



# An examination of the effects of print media exposure and contact on subjective social reality and acculturation attitudes

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## Abstract

This study draws upon cultivation theory, acculturation theory, and works on intergroup relations to examine the effects of print media exposure and contact on subjective social reality and acculturation attitudes of Chinese immigrants in Australia. Data was gathered via a survey administered to 265 respondents with Chinese origin. Results indicate that exposure to mainstream newspapers is only positively related to one indicator of subjective reality, namely, outgroup perception whereas exposure to ethnic newspapers was not significantly related to any of the indicators of subjective reality. Acculturation attitudes, on the other hand, are more closely related to group perception and contact but not closely associated with exposure to print media. These findings have again challenged the “direct effect” assumption of cultivation theory, paved the ground for combining mediated communication variables with interpersonal communication variables in acculturation research and suggested policy implications for interethnic coexistence.

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*Keywords:* Acculturation; Contact; Identification; Ingroup; Media exposure; Outgroup

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## 1. Introduction

Overseas migration has played a key role in shaping Australia into one of the world's most culturally diverse nations. The National Multicultural Advisory Council (NMAC) predicted that, in the long-term, average net overseas migration level could reach 75 000 per annum (NMAC, 1999). According to media release from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, of the total overseas arrivals from South-East Asia during the 2001–02 financial year, people from Hong Kong, Taiwan and PR China occupied approximately 87% of the immigrant population (Key Facts, 2003) and Chinese ethnic groups ranked second largest in the linguistic composition (Over Fifty Years, 2003). In view of the contribution of Chinese immigrants to the Australian economy, business, education, and cultural diversity, comprehensive research on interethnic relations between Chinese ethnic groups and Anglo-Australians has profound social and cultural significance.

The growing cultural diversity has led to the promotion of multiculturalism which “aims to achieve social cohesion through an environment where diverse cultures are recognized and valued” (Department of Premier, 2000, p. 4). The past two decades have witnessed the transition from “White Australian policy” to cultural pluralism. In addition to being repeatedly emphasized in government policies, multiculturalism has been a frequently occurring topic in the mass media. As an institution of culture and an influential shaper of cultural thought (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967), mass media play an important role in deepening interethnic understanding and facilitating cultural adaptation of ethnic minorities through the symbolic environment they create and sustain (Khan, Abbasi, Mahsud, Zafar, & Kaltikhel, 1999). Hence, the role of mass media in creating a social environment conducive to interethnic coexistence cannot be minimized.

This study drew upon cultivation theory, acculturation theory, and works on intergroup relations to examine the effects of print media exposure and contact on subjective social reality and acculturation attitudes of Chinese immigrants in Australia. This research broadened theory in that it tested the “mainstreaming” assumption of cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) by incorporating media consumers' own experience, hence throwing light on the mainstreaming effects of mass media in the age of greater user control. This study also bridged one gap in communication research by combining the effects of both interpersonal communication and mediated communication in the examination of acculturation attitudes. Previous research on acculturation predominantly focused on the influence of interpersonally oriented communication factors (Berry, 1990; Kim, Lujian, & Dixon, 1998) whereas past research on media effects gave insufficient attention to interpersonal sources in creating the symbolic environment (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). In addition to the theoretical contribution, this study attempted to suggest policy considerations regarding promoting interethnic coexistence.

## 2. Symbolic social reality, contact, subjective social reality, and acculturation

Mass media define various events in society not simply by presenting the objective reality but rather through their interpretation of the events (Lim & Hussein, 1999). Hence, the reality presented by the media is a socially constructed one, a symbolic social reality (Adoni & Mane, 1984). This symbolic social reality, as postulated by cultivation theory, serves as an input for the construction of an individual's own subjective world that

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