being informed, I feel comfortable that way.

Andile: Also the content of the news is one that begins to make you interested because you find out the news covers everything in the country, even the places we are coming

> from. The mere fact that you see a dam or a water scheme at a place that you are coming from makes you interested because you can relate to the content of the news. Everything I don't know about South Africa is being portrayed there. If there's a bus that's overturned in Durban, I identify with that bus. Everything that is happening in South Africa I identify with.
>
> Luxolo: Also the debates about what is happening in South Africa and Africa. If you don't watch the news it will be very difficult to pick up what's going on. We like to debate these things amongst ourselves.
>
> Lwazi: In the 'homeland' there are lots of debates and you can be ridiculed if you didn't know the current issues. So in a way it's important to know what's going on in the news.

Their identification with the poor outside of campus rather than with their fellow students, is further reflected in their preference for spending their spare time in the local township shebeens (drinking taverns) rather than the pubs frequented by university students.

> Andile: Some of us say that Rhodes is an island in Grahamstown because it's got it's own things different from greater Grahamstown. I feel at home when I'm there [the black township]…you get people of the same background. As black South Africans we mustn't forget about these people outside of Rhodes…we are from there. We must continue interacting with those people. Going to the township on Fridays, reaffirms that we are black South Africans. Even if I finish here at Rhodes, I will go and work there [in the impoverished rural areas]. I won't forget those people back there. I am better because I grew up there…much more than a person who grew up in a township who doesn't know these things…you cannot forget your background.

It's not only politics that these students are interested in. They also talk a lot about the problem of "getting girls" and these discussions also reflect their distance from mainstream campus culture. The problem they frequently encounter is that, unlike them, the female students have been influenced by Western culture. This creates another 'point of psychic pressure' as they feel they are judged by their peers according to their ability to 'get a girl'.

> Luxolo: At home we had girlfriends and we had a different view of relationships. We saw that even girls from the same background as us, when they come here they become impossible to get. You must have money to take her out, you've got to buy a rose and things like that. We refuse to do that. All those perceptions have reinforced

> our understanding of who we are.
>
> Lwazi: They behave differently on campus. If I met this person in Mdantsane, she would behave normally. But when she's here it's a different case. That's what I don't understand. Like her, when you propose to her you have to take her out, buy a rose and things like that. That's what I don't understand.

The need of the 'homeland' students to separate themselves from the rest of the student body provides a graphic example of Hall's (1996) reminder that identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. As he notes in this regard, 'Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside', abjected' (1996: 5). Similarly Morley argues that:

> [R]ather than analysing cultural or (national) identities one by one and then subsequently (as an optional move) thinking about how they are related to each other (through relations of alliance or opposition, domination or subordination), we must grasp how these 'identities', in Saussure's terms, are only constituted in and through their relations to each other. (1992, p.68).

Thus we see that the identities of the 'homeland' viewers' have been brought into sharp focus as a result of their entrance into the cultural space of Rhodes University. Some of the ways they have of reaffirming this identity is their separation from other students on campus, their nightly gatherings in the shared space they've named the 'homeland', and their rejection of foreign – in South Africa, primarily American - television programmes.

What emerged in my interviews, and what would support my claim, is that for many of the 'homeland' students the rejection of foreign (American) television is *a recent phenomenon*, coinciding with their entry into the cultural space of Rhodes University. As I've already noted, they feel alienated from the dominant student and institutional culture of the university and it is this alienation that has brought into sharp focus for them their difference from other students – identity as difference. This difference is both represented and reinforced by their decision to view television in the 'homeland' and to restrict this viewing to local productions. The impact that social location, social networks and so on have on both media consumption patterns and identity formation, emerged particularly clearly in an unstructured in-depth interview I conducted with one of the 'homeland' students, Andile.

Andile

Andile grew up in Payn, a small rural village in the heart of the former Transkei. His mother worked

occasionally as a domestic servant in white homes. She was however, financially dependant on money her husband, a truck driver in the urban centre of East London, sent to her.[vii] Payments were irregular and this led to Andile's first visit to the city. When he was nine years old his mother took him to visit his father who was living in a 'shack' in Duncan Village, one of East London's African townships.

> The actual fact that brought us to East London was to get money from my father. My mother took me for that reason. Just to go there so that my father would see that really at home, people are suffering. I didn't have shoes, toys…all those things.

It was here that he had contact with television for the first time. He visited his cousins in the township of Mdantsane, bordering Duncan Village. They were watching the American series Knightrider, and the programme impacted deeply on young Andile.

> Everything in that film just shifted my thinking. I saw that this guy doesn't have any suffering…his life is just moving. Even though there are these fights, this guy seems to be enjoying himself. His life is just smooth.

