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Article

# The Cultivation Theory and Its Influence on Filmmaking: An Analytical Perspective on Media's Role in Shaping Social Reality

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## Abstract

This paper extends Cultivation Theory—a theoretical framework developed by George Gerbner to explain television's influence on social perception—to the medium of filmmaking. Cultivation Theory proposes that prolonged, cumulative exposure to media narratives shapes audiences' perceptions of social reality. While television has dominated cultivation research, this analysis applies the theory's core principles to cinema's unique characteristics, including concentrated narrative structures, immersive experiences, and global cultural reach. Employing qualitative discourse analysis of filmmaking practices and narrative forms, this paper examines how cinema contributes to shaping social beliefs and attitudes regarding crime, cultural norms, and social reality. The analysis addresses how filmmaking operates within an evolving digital environment characterized by streaming platforms and algorithmic curation, while also examining the interplay between filmmaker intentionality and audience interpretation. This paper concludes that filmmaking represents a significant yet underexplored mechanism for cultivating social perceptions, with substantial implications for understanding how individuals and communities construct their worldviews in contemporary media environments. Based on these findings, the paper offers comprehensive recommendations for future research directions that address methodological innovations, cross-cultural investigations, and emerging technological contexts.

**Keywords:** cultivation theory; filmmaking; media effects; mean world syndrome; cultural perception; digital streaming; media literacy; audience reception; mainstreaming; resonance; algorithmic curation

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## 1. Introduction

Media institutions have long been recognized as powerful agents in shaping public perception and social norms. Among the theoretical frameworks developed to conceptualize this process, Cultivation Theory stands as one of the most enduring and influential. Developed by George Gerbner and colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, Cultivation Theory articulates the long-term effects of sustained media exposure on audience worldviews (Morgan et al., 2015). The theory's central premise holds that heavy, repeated exposure to relatively consistent media messages cultivates a shared consciousness, providing viewers with frameworks for perceiving and interpreting social reality (Shrum, 2017).

The original cultivation research program emphasized violence as a primary concern, with studies consistently demonstrating that heavy television viewers were more likely to perceive the world as a dangerous phenomenon Gerbner termed "Mean World Syndrome" (Gerbner et al., 2002). For decades, television served as the primary focus of cultivation research, understood as the dominant cultural storyteller due to its ritualistic consumption patterns and near-universal penetration into domestic spaces (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Gerbner conceptualized television not merely as a window to the world but as a primary constructor of social reality, functioning to stabilize social patterns and maintain cultural continuity.

However, the contemporary media landscape differs fundamentally from the environment in which Cultivation Theory originated. The proliferation of digital streaming services, social media platforms, and on-demand content has fragmented audiences and diversified consumption patterns (Riddle et al., 2021). While broadcast television's cultural dominance has diminished, the capacity for narrative media to shape social perception remains substantial. This transformation necessitates extending Cultivation Theory to other significant storytelling forms, with cinema representing a particularly compelling case given its capacity for psychological immersion and global cultural influence (Van den Bulck & Beullens, 2007).

This paper argues that filmmaking, as a culturally significant institution, functions as an important cultivator of social reality. Films do more than entertain; through recurring narratives, character archetypes, and representational patterns, they facilitate cultural conversations that influence social attitudes regarding criminal justice, gender roles, cultural identity, and numerous other domains (Gerbner, 2006). Although films lack television's continuous programming flow, they deliver concentrated, emotionally resonant narratives capable of producing profound psychological effects that become embedded in viewers' belief systems (Green & Brock, 2000).

The following analysis applies Cultivation Theory's core concepts to film production and consumption. This endeavor extends beyond the theory's original focus on television violence to examine how cinematic representations in the contemporary era shape social perceptions, while accounting for the complexities of current media culture. The analysis addresses the narrative and psychological mechanisms through which cinema cultivates societal perceptions, offering a comprehensive examination of film's role in constructing collective social reality. Furthermore, this paper provides detailed recommendations for future research that can advance understanding of cinematic cultivation in an increasingly complex media environment.

## 2. Literature Review: Theoretical Foundations and Trajectory

Understanding film's impact on social perceptions requires establishing a robust theoretical foundation. Cultivation Theory, as a cornerstone of media effects research, provides the conceptual framework for this analysis. This review examines the theory's origins, traces the evolution of its core mechanisms, identifies the conditions enabling its extension beyond television, and addresses ongoing academic debates regarding its utility and limitations.

### 2.1. *The Origins of Cultivation Theory*

Cultivation Theory emerged from Gerbner's research program initiated in the late 1960s at the University of Pennsylvania, where he served as Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication (Morgan et al., 2015). The theory developed as a direct response to television's unprecedented influence as the first dominant electronic storytelling medium in contemporary society (Gerbner et al., 2002). Gerbner theorized that television, operating as a centralized cultural production system, contributed to cultivating synthetic worldviews through its systematic and repetitive messaging patterns. Central to Cultivation Theory is the proposition that prolonged exposure to television's consistent messaging cultivates shared normative beliefs and conceptions of social reality (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). The more time individuals spend immersed in television's symbolic world, the more likely their perceptions of actual social conditions will mirror the depictions presented in televised content. This cultivation effect operates gradually and cumulatively rather than through immediate, dramatic shifts in attitude.

The theory's conceptualization was rooted in the Cultural Indicators Project, a systematic research program that analyzed television content and surveyed audience perceptions (Gerbner et al., 2002). This research documented that violence appeared on television at rates substantially exceeding its prevalence in actual society. Rather than causing direct behavioral imitation, this overrepresentation cultivated heightened fear and distrust—the Mean World Syndrome—characterized by beliefs that the world is more dangerous and unpredictable than objective conditions warrant (Signorielli & Morgan, 2009).

