

**IMPACT OF AMERICAN SITCOMS ON THE  
PAKISTANI YOUTH: A CROSS-CULTURAL  
STUDY**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
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## **DECLARATION**

I, HayaShaukat, Roll No. 100884004, student of M. Phil, in the subject of Applied Linguistics, session 2010-2012, hereby declare that the matter printed in the thesis titled Impact of American Sitcoms on the Pakistani Youth: A Cross-Cultural Study is my own work and has not been printed, published and submitted as research work, thesis or publication in any form in any University, Research Institution etc. in Pakistan or abroad except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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Signatures of Deponent

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understanding of the subject. I offer my regards to my loving parents, dearest friends, and worthy teachers without whose support and encouragement this venture would not have been possible.

HayaShaukat

## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this study is to investigate the influence of American sitcoms on the youth of Pakistan and explore changes taking place in the mindset of the youth due to the cross-cultural impact. The study also attempted to probe into linguistic influence of these sitcoms. Chapter one mainly focuses on introducing the topic along with a brief overview of why this particular topic was chosen thus establishing the purpose, background, aims and objectives, research hypothesis as well as research questions and implications of the study. It also discusses limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter two discusses the existing literature especially Fairclough and van Dijk's ideas regarding power and control. However, there is no existing research on CDA and the influence of American sitcoms carried out in Pakistan and media studies carried out abroad are very much focused on the linguistic aspect of sitcoms rather than CDA, thus making this research novel. Therefore, this research had to develop its own theoretical framework based on the existing tenets of CDA rather than follow a fixed or already established method. Chapter three discusses methodology. The study combined qualitative approach with the quantitative method. The study involved respondents between the ages of 18 and 25 belonging to four educational institutions of Lahore, including FAST-NU, BNU, LUMS, and LSE. Focus group and depth interview were administered as the data collection instruments along with survey questionnaire. While respondents for survey questionnaire were randomly chosen, respondents involved in qualitative research went through a screening procedure. Chapter four provides a

detailed and in depth analysis of the data gathered, both qualitative and quantitative. Results of the research indicate that while at present the well-educated youth are the ones watching these shows, the fact is they will be the ones in power in future and it is those in power who decide what is acceptable or unacceptable in the society. Chapter five answers research questions and chapter six sums up the findings of the study. The study found that the youth agreed American sitcoms had a massive impact and were very influential. It was noted that a strongly advertised culture seems to be taking over a vulnerable one with the element of neo-colonization very much present as these sitcoms serve as potent tools for controlling minds by simplifying certain concepts through the use of frequent stereotyping. However, the majority perceived this cross-cultural influence and cultural evolution to be negative as it posed threat to their religious values.

**Key Words:** American sitcoms, Pakistani youth, cross-cultural influence

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this particular study is to establish the cross-cultural influence of American sitcoms on Pakistani culture and promotion of American culture becoming a part of the mindset of a totally different culture that cannot fully associate with it. Although this study is limited to the American sitcoms alone and does not comment on news etc., it does focus on the fact that propaganda and influence go beyond the domain of news and political statements alone. Sitcoms are very short comedies that last less than half an hour but in the guise of humour proved to be very successful in promoting certain ideologies. Many sitcoms last nearly a decade.

With cable becoming so common and the growing trend of free online downloads, access is becoming easier and both upper and middle classes are watching these shows more and more. This study will establish as to what extent the ideas of today's youth are being shaped, consciously or unconsciously, by this phenomenon.

## **1.2 Background to the Study**

The trend of watching sitcoms started in Pakistan somewhere in the 1980s. During the 90s PTV had time slots reserved in the evening when sitcoms were aired and the most popular among those were 'Full House,' 'Perfect Strangers,' and 'Mind Your Language.' The trend grew gradually as initially a very few people had access to the dish antenna. As it became more popular and eventually got replaced by the cable it gave a major boost to the trend of watching sitcoms as well since entertainment was there and the price to be paid was rather cheap. But the price to be paid is not only in terms of money. It is in terms of changes taking place in the culture. The irony is that while cultures are always dynamic, with the kind of upbringing that especially the middle class has, when this exposure is given the culture instead of evolving has started becoming more chaotic. On the one hand is the rigidity that is deep rooted and on the other hand is a secular almost alien culture. When the conflict reaches this level negative aspects and conflict are bound to come in.

Sitcoms have come a long way since the shows above mentioned. Overtime they have become more goal-oriented i.e. in every sitcom there are themes pushing a certain agenda. While many themes are recurrent in most of the shows and regular sitcom viewers can see the promotion of cultural and political ideas through this reinforcement. Even promotion of certain

religious groups in a very subtle manner is noteworthy. In this regard the evolution of promotion of Judaism from “Seinfeld” to “Curb Your Enthusiasm” has been significant. Cultural stereotypes have crossed all limits on “Mike & Molly,” which is more or less a routine with Chuck Lorre’s sitcoms. Almost all sitcoms manage to involve themes such as alcoholism, substance abuse, womanizing, racism, etc. and portray them as extremely hilarious, thus giving them the ability to bring about a major cultural change all over the world. Even sensitive issues such as the feud between Palestine and Israel, cultural stereotypes, and racism have been exploited, especially by HBO more than any other network, in a manner where one cannot help but laugh. Yet the fact is that these sitcoms leave a mark for good, gradually bringing about a change in the mindset of the masses which might be unconscious but very much there.