Importantly, the relative affluence he experienced in East London, and the visions of America he witnessed on the television screen melded into one and gave Andile, for the first time, a vantage point from which to view his own impoverished rural existence.

> Actually the only thing that I understood from visiting East London and watching television is that I recognized the place that I was staying in. I could see it was really in the dark. I thought why are these people in East London having these nice things…motor cars, televisions…everything is nice here. I could distinguish clearly between my cousins and the guys with whom I'm staying in the rural areas. These people in town are clean, they are always wearing these nice things.

What he saw on television during that first visit to East London accorded with his own lived experience in rural Transkei.

> I saw these white people on television as people who are actually high in terms of living. These people are owning nice cars, are having money, their kids are having bicycles…They had a lot in their possessions which we didn't possess as black, and in particular in my family. There was always that quest to be like those people because those people don't have that problem. I would love to be like them…to have a car, to have all those things. Of course from that television those were the conclusions that I had. When I saw them on the naked eye on the farm…these people that I saw…the picture that I saw on television was no different…these [white] people are having so

> many head of cattle, tractors and all these things…and my aunt was working for them.

For Andile, America, as experienced through television, seemed particularly attractive.

> Having watched Knightrider and all those stuff….yes, there was this Dallas, America was really a nice place to be. It was totally different from the place I was staying. So there was a need for me to advance to live in that particular place. The houses were nice, the people there were speaking nice English…although I didn't know what nice English was I could see that this was nice English. So those were some of the things that influenced me. These people are always having nice offices. These people, even though they are serious at the same time they entertain themselves. So there is that balance as compared to us where we will have maybe one thing…go to school and then afterwards just kick that soccer ball…there was nothing else. So these people had a right way of doing things. To know those programmes was just to know that people do different things…there are different things that are happening which are nice.

As Andile indicates above, the fact that the foreign programmes were in English, as opposed to the local dramas in Xhosa, was another reason he was attracted to them.

> The teacher would tell us that you must know English if you want to be successful. They were telling us that it is a world language. You can talk to anyone in the world as compared to speaking Xhosa to say someone from Japan. So I was interested in English even though I never practised English at home where I would only speak Xhosa. I really wanted to speak English.

For Andile living in rural poverty, television, and American programmes in particular, provided a glimpse of the modern world. Returning home after his first visit to East London, he felt that he'd been exposed to a world not available to his rural friends.

> I knew that with these guys I knew something that they didn't know. Every holiday I wanted to spend in East London just to watch television.

As we've seen, the world Andile experienced via American television programmes was one of relative affluence and choice. American television was thus instrumental in bringing about Andile's 'mental modernisation'. His experiences accord with Tomlinson's claim that at an existential level modernity involves 'the emergence of new senses of possibility – new options, new desires, new freedoms…' (1991: 41). However, it is precisely the openness of this experience that creates existential dilemmas for the modern subject. Thus Fromm writes that freedom from pre-modern certainties bring 'complete aloness

and doubt' (1960: 29), while for Berman 'it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish' (1982: 15). It is this tension between the promise and the dangers of modernity that Berman explores in All That is Solid Melts Into Air. As he points out in his introduction:

> To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. (1983: 15)

Despite these threats to pre-modern certainties, there is the belief amongst writers on this subject that, with the growth of the global capitalist market, cultures are 'condemned to modernity' (Tomlinson, 1991: 41). What the 'homeland' interviews highlight is the unevenness of this transition and that the adoption of 'modern' values is always context bound. For Andile, living an impoverished rural existence in the Transkei, America signified abundance and the possibility of making life choices. Coming to Rhodes University exposed him, for the first time on an ongoing basis, to students who were modern subjects and recognizing his difference from them – the lack of fluency in English, the relative poverty of his background, the generally inferior education he'd received in the DET school system - he retreated into conservative traditional Xhosa culture. Part of this retreat involved a rejection of American culture as experienced via television. Within this new context, this same America that had before seemed so attractive, now became associated with that middle class student culture from which he felt alienated.

For Andile and a number of other 'homeland' students there was, on campus, a slippery slide between the ability of the modern subject to make life-choices and, as Luxolo put it, the feeling 'that you have to be flexible, just take everything'. In the face of the uncertainty and doubt, underlying the modern experience, these students found security in what Lwazi referred to as the 'comfort of the homeland'.