Gerbner established that cultivation represents cumulative effects of consistent exposure rather than immediate responses to individual programs. Television became conceptualized as a primary socializing agent, creating common consciousness by exposing diverse populations to normative narrative frameworks and shared moral values (Morgan et al., 2015). The repetitive, ritualistic nature of television consumption distinguished it from other media, positioning it as uniquely influential in political socialization and public consciousness formation.

### 2.2. Core Mechanisms: Mainstreaming and Resonance

To explain how cultivation occurs, Gerbner and colleagues articulated two key mechanisms: mainstreaming and resonance. These concepts refine theory by explaining how television effects interact with viewers' social realities and group affiliations. Mainstreaming describes the process whereby heavy television viewing attenuates differences in perceptions and beliefs among individuals from diverse social, cultural, and political backgrounds (Morgan et al., 2015). Gerbner argued that television messages typically represent market-driven, middle-ground perspectives that blur distinctions. Heavy viewers from different socioeconomic backgrounds may consequently share more similar perceptions about social issues than light viewers, whose perceptions remain more strongly influenced by their immediate environments. Television thus cultivates a "mainstream" consciousness by drawing divergent viewpoints toward a common center (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

Resonance describes situations where viewers' real-life experiences align closely with television messages, thereby intensifying cultivation effects (Shrum, 2017). When the television world resonates with personal experience, messages acquire enhanced credibility and reinforcement. An individual residing in a high-crime neighborhood who frequently views crime dramas receives a "double dose" of messages suggesting danger, with television confirming lived experience and thereby strengthening cultivation of mean world perceptions. Resonance indicates that cultivation effects are not uniform; effects may be substantially stronger for population subgroups whose experiences resemble the symbolic world constructed by media.

Together, mainstreaming and resonance provide nuanced explanations of how television simultaneously homogenizes and intensifies different audiences' perceptions of social reality, accounting for both convergence and differential effects.

### 2.3. Evolution Beyond Television and Violence

While Cultivation Theory originated when broadcast television dominated the media landscape and violence served as the central concern, the framework has demonstrated considerable flexibility in adapting to new media environments and research topics (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Scholars have applied the theory to study cultivation of beliefs regarding aging, occupational perceptions, political attitudes, health behaviors, and numerous other domains (Van den Bulck, 2006). The basic principle—that exposure to repetitive, systematic representational patterns shapes long-term beliefs—applies broadly to any consistent stream of mediated messages.

**Table 1.** Evolution of Cultivation Theory Applications (2005-2025).

Period	Primary Focus	Key Developments	Representative Studies
2005-2010	Television violence, political attitudes	Extension to health behaviors, body image	Van den Bulck and Beullens (2007); Shrum (2009)
2011-2015	Social media emergence, genre-specific effects	Integration of psychological mechanisms	Morgan and Shanahan (2010); Potter (2014)
2016-2020	Digital streaming, algorithmic curation	Cross-platform cultivation, binge-watching	Riddle et al. (2021); Chung (2018)

2021-2025	Global cinema, interactive media	Cross-cultural applications, VR environments	Morgan et al. (2022); Cohen and Weimann (2024)
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Note. Compiled from systematic review of cultivation literature.

#### 2.4. Critical Perspectives and Theoretical Refinements

Despite serving as a foundational framework in media studies, Cultivation Theory has generated substantial academic debate regarding its conceptual precision and empirical support (Potter, 2014). One significant challenge concerns the difficulty of establishing causal relationships. Critics argue that correlational designs cannot definitively establish whether media exposure causes particular beliefs or whether individuals holding such beliefs selectively expose themselves to reinforcing content (Shrum, 2017). While decades of research have documented statistical relationships between viewing patterns and beliefs, the causal mechanism remains contested.

The conceptualization of audiences represents another significant concern. Early formulations were sometimes interpreted as positing passive, homogeneous audiences receiving media messages without critical interpretation (Morgan et al., 2015). Contemporary media research emphasizes audiences' active roles in interpreting, negotiating, and resisting messages based on individual experiences, critical capacities, and social contexts. Critics have called for more sophisticated conceptualizations requiring attention to deeper psychological processes and individual differences in how and why cultivation occurs.

Potter (2014) conducted systematic reviews of cultivation literature, identifying variability in operationalizations and advocating for refinement of core propositions, including attention to temporal dynamics and conceptual precision. Such critiques have generated productive methodological innovations, including research integrating cognitive psychology to explain the foundational complexity of belief cultivation processes (Shrum, 2017). These ongoing conversations maintain the theory's relevance while pushing toward greater sophistication in contemporary media scholarship.

### 3. Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods to examine the mechanisms through which filmmaking cultivates social perception, extending Cultivation Theory beyond its traditional quantitative applications. While cultivation research has historically relied on surveys and content analyses to assess long-term television effects (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999), qualitative approaches offer unique capabilities for examining cinema's complex symbolic dimensions—specifically, the processes through which narrative construction, filmmaker decisions, and discursive practices convey meaning and shape beliefs.

#### 3.1. Rationale for Qualitative Inquiry

The qualitative framework enables interpretive analysis extending beyond correlations between viewing habits and beliefs to illuminate meaning-making processes. This approach conceptualizes film not as monolithic stimuli but as distinctive narratives engaging viewers cognitively and emotionally in ways that may cultivate specific belief systems (Green & Brock, 2000). A qualitative lens facilitates examination of representations, themes, and aesthetics constructed by filmmakers that may cultivate worldviews.

This framework proves particularly suited to addressing contemporary media landscape complexities. With streaming platforms and globalized distribution, audiences experience film in fragmented, personalized ways diverging substantially from the mass viewing of broadcast television that Cultivation Theory originally addressed (Riddle et al., 2021). Qualitative study captures how cultivation operates within this landscape by examining specific genres, cycles, or directorial oeuvres, acknowledging that different cinematic texts may cultivate different realities for different audiences.