Evident impact of American media, especially sitcoms, can be seen among the youth with a significant change in accent observed by the researcher. Over the last decade the trend of significantly pronounced ‘r’ by rolling the tongue has become common as well as slanted ‘a,’ for example, frequent use of the American way of pronouncing words such as ‘can’t,’ ‘pass,’ etc. as opposed to the British manner of pronouncing these words which used to be a common practice in Pakistan. Also Pakistani youth is more familiar with the American slang as compared to British slang which is almost Gaelic to them. The reason being that American media is strongly advertized and highly commercial; thus, it is easily accessible around the world. Second language users of English find the American accent easier to understand as compared to the British accent, and unlike British humour, American wit is simpler and easy to understand. It is said that if one wishes to comprehend the psyche of a nation, they need to understand their humour. It would not be wrong to say that despite all its cultural diversity. or perhaps due to this very diversity,

American humour is understood with little effort worldwide and is also easy to relate to, therefore, making the cultural impact stronger. The power of media cannot be denied and although in a conservative society like Pakistan, 'Sex and the City' was not highly advertised, in modern and more advanced countries, the show played a huge role in changing women's perception on the subject.

### **1.3 Aims and Objectives**

- To analyze as to what extent American sitcoms are influencing and in turn changing the mindset of people of Pakistan, especially the youth.
- To determine whether it is bringing about a linguistic change thus affecting the manner of speech and the use of vocabulary.
- To establish the role of stereotypes in sitcoms and how and why they prove to be highly effective.
- To see what kinds of trends are currently in vogue and examine cultural changes taking place as a result of the influence of American sitcoms.
- Not to pass judgment whether the change is negative or positive but to observe the common perception i.e. whether it is perceived to be negative or positive by the youth, who mainly is the subject.
- To scrutinize the critical abilities of the people watching the shows and if they are capable of pin pointing the underlying issues and meaning.
- To look into possible long-term impact of this growing trend.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

- Keeping in mind Fairclough's view:
  - Who has access to media i.e. since foreign shows are being mentioned who in Pakistan has the resources to access it?
- Keeping in mind Hall's social constructionist view:
  - Is there a relation between the current trends among the youth of Pakistan and the linguistic codes of American sitcoms?
- Is the influence of sitcoms on youth perceived to be negative or positive?
- Is there a significant relation between the current mindset of the youth and the ideas and stereotypes promoted in sitcoms?
- Is there a significant relationship between gender and the level of influence these sitcoms have?

### **1.5 Research Hypothesis**

The major premise this research is built upon is that American sitcoms are having a strong influence in bringing about a change in the mindset of the Pakistani youth through their media, especially sitcoms. The research will test the phenomenon that was repeatedly observed by the researcher and try to provide a logical and rational response to whether or not it is correct that a stronger culture is taking over a weaker culture by reinforcing certain ideologies through sitcoms disguised and presented in the form of innocent and simplistic humour. While the assumption on part of the researcher is that a major change is in process, in order for it to evolve into a theory, the researcher has employed different methods to test the above mentioned hypothesis.

## **1.6 Research Method**

The research will mainly rely on the qualitative data; however, quantitative data will also be utilized.

## **1.7 Research Procedure**

### ***1.7.1 Qualitative***

#### ***i. Focus Group***

- A focus group session to determine the extent of
  - a) Trends
  - b) Influence
  - c) Perception
  - d) Stereotypes

#### ***ii. Interview***

- A depth interview to using somewhat similar guidelines as the focus group to examine an individual's perspective in isolation and without any kind of peer pressure.

### ***1.7.2 Quantitative***

#### ***i. Survey Questionnaire***

- Quantitative analysis using survey questionnaire to verify and generalize the results of the qualitative study. Although the research is mainly qualitative a survey is included to quantify as to what extent people are aware of the fact that the influence is there.

### **1.8 Sample**

The target age group consisted of people between the ages of 18 to 25. Since the first step was to determine which sitcoms were most popular, one hundred respondents participated in the initial viewership survey, all belonging to FAST-NU. For the qualitative research six participants were involved in the focus group whereas only one in the depth interview. On the other hand one hundred respondents took part in the quantitative part of the research. These respondents belonged to FAST-NU, LUMS, BNU, and LSE.

### **1.9 Limitations**

The biggest limitation in this research is that when the youth is mentioned it only refers to educated youth involving upper class and middle class. The reason is obvious and the obstacle is language. It is impossible to quantify at the moment as to what percentage of youth can understand English and the study becomes restricted to prestigious educational institutions and people studying there.

### **1.10 Delimitations**

There have been thousands of sitcoms to this day and it is impossible to analyze all of them. The researcher is going to limit the study to specific American sitcoms only and utilize only those and after a careful analysis explain how vital the discourse used in these

sitcoms has been in influencing certain ideas and creating a particular mindset, especially that of the youth. The other delimitation is that the researcher had to restrict the research to the institutions in Lahore only. However, this was somewhat overcome by the fact that many students of these institutions belonged to other cities and were currently residing in Lahore for the purpose of studies.

### **1.11 Implications of the Study**

Very little work has been done on the cross-cultural influence, especially on the influence of American shows, since people remain focused on the influence of Indian shows to the extent that this factor is completely ignored. This study will provide room for further investigation into as to how what we refer to as neo-colonization is being promoted through sitcoms disguised as harmless humour. It will also leave margin for future investigation as to how far linguistically the youth of Pakistan is being influenced. These influences can be seen in their pronunciation of “r” and words using “a” for example the difference between the pronunciation of British and American “can’t”. American sitcoms are more popular because the majority finds the accent easy to understand and the humour unlike British humour is not really what we can refer to as “smart comedies”. This study implies that under similar circumstances, over time, there will be further changes, both cultural and linguistic, due to the strong influence of these sitcoms. So, a few years from now further studies can be carried out on the subject and comparison and contrast between past and present studies can be used to determine the extent of change.