Importantly, this nightly ritual of television viewing doesn't only reflect these traditional identities, it also helps to produce them. As Frith observes in this regard,

> social groups [do not] agree on values which are then expressed in their cultural activities…but…they only get to know themselves as groups (as a particular organization of individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) through cultural activity, through aesthetic judgement. (1996: 138)

Both the process of regular meetings in this separate space as well as the talk around the programmes viewed, contributed to their gaining knowledge of themselves as a group.

The Politics of Consumption

In this paper I have provided a number of possible reasons for their rejection of the relative 'openness' of modern culture as experienced on the Rhodes University campus and of Western television programmes which they see as embodying these cultural values. One the one hand their nightly ritual in the 'homeland' does contribute to their psychic security but on the other, it also results in them holding onto some of the more static and regressive aspects of pre-modern culture. Thus during one of our focus group discussions we discussed their viewing of the local drama, Isidingo. There was general laughter in the group whenever the name of one of the central characters, Mr. Matabane, was mentioned. He was obviously the focus of much derision amongst the 'homeland' students. When I asked why this was, they explained that since he'd lost his job on the mine, his traditional male power, as the head of the household, had been usurped by his wife. He had, in their eyes, become a weak man, one to be mocked and laughed at. The portrayal of the wife as a strong woman, able to assume the family responsibilities, rather than challenging their traditional patriarchal beliefs, reinforced them.

> Andile: Like there's this guy Matabane (laughter from the group)…he's not working but his wife is working. So now the wife has much power over him because he can't earn any money. So the way she treats her husband is different to the way we understand the relationship should be. So we respond quickly to things like that.
>
> Lwazi: That situation is getting common in our society because our fathers are being retrenched and their role as head of the family is undermined. This is bad because sometimes Matabane (laughter) is not treated with the respect that he deserves.
>
> Luxolo: When Matabane was working it was a different case. He was in charge of his wife.
>
> Andile: I won't say he was bullying, but he was doing what was right. The way we understand things is that a man should be giving direction to his family. He was doing that last year but now he's being given direction (laughter). These are things we talk about.
>
> Lwazi: In our comments we're always saying that Mr Matabane is weak.

Further questioning on my part revealed that their attitude towards Mr Matabane was reflected their general conservatism with regard to gender relationships.

> Lwazi: These feminsists don't only want equal power, they want more of it. In some

> aspects they want to be subordinate to men when it comes to spending money. But when it comes to power, they want to be equal to men. It doesn't balance. They mustn't be selective.

> Andile: Equality shouldn't downgrade the man.

> Luxolo: In some things we can't be equal. In most cases it is the man who must initiate the relationship…you must go to the woman. Even with marriage you are the one who says I would like to get married. Even in the family, the man must take a leading role…that's how we are.

Finally, as we saw earlier, their suspicion of the African middle class (because of their supposed loss of traditional cultural values), easily translates into xenophobia. Ironically, in the light of the media imperialism theorists who bemoan the loss of traditional cultural values (a result of the imposition of cultural heterogeneity) in the age of global media, it seems that the rejection of foreign television on the part of the 'homeland' viewers reflects an unwillingness to become modern subjects, open to new, more socially progressive ways of being in, and relating to, the world.

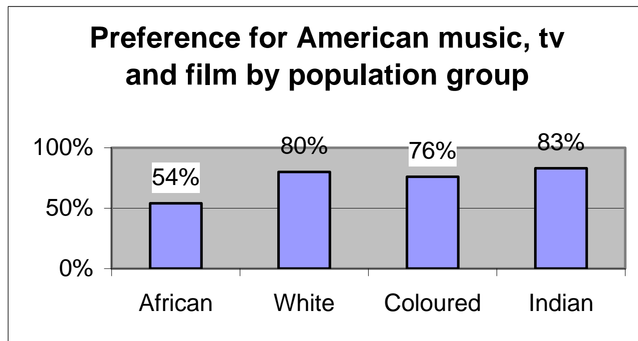
The uneven penetration of global media into local cultures

My research into the 'homeland' students has, I believe, revealed the importance of needing to see the interplay between media consumption and other social factors – such as social location, social networks and so on - in the construction of social identity. It has also pointed to the uneven penetration of global media into local cultures. As Mattelart reminds us in this regard,