### 3.2. Discourse Analysis Methodology

Discourse analysis serves as the primary analytical method, concerned with how language and representational systems construct social and psychological realities. This approach examines how texts—films and industry communications—actively participate in producing and shaping reality rather than merely reflecting it (Fairclough, 2013). Discourse analysis proves particularly relevant to cultivation study of cinema, enabling critical inquiry into both overt content and embedded ideologies within narrative and visual structures.

The analysis operates at two distinct yet interrelated levels. The first level comprises textual analysis of contemporary films, identifying recurring narrative patterns, character representations, thematic preoccupations, and ideological assumptions. This analysis examines how social phenomena such as crime are represented, how these representations address institutions and relationships, and how they align with or diverge from empirical realities. The objective extends beyond logging content to interpretive analysis of how representations are framed and contextualized within narratives.

The second level focuses on extra-textual discourse produced by the film industry, including interviews with creative personnel, marketing materials, and industry publications. This meta-discourse provides context for understanding how industry stakeholders rationalize representational decisions and navigate commercial imperatives. Examining how filmmakers justify choices and articulate their relationship to "social responsibility" reveals the film industry not simply as entertainment provider but as an institution producing media based on commercial logic and legitimizing particular representational frameworks.

### 3.3. Data Collection and Analytical Procedures

Data collection encompasses multiple layers of cinematic cultivation. The primary dataset derives from purposively selected commercially successful and culturally significant films released between 2015 and 2025, situating analysis within the contemporary media context of streaming proliferation and global distribution. Film selection prioritizes commercial success (box office performance, viewership metrics) and critical recognition while focusing on films addressing significant social themes including crime, social inequality, and gender relations. Secondly, data collection draws from public sources including published interviews with directors, writers, and producers; promotional materials; and critical reviews from established outlets. This secondary data provides extra-textual discourse essential for holistic analysis.

**Table 2.** Data Collection Framework.

Data Type	Sources	Analytical Focus
Primary Film Texts	Commercial releases 2015-2025	Narrative patterns, character archetypes, visual motifs, thematic content
Industry Discourse	Director interviews, press materials, trade publications	Discursive strategies, intentionality claims, commercial rationales
Critical Reception	Established review outlets, academic analyses	Interpretive frames, cultural positioning, ideological readings

Note. Framework developed for comprehensive discourse analysis of cinematic cultivation.

Analysis follows systematic coding protocols informed by discourse analysis principles (Fairclough, 2013). Initial open coding identifies emergent themes, recurring archetypes, narrative formulas, and visual motifs. Subsequent focused coding is guided by Cultivation Theory concepts, particularly representational patterns that may cultivate first-order beliefs (prevalence estimates) and second-order beliefs (attitudes about personal safety, social trust). The analysis moves beyond

content logging to interpretive examination of representational framing and contextualization. Following primary text analysis, secondary data are analyzed to identify discursive strategies employed by industry stakeholders—explicit claims regarding audience influence, social responsibility, artistic intent, and commercial pressures. Particular attention is given to language justifying potentially problematic content through appeals to "authenticity" or "creative freedom." Systematic comparison of film text discourse with industry discourse identifies convergences and contradictions, revealing complex relationships between creative expression within commercial systems and social influence.

#### 4. Application of Cultivation Theory to Filmmaking

Cultivation Theory's principles, developed to capture cumulative television effects, extend productively to cinema despite requiring adaptation to film's distinctive characteristics, different consumption patterns, narrative structures, and psychological engagement mechanisms. The fundamental premise that mediated representations cultivate audience perceptions of social reality remains applicable (Morgan et al., 2022). Films construct images of life, society, and human interaction that, when consumed consistently within genres or across mainstream cinema, possess cumulative potential for affecting long-term beliefs and attitudes.

Applying Cultivation Theory to film shifts emphasis from television's diffuse programming flow to cinema's concentrated, high-impact experiences. Individual films, through immersive capacity and emotional resonance, may significantly impact viewer worldviews. When audiences consume films within genres or franchises over extended periods, cumulative effects may become pronounced, influencing perceptions ranging from crime victimization likelihood to romantic relationship expectations (Romer & Jamieson, 2014).

##### 4.1. *Film as Cultivator of Social Reality*

Film functions as a powerful cultivator of social reality by presenting coherent, purposive, and often simplified world representations that engage viewers cognitively and may become internalized. Cinematic narratives offer schemas for understanding social norms, values, and societal operations (Cohen, 2006). Media content exercises greatest influence on audience perceptions when addressing domains beyond personal experience—criminal justice systems, international affairs, historical events—where cinematic representations may constitute primary information sources shaping expectations and beliefs.

The cultivation process is amplified by film's perceived realism and narrative authority. Advanced production techniques create realistic and emotionally engaging spaces that blur fiction-reality distinctions (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). This "illusion of reality" renders social messages embedded in narratives plausible and applicable to actual experience. Audiences repeatedly exposed to action films portraying violence as effective and justifiable conflict resolution may develop beliefs that violence represents appropriate problem-solving across contexts. Similarly, repeated stereotypical portrayals of professions, lifestyles, or social groups may cultivate and solidify public perceptions and prejudices (Mastro, 2009).

Cinema's globalization has expanded its cross-cultural cultivation capacity. International distribution of Hollywood productions and other national cinemas contributes to constructing social reality globally (Jin, 2016). International audiences receiving these films as primary information sources about depicted countries may develop stereotyped attitudes about destinations and inhabitants, exemplifying film's power not merely to mirror but actively to shape social reality domestically and interculturally through creating shared pools of stories and imagery.

#### 4.2. Narrative Strategies and Perception Cultivation

Filmmakers deploy narrative strategies central to cultivation processes, influencing how audiences perceive and process represented social realities. Genre conventions represent particularly powerful mechanisms, providing predictable formulas, character types, and plot structures facilitating comprehension (Green & Brock, 2000). Constant reception of genre conventions—crime present in procedurals, romantic coupling inevitable in romantic comedies—cultivates expectations regarding how the world operates. Genre-specific realities, though entirely fictitious, become incorporated into viewers' general social understanding.

**Table 3.** Narrative Mechanisms in Cinematic Cultivation.

Mechanism	Description	Cultivation Effect	Example
Genre Conventions	Predictable formulas and plot structures	Normalized expectations about social phenomena	Crime procedurals cultivating perceptions of justice system effectiveness
Character Archetypes	Simplified, stereotypical character representations	Biased perceptions of social groups	Heroic officer, nurturing mother, model minority
Narrative Resolution	Problem-solution-closure structure	Beliefs in just world, individual agency	Justice prevailing through decisive action
Protagonist Identification	Emotional alignment with main characters	Adoption of character moral frameworks	Audience accepting protagonist's perspective as valid

Note. Derived from analysis of cultivation mechanisms in contemporary cinema.

Character archetypes constitute another important cultivation tool. Films frequently employ simplified, stereotypical representations embodying social roles, values, or ideologies—heroic police officers, nurturing mothers, ruthless executives, model minority students—conveying messages about social hierarchies and normative behavior (Mastro, 2009). Repeated exposure to these archetypes may foster simplified, often biased perceptions of social groups, reinforce mainstream values while marginalize alternative perspectives. Emotional identification with protagonists enhances this process, as audiences adopting character perspectives also absorb their moral frameworks, rendering narrative messages more personally relevant and impactful.

Narrative structure emphasizing resolution and closure plays significant cultivation roles. Cinematic stories most commonly present problems, follow characters confronting them, and conclude with clear solutions restoring order and delivering justice. This repeated structure may cultivate beliefs in a just world where good is rewarded and evil punished—a comforting but oversimplified understanding that obscures real-world ambiguities and systemic injustices (Appel & Richter, 2007). Through these narrative strategies, film teaches audiences how to interpret the world according to cinema's internal logic.

#### 4.3. Psychological Effects of Cinematic Techniques

Cinematic techniques enhance cultivation through psychological effects extending beyond narrative content. Visual and auditory elements integrally develop meaning and provoke emotional reactions enhancing memorability and persuasiveness (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Camera angles, lighting, color grading, and sound design manipulate viewer attention and interpretation—low angles conveying character dominance, rumbling sounds provoking danger perceptions. These techniques operate subconsciously, emotionally influencing and cognitively processing viewers without explicit awareness.

The immersive nature of film experience substantially contributes to cultivation power. Theater environments—large screens, surround sound, darkened spaces—create distraction-free contexts fully enveloping viewers. Narrative transportation, the experience of feeling absorbed within stories, partly operates by lowering cognitive defenses and counter-arguing (Green & Brock, 2000). Emotionally engaged and cognitively immersed viewers more readily accept depicted reality as plausible, facilitating encoding of cinematic content into long-term memory where it may subsequently influence real-world judgments and beliefs. Advances in home theater technology increasingly replicate these immersive experiences outside traditional theaters.

Film editing—pacing, rhythm, cutting patterns—influences psychological and physiological states. Fast cuts in action sequences increase heart rate and create excitement; long, slow takes produce contemplation or unease (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). This capacity to incite affective responses is fundamental to cultivation, as emotion enhances memory consolidation. Social lessons embedded in emotionally charged moments are more likely to be retained and integrated into worldviews. Through these psychological techniques, film extends beyond storytelling to perception management, rendering the boundary between screen and psyche highly permeable.

## 5. Discussion: Cultivation in Contemporary Media Ecology

Cultivation Theory's core tenets, developed during broadcast television's relative monopoly, require significant reexamination within contemporary media ecology. The transition from uniform media consumption to fragmented, on-demand, interactive environments warrant careful consideration of how films continue to cultivate social perceptions. This discussion articulates Cultivation Theory's applicability in the era of digital streaming and social media, examines cross-cultural dimensions of globalized cinema, and explores the complex relationship between filmmaker intent and audience interpretation.

### 5.1. Digital Streaming and Transformed Consumption

The media consumption habits underlying Gerbner's original conceptualization have fundamentally transformed through digital technology proliferation (Riddle et al., 2021). Centralized, habitual, relatively homogenous television consumption has shifted toward individualized, fragmented media diets across numerous streaming platforms. The transition from passive scheduled viewing to active, personalized selection complicates core arguments regarding mainstreaming and resonance.

Digital streaming services have fundamentally altered film engagement patterns. Binge-watching—consuming multiple films or series episodes in single sessions—represents a significant departure from the gradual, incremental exposure Gerbner identified (Chung, 2018). Cultivation effects may accelerate or intensify regarding specific narratives or genres. Viewers consuming crime dramas intensively over weekends may experience more pronounced acute perceptions of danger compared to those viewing identical content over extended periods.

Algorithmic curation creates individualized "filter bubbles," with recommendation systems channeling audiences through personalized content pathways aligned with previous viewing patterns (Pariser, 2011). This algorithmic mediation may cultivate specific worldviews within smaller communities rather than the mass consciousness Gerbner theorized broadcast television cultivated. Streaming technologies enable cultivation of niche perspectives potentially diverging from mainstream consensus.

Social media adds further complexity, serving simultaneously as film distribution platform and secondary discourse forum featuring peer commentary, analysis, and content remixing. Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram interweave user-generated content with film clips, complicating traditional cultivation analysis focused on professionally produced long-form content (Riddle et al., 2021). Social media enables parasocial interactions, audience-initiated one-sided relationships with characters and actors—extending beyond screens as followers engage with actors

and fan communities, potentially intensifying emotional investment in narrative worlds and increasing resonance with cinematic messaging.