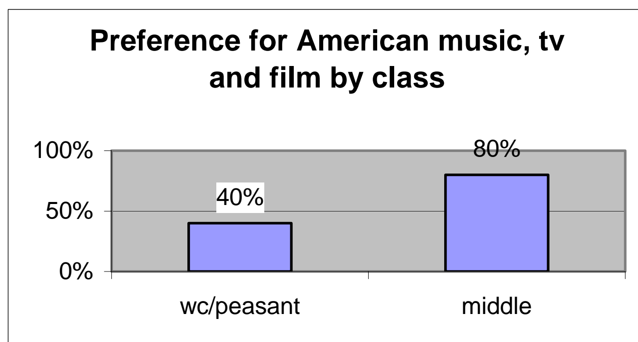
> the idea of a monolithic, triumphant imperialism, wiping out all diversity and homogenizing all cultures is absurd…The idea that imperialism invades different sectors of a society in a uniform way must be abandoned. What must be substituted is the demand for an analysis that illuminates the particular milieu that favour [or hinder] this penetration. (quoted in Morley, 1992: 72)

This uneven penetration has been evident in my current research into media consumption patterns amongst Rhodes University students. For example, results from a random sample survey conducted on campus reveal significant correlations between the class and population group of students and their relative affinity for foreign versus local media and popular cultural forms (Strelitz, 1998). Thus, while 54% of African students agreed with the statement 'I connect more with American music, television and film than with South African music, television and film', the corresponding figure for Whites was 80%, for Coloureds 76%, and for Indian 83% (Strelitz, 1998).

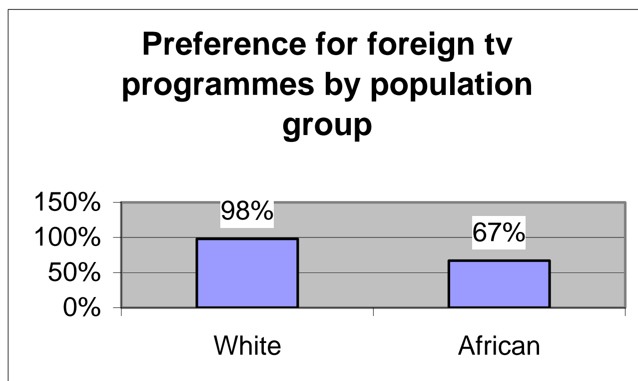
(Strelitz, 1998).



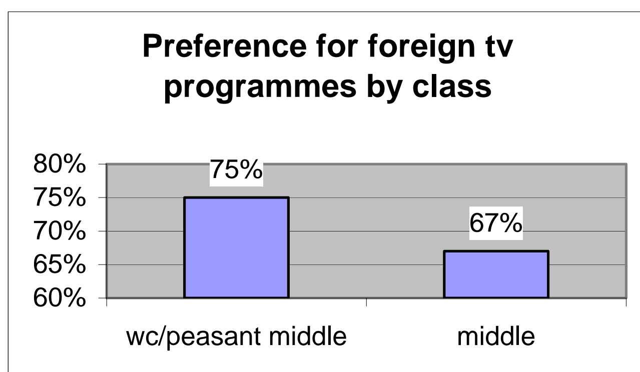
And while 40% of students from working class and peasant backgrounds agreed with the statement, the figure for middle class students was 80% (Strelitz, 1998).



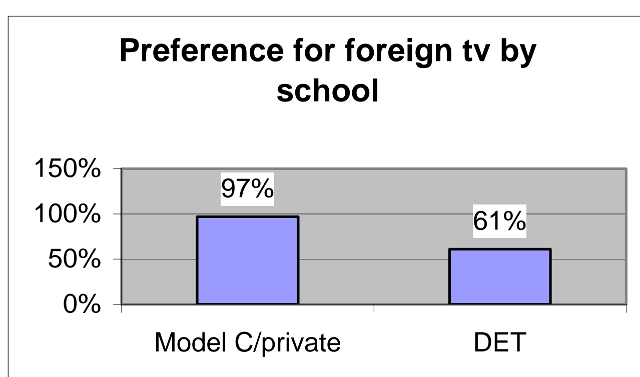
When I asked students about their preference for local or foreign television programmes, 67% of African students preferred foreign programmes compared to the 98% for white students (Strelitz, 1998).



When it came to the impact of class on television preference, 97% of middle class students preferred foreign programmes compared to the 75% for students from working class and peasant backgrounds (Strelitz, 1998).

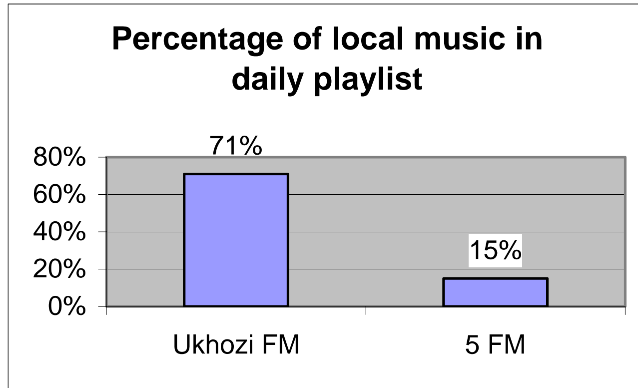


Finally, 97% of students who had attended 'Model C' or private schools preferred foreign programmes compared to the 61% for DET students (Strelitz, 1998).



These figures are unsurprising given the correlation between population group, social class, and schooling discussed earlier. These trends are further reflected in the television viewing and radio listening patterns of the wider South African population, supporting Straubhaar's (1991) claims regarding the desire for 'cultural proximity' amongst the peasant and working ('popular') classes. He uses the term to describe the desire by these classes to consume local media. In contrast to the elites, who will often seek out global media, these classes 'seem to prefer nationally or locally produced material that is closer to and more reinforcing of traditional identities, based in regional, ethnic, dialect/language, religious and other elements' (1991: 51).

I will briefly discuss one example of this trend in the South African context. Local music content averages for the public broadcaster radio services in South Africa indicate that the urban-based, English language stations play a much lower percentage of local music than do the rural, indigenous language stations (IBA, 1999). Two radio stations, Five FM and Ukhozi FM provide examples of this trend. Seventy-four percent of 5 FM's listeners are white while 99% of Ukhozi FM's listeners are black. According to the Independent Broadcasting Association's (IBA) Monitoring and Complaints Unit, during 1998, 15% of the music played on Five FM was local. In contrast, 71% of the music played on Ukhozi FM was of local content (IBA, 1999).



The demographics of the audiences for the two stations support my campus findings. The majority of 5FM's listeners are white, urban, Enlgish speaking, and are relatively affluent and well-educated. In contrast, the majority of Ukhozi FM's listeners are poor, ill-educated, African rural dwellers, the majority of whom speak Zulu, an indigenous African language (SAARF, 1997a). What these figures indicate is that for the poor, ill-educated rural African listener, the global music scene has had very little impact. For urban, well-educated and relatively affluent white South Africans, the opposite seems to be true.

Television viewing in South Africa shows similar trends with those stations which appeal to urban English-speaking South African carrying a much lower local content than those stations aimed at indigenous-language speaking Africans (SAARF, 1999).

Conclusion

In this paper I have drawn on my research into the 'homeland' students to argue against those theories which privilege media consumption – at the expense of such factors as social location, involvements in social networks and so on – in identity formation. I have also used the case of the 'homeland' students to argue for a more nuanced approach to the question of the spread of global culture via the global media. As this study indicates for many of the 'homeland' students, their insertion into the cultural space of Rhodes University has brought into sharp focus their identities as 'traditional' Africans. This has impacted on their television programme preferences. As we saw in the case of Andile, the meanings he obtained from American television in the past (material abundance, freedom, personal choice and so on), and which were important to him during that phase of his life, are no longer appropriate to him in his new setting of Rhodes University. In his case there has been a re-articulation of what 'America' now signifies and he is now dismissive of 'this whole American culture of consumerism…people buying things, having things, lots of money in the banks, while there are still poor people…this individualistic thinking'.

What has brought about this shift? One could surmise that for Andile the values he now associates with American culture are those he associates with the urban middle class culture experienced on campus and

from which he feels estranged. This estrangement is largely a result of the class differences he experiences and the way these differences are manifested in the poor school education he received, his relatively poor grasp of English, and so on.

I have deliberately downplayed the central role given to the media in identity formation in order to provide a corrective to those ‘media-centric’ approaches discussed at the start of this paper. However, as we’ve seen with the ‘homeland’ students, the meanings they take from the local programmes they watch obviously play an important role in cementing their particular identities and they help mediate how they experience the social space of Rhodes University. This is the ‘interplay of mediations’ (Tomlinson, 1991: 61) referred to at the start of this paper.

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[i] In this paper I use the term 'black' as a collective term to refer to African, Coloured and Indian students. Thus when I use the term 'African' I am referring specifically to African students.
[ii] Rhodes University has two campuses, one in Grahamstown and a smaller one in East London.
[iii] This takes place any time after the age of 17.
[iv] Because the Zimbwean students are not eligible for bursaries at South African universities, the majority tend to come from middle class families as they can afford the fees.
[v] In South Africa almost 50% of the population live in rural poverty while in the Eastern Cape, the figure is 66%, the majority being African.
[vi] M-Net is a local subscription channel which screens primarily American films, sitcoms and drama series.
[vii] During the years of apartheid, many black families were split up in this way. As the increasingly overcrowded and

impoverished rural homelands were increasingly unable to support and sustain black families, the fathers were often forced to seek work in the cities, sending money home to their rural families.