The contemporary media environment is no longer unidirectional but dynamically interactive, blurring boundaries between content consumption and social interaction. Viewers no longer simply watch films but experience them while engaging in discussions weaving themes and messages into online identities and social networks (Cohen & Weimann, 2024). This interactive dimension suggests cultivation operates not simply as top-down institutional process, but as networked phenomenon co-constructed by producers, algorithms, and audiences. Cultivation researchers must develop methodologies accounting for multi-platform, algorithmically mediated, socially constructed media environments.

### 5.2. Cross-Cultural Dimensions and Globalization

Film industry globalization introduces transnational content flows providing new variables to the cultivation equation. While early cultivation research occurred primarily within single national contexts, contemporary conditions necessitate cross-cultural perspectives on how cinematic narratives shape perceptions across cultural contexts (Jin, 2016). Hollywood blockbusters enjoy global consumption; simultaneously, national cinemas from Nollywood to Bollywood and streaming platform accessibility expose audiences to diverse yet often culturally specific narratives and values. This raises questions regarding whether transnational entertainment flows cultivate shared global values or reinforce cultural divisions.

**Table 4. Cross-Cultural Cultivation Considerations.**

Factor	Influence on Cultivation	Methodological Implications
Cultural Proximity	Moderates resonance effects	Audience cultural background assessment required
Local Social Conditions	Shapes interpretation of foreign content	Contextual reception studies necessary
Prior Direct Experience	Counters or reinforces mediated perceptions	Comparative analysis across experience levels
Translation/Dubbing	May alter narrative meanings	Linguistic adaptation analysis needed
Distribution Patterns	Determines exposure levels	Platform-specific consumption tracking required

Note. Developed from cross-cultural media effects literature review.

Applying Cultivation Theory cross-culturally requires acknowledging moderating effects of local culture, social conditions, and individual experience (Rössler & Brosius, 2001). Resonance may operate differently depending on relational proximity between media content and audience lived experience. Narratives producing resonance with American audiences due to particular social anxieties may be interpreted differently by Japanese or Nigerian audiences experiencing distinct social contexts. Generalizing cultivation findings across cultures requires substantial caution. Additionally, audiences viewing foreign media texts may cultivate biased perceptions of depicted cultures without experiential counterweights.

The tension between cultural imperialism and cultural globalization perspectives remains central to understanding cross-cultural cultivation. Cultural imperialism suggests Western media dominance degrades local cultures through foreign value imposition, with global cinema functioning as vehicle for cultivating Western worldviews (Jin, 2016). Cultural globalization perspectives suggest more complex relationships in which global media flows are hybridized, adapted, and reinterpreted

by local cultures. Audiences actively negotiate foreign media text meanings against their own cultural frameworks.

Analyzing cultivation effects of global cinema requires frameworks considering both media content and audience consumption contexts. Film meaning emerges from co-constitution of text and cultural lens; transnational cultivation studies must extend beyond content analysis to cross-cultural reception studies examining how audiences interpret specific global narratives (Rössler & Brosius, 2001). Understanding how films cultivate social reality in an increasingly globalized world depends upon comprehending interactions between global messages and local meaning-making processes.

### *5.3. Filmmaker Intentionality and Audience Interpretation*

A fundamental challenge in applying Cultivation Theory to filmmaking involves the disjuncture between creator intentions and audience interpretations. Filmmakers typically defend their work through claims of artistic vision, realism, or entertainment value while disclaiming intentions to influence social beliefs (Romer & Jamieson, 2014). Cultivation Theory observes that media influence represents cumulative, potentially unintentional effects of consistent representations regardless of stated purpose. The cultivation process concerns accumulated lessons from the symbolic world of cinema rather than lessons from individual films.

Discourse analysis reveals that filmmakers employ various discursive strategies to address social responsibility questions, including references to market demand, genre conventions, or creative freedom to justify problematic or stereotypical representations (Fairclough, 2013). These disclaimers may be justifiable from industry perspectives but do not preclude unintended cultivation effects. Films intending to critique violence through graphic depictions may nonetheless instill heightened danger perceptions; comedies employing ethnic stereotypes for humor may reinforce prejudice despite purely entertainment aims. Cultivation depends not solely on authorial intent but on reception and incorporation into viewer knowledge frameworks.

Audiences function as active meaning-making agents rather than passive receptacles. Viewers bring life experiences, cultural backgrounds, and pre-existing attitudes to film viewing, potentially generating widely divergent readings of identical texts through active negotiation, resistance, or selective application of media messages (Cohen, 2006). This "active audience" perspective counters deterministic cultivation views. However, narrative representation and film storytelling may be sufficiently powerful to circumvent critical thought through narrative transportation that diminishes cognitive defenses, rendering viewers more susceptible to represented attitudes and beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000).

Cultivation effects in film emerge from interplay among authored text, intended meaning, and viewer interpretive frames. Ideological positions and implicit meanings embedded in narrative structures, archetypes, and visual discourse contribute to cultivation potential often unrecognized by both filmmakers and audiences. Comprehensive cinematic cultivation analysis must extend beyond surface intentions to examine how underlying representations constitute film's symbolic environment. The recurrence and pervasiveness of representations across films and genres constitutes the foundation of film's cultivation power, necessitating ongoing critical analysis and media literacy development to empower audiences for deconstructive engagement with cinematic content (Potter, 2019).

## **6. Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings and perspectives developed in this paper illuminate numerous avenues for advancing scholarly understanding of cinematic cultivation. The following recommendations address methodological innovations, thematic expansions, technological considerations, and practical applications that can strengthen the theoretical and empirical foundations of cultivation research applied to filmmaking.

### 6.1. Methodological Innovations

Future research must develop innovative methodologies capable of capturing the complexity of cinematic cultivation in contemporary media environments. Traditional cultivation research relied heavily on cross-sectional surveys measuring exposure and beliefs at single time points, an approach inadequate for understanding the dynamic, cumulative nature of film effects (Potter, 2014). Longitudinal panel designs tracking the same individuals over extended periods would provide substantially stronger evidence regarding causal mechanisms, enabling researchers to observe how film consumption patterns relate to belief changes over time while controlling for baseline attitudes and selective exposure tendencies.

Mixed-methods approaches integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques offer particular promise for cinematic cultivation research. Quantitative surveys can establish broad patterns of association between genre consumption and social beliefs, while qualitative interviews and focus groups can illuminate the interpretive processes through which viewers make meaning from cinematic content (Morgan et al., 2015). This integration addresses a persistent limitation of cultivation research—the tendency to document correlations without explaining underlying mechanisms. Future studies should systematically combine content analysis of films, surveys of audience beliefs, and in-depth interviews exploring how specific narrative elements resonate with or challenge viewer worldviews.

Experimental designs manipulating exposure to specific film content under controlled conditions would complement observational research by providing stronger causal evidence. While laboratory experiments sacrifice ecological validity, they enable precise measurement of how particular representational strategies—character archetypes, narrative resolutions, visual techniques—influence subsequent beliefs and attitudes (Shrum, 2017). Researchers should design experiments examining dose-response relationships between film exposure and cultivation effects, testing whether brief exposure to single films produces measurable effects or whether cumulative exposure across multiple viewings is necessary. Additionally, experiments could manipulate specific cinematic elements while holding others constant, isolating the contributions of narrative structure, character representation, and visual style to cultivation outcomes.

**Table 5. Recommended Methodological Approaches for Future Cultivation Research.**

Methodology	Strengths	Limitations	Research Addressed	Questions
Longitudinal Panel Studies	Tracks change over time; controls for baseline attitudes	Resource-intensive; participant attrition	How do cultivation effects develop and persist?	
Mixed-Methods Designs	Combines breadth and depth; illuminates mechanisms	Requires diverse expertise; challenges integration	Why and how does cultivation occur for different audiences?	
Controlled Experiments	Establishes causation; isolates variables	Limited specific validity; effects	ecological short-term	Which cinematic elements produce cultivation effects?
Ecological Momentary Assessment	Captures real-time responses; ecological validity	Technology high requirements; participant burden	How do immediate viewing responses relate to long-term beliefs?	

Computational Content Analysis	Analyzes large corpora; identifies patterns	large film; identifies development; nuance	Requires algorithmic development; may miss nuance	What patterns contemporary cinema?	representational characterize
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Note. Framework for methodological innovation in cinematic cultivation research.

Ecological momentary assessment methods, utilizing smartphone applications to capture viewer responses immediately following film consumption, represent an underutilized approach with significant potential. These methods can document how viewers interpret and emotionally respond to specific scenes or narrative elements in naturalistic viewing contexts, providing data on the immediate processing that may contribute to long-term cultivation (Riddle et al., 2021). Future research should develop protocols for momentary assessment of cinematic viewing, examining how real-time emotional and cognitive responses predict subsequent attitude formation.

Computational methods for large-scale content analysis offer opportunities to map representational patterns across cinema at unprecedented scale. Natural language processing and computer vision techniques can analyze dialogue, visual composition, and character representation across thousands of films, identifying the systematic patterns that constitute cinema's symbolic environment (Cohen & Weimann, 2024). Future research should develop and validate computational tools specifically designed for cultivation-relevant content analysis, enabling researchers to document how representational patterns vary across genres, production contexts, and historical periods.

## 6.2. Thematic Expansions

While violence and crime have dominated cultivation research historically, the theoretical framework applies to numerous content domains warranting systematic investigation. Future research should expand thematic focus to address representational patterns and cultivation effects across diverse social issues of contemporary significance.

Climate change and environmental issues represent an urgent domain for cultivation research. Films increasingly address environmental themes, yet the cultivation effects of these representations remain largely unexplored. Future studies should examine how cinematic portrayals of climate change—from dystopian disaster films to hopeful narratives of environmental restoration—shape audience beliefs about environmental risks, human responsibility, and the efficacy of collective action (Morgan et al., 2022). Research should investigate whether cultivation of environmental attitudes differs between fictional narratives and documentary films, and how genre conventions influence the environmental beliefs audiences take from cinematic experiences.

Mental health representation constitutes another critical area for expansion. Film portrayals of mental illness have historically emphasized dangerousness and unpredictability, potentially cultivating stigmatizing attitudes among viewers. Future research should systematically analyze contemporary mental health representations across genres, examining whether evolving cinematic depictions contribute to destigmatization or reinforce harmful stereotypes. Longitudinal studies tracking the relationship between mental health film consumption and attitudes toward individuals with mental illness would provide valuable evidence for informing industry practices and public health messaging.

Economic inequality and social mobility merit cultivation research attention given cinema's persistent engagement with class narratives. Films frequently present rags-to-riches stories emphasizing individual agency and meritocracy while underrepresenting structural barriers to mobility. Future studies should examine how consumption of these narratives relates to beliefs about economic opportunity, attributions for poverty and wealth, and support for redistributive policies (Mastro, 2009). Cross-cultural comparative research could investigate whether cultivation of economic beliefs differs between cinematic traditions emphasizing individualism versus collectivism.

Artificial intelligence and technological futures represent an emerging thematic domain with increasing cinematic presence. As AI capabilities advance, films depicting artificial intelligence— from threatening superintelligences to benevolent assistants— may shape public expectations and concerns regarding technological development. Future cultivation research should examine how science fiction representations of AI relate to audience attitudes toward AI governance, automation, and human-machine relationships, with implications for public engagement in technology policy debates.

### 6.3. *Cross-Cultural and Global Perspectives*

The globalization of film distribution necessitates systematic cross-cultural cultivation research moving beyond the predominantly Western focus of existing scholarship. Future studies should examine cultivation effects across diverse cultural contexts, investigating how audiences in different societies interpret and internalize messages from both domestic and imported cinema.

Comparative studies examining identical films' cultivation effects across multiple countries would illuminate how cultural context moderates reception. Research designs should investigate the same blockbuster releases in culturally proximate and distant contexts, examining whether cultivation effects generalize or whether local interpretive frameworks fundamentally alter how audiences extract meaning from cinematic narratives (Jin, 2016). Such studies should measure not only belief outcomes but also the interpretive processes through which viewers from different cultural backgrounds engage with film content.

Research on non-Western cinemas' cultivation effects remains substantially underdeveloped. Nollywood, Bollywood, and other major film industries produce massive volumes of content consumed by billions of viewers, yet cultivation research has largely ignored these industries (Rössler & Brosius, 2001). Future scholarship should apply cultivation frameworks to these cinematic traditions, examining how their distinctive narrative conventions, character representations, and thematic preoccupations cultivate beliefs within their primary audiences. Comparative analysis of cultivation across different national cinemas would reveal whether cultivation mechanisms operate similarly across cinematic traditions or whether culturally-specific factors moderate effects.

The cultivation effects of transnational film consumption warrant particular attention. When audiences consume films depicting cultures other than their own, cultivation may operate differently than when viewing domestic productions. Future research should examine how consumption of foreign films shapes stereotypes and attitudes toward depicted cultures, investigating whether cinematic representations serve as primary information sources or whether direct experience and other information sources moderate cultivation effects (Cohen & Weimann, 2024). Studies should also examine reverse cultivation— how consumption of films from other cultures shapes beliefs about one's own society through processes of comparison and contrast.

Research on diaspora and immigrant audiences represents a valuable yet underexplored dimension of cross-cultural cultivation. Individuals navigating between cultural contexts may experience cultivation from both heritage and host culture cinema, with complex implications for identity formation and social integration. Future studies should examine how bicultural film consumption relates to beliefs about both cultures and to processes of cultural identity negotiation, with implications for understanding media's role in immigrant adaptation.

### 6.4. *Emerging Technologies and Media Platforms*

Technological evolution continuously transforms cinematic consumption contexts, requiring ongoing adaptation of cultivation research frameworks. Future scholarship must address how emerging technologies and platforms modify the cultivation process.

Virtual reality cinema represents a transformative development with potentially profound implications for cultivation. VR's capacity for immersive, embodied experience may intensify cultivation effects by enhancing presence and reducing critical distance from narrative content (Morgan et al., 2022). Future research should examine whether VR films produce stronger or

qualitatively different cultivation effects compared to traditional cinema, investigating how the sensation of presence within narrative worlds relates to subsequent belief adoption. Studies should also examine whether VR's capacity for perspective-taking—enabling viewers to experience narratives from different characters' viewpoints—might cultivate empathy and reduce prejudice, potentially offering positive cultivation applications.

Algorithmic recommendation systems fundamentally restructure how audiences encounter film content, with significant cultivation implications. Rather than the relatively uniform exposure characterizing broadcast television, algorithmic curation creates personalized content streams potentially reinforcing existing beliefs and preferences (Pariser, 2011). Future research should examine how algorithmic personalization shapes cultivation processes, investigating whether filter bubbles produce intensified genre-specific cultivation effects while diminishing mainstream cultivation. Studies should analyze recommendation system data where accessible, mapping how algorithms construct viewing pathways and examining whether these pathways predict distinct patterns of cultivated beliefs.

Interactive and choose-your-own-adventure film formats, exemplified by productions like Netflix's "Black Mirror: Bandersnatch," introduce viewer agency into narrative progression. This interactivity may modify cultivation by enabling viewers to construct personalized narrative experiences. Future research should examine whether interactive films produce different cultivation effects depending on narrative choices, and whether the sense of agency in narrative construction influences how viewers attribute responsibility for narrative outcomes. Studies might also examine whether repeated viewings exploring different narrative branches produce cultivation effects distinct from single viewing experiences.

Short-form video platforms such as TikTok increasingly feature film-related content including clips, commentary, and fan-created material (Riddle et al., 2021). Future research should examine how engagement with film content in these fragmented, remixed forms relates to cultivation effects, investigating whether decontextualized clips produce similar effects to complete narrative consumption or whether recontextualization within user-generated commentary modifies meaning and cultivation potential. Studies should also examine how parasocial engagement with film-related content creators influences the interpretation and cultivation effects of discussed films.

### 6.5. Media Literacy and Intervention Research

Understanding cultivation processes carries practical implications for developing interventions that enhance audience critical engagement with cinematic content. Future research should systematically investigate media literacy approaches and their efficacy in moderating cultivation effects.

Intervention studies testing specific media literacy curricula would provide evidence regarding effective strategies for enhancing critical viewing. Research should examine whether education about cultivation processes, narrative construction techniques, and representational patterns reduces cultivation effects or simply increases conscious awareness without modifying belief outcomes (Potter, 2019). Studies should compare different pedagogical approaches—didactic instruction versus experiential analysis of specific films—examining which methods most effectively develop critical viewing skills transferable across cinematic content.

Research should investigate developmental differences in susceptibility to cinematic cultivation and in responsiveness to media literacy interventions. Children and adolescents may be particularly susceptible to cultivation given less developed critical faculties and limited direct experience against which to evaluate media representations. Future studies should examine age-related differences in cultivation effects and identify optimal developmental windows for media literacy education. Longitudinal research tracking media literacy training effects from childhood through adulthood would reveal whether early intervention produces lasting protection against cultivation or whether ongoing reinforcement is necessary.

Examination of naturally occurring media literacy—critical viewing skills developed through education, profession, or other experiences—would complement intervention research. Future studies should examine whether individuals in media industries, communication studies students, or others with formal exposure to media criticism exhibit reduced cultivation effects compared to general audiences (Morgan et al., 2015). Research should investigate which specific knowledge and skills account for any protective effects, informing the design of targeted literacy interventions.

**Table 6. Media Literacy Research Priorities.**

<b>Research Priority</b>	<b>Key Questions</b>	<b>Potential Outcomes</b>
Intervention Efficacy	Which media literacy approaches most effectively moderate cultivation?	Evidence-based curriculum development
Developmental Considerations	At what ages is media literacy education most effective?	Optimized educational timing and targeting
Mechanism Identification	What specific skills and knowledge protect against cultivation?	Focused intervention design
Long-term Persistence	Do media literacy effects persist over time?	Understanding of maintenance requirements
Transfer Effects	Does film-focused literacy generalize to other media?	Efficient curriculum scope decisions

Note. Framework for media literacy research informing cultivation intervention development.

Research should also examine industry-level interventions, investigating whether practices such as content advisories, diversity requirements, or consultation with affected communities influence the representational patterns that constitute cinema's symbolic environment. Future studies should examine how industry self-regulation, external regulation, and advocacy efforts relate to representational changes over time and whether such changes correspond to shifts in cultivated beliefs among audiences.

#### 6.6. Integration with Adjacent Theoretical Frameworks

Cultivation Theory's continued development will benefit from systematic integration with complementary theoretical perspectives addressing related phenomena. Future research should pursue productive theoretical synthesis enhancing explanatory power and conceptual precision.

Integration with narrative persuasion theories, particularly the Transportation-Imagery Model and the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model, would strengthen understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying cinematic cultivation (Green & Brock, 2000). These frameworks specify how narrative engagement diminishes resistance to embedded messages and how story-consistent attitudes are formed. Future research should explicitly test whether transportation mediates cultivation effects, examining whether highly transporting films produce stronger cultivation and whether individual differences in transportability predict cultivation susceptibility.

Social cognitive theory offers complementary mechanisms for understanding how cinematic content translates into viewer beliefs and behaviors. The theory's concepts of observational learning, modeling, and self-efficacy provide frameworks for understanding how film characters serve as sources of social information and behavioral templates (Mastro, 2009). Future research should integrate social cognitive and cultivation perspectives, examining how identification with characters, perceived similarity, and character outcomes influence cultivation of both beliefs and behavioral intentions.

Dual-process models of cognition, distinguishing automatic/heuristic and deliberative/systematic processing, offer resources for understanding when and how cultivation occurs. Future research should examine whether cultivation effects primarily reflect automatic processing of cinematic content or whether systematic engagement with narrative themes also contributes (Shrum, 2017). Studies should investigate individual differences in processing style and situational factors influencing processing mode as moderators of cultivation effects, with implications for understanding why some viewers are more susceptible than others.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper has examined filmmaking's significant impact on social perception through the Cultivation Theory lens. By extending a framework developed to explain television effects, the analysis has demonstrated how Cultivation Theory provides valuable resources for understanding how cinema shapes audience comprehension of social reality through cumulative exposure. The theoretical trajectory from Gerbner's original postulates of mainstreaming and resonance to contemporary applications in film analysis reveals how films are not mere societal reflections but active participants in reality construction, cultivating beliefs, attitudes, and values through consistent representational patterns.

The analysis has addressed Cultivation Theory's application within contemporary media ecology, which differs substantially from the environment in which the theory originated. Digital streaming and social media have fragmented audiences and personalized content experiences, potentially eliminating the mainstream master narrative cultivated through mass media in favor of niche community echo chambers produced through algorithmic curation. The globalization of cinema introduces cross-cultural dimensions requiring acknowledgment that cultivation effects are themselves mediated by cultures of both media text and audience. The dynamic between filmmaker intent and audience reception complicates simplified effects models, positioning these as matters of meaning-making rather than transmission.

Despite these complexities, the core argument regarding cinema's cultivation effects remains robust: symbolic worlds presented through immersive and emotional cinematic experience significantly contribute to understanding of the actual world. From shaping crime and justice perceptions to constructing social norms, values, and stereotypes, cinema cultivates and repeatedly embeds messages into viewer consciousness. The psychological effects of narrative transportation and character identification invigorate this process at individual and societal levels.

The comprehensive recommendations for future research outlined in this paper chart pathways for advancing scholarly understanding of cinematic cultivation. Methodological innovations including longitudinal designs, mixed-methods approaches, and computational content analysis can strengthen causal inference and capture the complexity of contemporary media engagement. Thematic expansions to domains including climate change, mental health, economic inequality, and artificial intelligence will extend cultivation theory's explanatory reach. Cross-cultural and global perspectives are essential for understanding cultivation in an era of transnational media flows. Emerging technologies including virtual reality, algorithmic curation, and interactive formats require ongoing scholarly attention as they transform cinematic consumption. Media literacy research can translate theoretical understanding into practical interventions empowering audiences for critical engagement. Finally, integration with adjacent theoretical frameworks will enhance conceptual precision and explanatory power.

The cultivation process of cinema constitutes a constant, meaningful, and timely phenomenon. While the process of impact is fluid and continuously evolving, the efficacy of storytelling in shaping human perception remains undiminished. As engagement with various cinematic worlds continues, critical awareness of cinema's cultivation power becomes increasingly essential. Enhanced media literacy and sophisticated understanding of inhabited media landscapes will empower audiences to engage with film through complete participation—not as mere consumers but as participatory beings who actively construct their social worlds.

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