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*Global Media and Communication* 2009 5: 149  
DOI: 10.1177/1742766509340963

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# Theoretical approaches and methodological strategies in Latin American empirical research on television audiences: 1992–2007

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## ABSTRACT

This article reports the findings of a review and methodological critique of 96 Latin American empirical studies on television reception published between 1992 and 2007 in the most important journals of the region. The analysis compares the studies according to their theoretical approach, the research technique used, their sample size, the type of audience members studied, the type of television content researched and the scholars mentioned the most in their references. Findings show that Cultural Studies is by far the most popular theoretical approach in Latin American audience research, and that two of the topics covered the most were television and daily life and the importance of social and cultural mediations. The article also concludes that many studies lack a solid methodological base. Morley, Orozco, Martín-Barbero, García-Canclini and Lull were the scholars mentioned the most in the reference sections. The article ends with a diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of current Latin American empirical research on television audiences and points out the need for more methodological rigor and more emphasis on the analysis of ideological readings and impact.

## KEY WORDS

audience research ■ Cultural Studies ■ empirical studies ■ Latin America  
■ reception studies ■ research methodology ■ television

In 1994 McAnany and La Pastina published their methodological review and critique of 26 *telenovela* reception studies in Latin America. In their analysis, they acknowledged the growth of research in this field and region of the world but warned about some weaknesses of the studies, especially in their methodological rigor. They pointed out the importance of the *telenovela* in Latin America as the dominant genre for television audiences and its potential social and cultural consequences.

Latin American researchers, according to McAnany and La Pastina, were aware of the importance of television and its social impact. However, empirical research was scarce and the literature on *telenovelas* up to 1994 was based only on references to the studies done by Katz, Liebes and Morley.

According to McAnany and La Pastina, most of the empirical studies reviewed showed methodological deficiencies due to the lack of experience of the authors (many of them graduate students doing the studies as part of their theses or dissertations). Also, they contrasted the scarcity of studies on *telenovelas* in Latin America with the more consistent research on them in the United States. They concluded their article with a plea for more and better empirical research on *telenovela* audiences by Latin American scholars.

This article looks at Latin American empirical research on audiences from 1992 through 2007, to provide some comparison with the period taken into account by McAnany and La Pastina. However, this study was not conceived as a replication of that analysis. Instead, it looked at several different variables, and it included all types of television programs, not only *telenovelas*. The main purpose of this study was to explore and assess the empirical research on television audiences of the last 15 years in this region. The study encompassed all television genres in order to provide a comprehensive diagnosis and evaluation of recent and current research and facilitate suggestions for the future.

### **Reception studies in Latin America**

Prior to the 1990s, communication research in Latin America focused mainly on the critical analysis of mass media as institutions, providing little attention to audience research. Scholars tended to perceive audience members as passive when confronted with the power and hegemony of cultural industries. Political economy and semiotic analyses, consequently, were the basis for most studies. In a regional context of great inequalities and concentration of capital, dependency theorists assumed that by corroborating the existence of transnationalization in the production and distribution processes, transnationalization of the reception process followed (Lozano, 1990–1991).

In the mid-1980s a new critical perspective emerged in Latin America focusing on the reception and consumption of cultural products. The work of scholars like García-Canclini (1988), Martín-Barbero (1987) and González (1987), brought new considerations on the cultural aspects and the mediations used by audiences to interpret media meanings. During

the 1990s, work on this new approach emphasized the conception of audiences as active, a common notion in critical approaches in other parts of the world since the late 1970s and early 1980s, but not well accepted in Latin America due to the influence of the dependency and the cultural imperialism paradigms.

Scholars in different countries in the region started in the 1990s to do more empirical research following the theoretical lead of Martín-Barbero, García-Canclini, Orozco and González. In Argentina, with the consolidation of reception studies, scholars adopted new theoretical and epistemological approaches stemming from the social sciences and the broad cultural studies tradition (Saintout and Ferrante, 2006). In their work, these scholars explored the ways in which subordinate groups interact and negotiate mass culture, replacing the notion of ideological imposition with the concepts of hegemony and resistance. However, according to Saintout and Ferrante, in the last few years Argentinean scholars have tended to publish more theoretical essays than empirical work.

In Brazil, critical theory, semiology and effects' approaches influenced the pioneer studies, according to Jacks and Escosteguy (2006). Until the mid-1980s, Brazilian reception studies 'were out of touch' with the new conceptual and methodological developments in the field, in particular the theoretical proposals of cultural studies and reception studies elsewhere in Latin America and the West (Escosteguy, 2005; Lopes et al., 2002). It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s when audience studies increased and established a new trend in Brazilian communication research, locating audience members in the wider context of culture, following the influence of Martín-Barbero (1987) and his theory of social mediations. Despite the growth of empirical research on audiences and its institutionalization in many Brazilian universities, audience studies have not generated a significant debate in the communication field in comparison with their relevance in the Anglo-Saxon world (Jacks and Escosteguy, 2006).

Martín-Barbero and Tellez (2006) found a similar situation in Colombia after reviewing the last 20 years of audience studies in that country. According to the authors, audience studies originated in Colombia in the 1980s under the influence of the effects tradition and two key situations in society: 'The fragility of democracy and the density of violence' (2006: 58). During the 1990s, however, Colombian scholars changed their emphasis significantly, from the concept of 'reception', to the concept of 'consumption' (García-Canclini, 1999), a term which allowed viewing audience members to be actively engaged in the use of media messages. This new approach rejected the conceptualization of audiences as passive and fragile, particularly youngsters and children – traditionally conceived

as the most influenced by the negative effects of television. Colombian scholars in this line of research suggested instead studying these audiences' communicative competences, exchanging the view of television as evil for a more open and flexible position and taking into account the school and the family as important spaces for socialization and mediation of television's contents.

Reviewing television reception studies in Chile, Fuenzalida (2006) explained that during the Pinochet dictatorship audience research was not allowed in universities. It was not until the 1990s when, due to the opening of graduate programs in communication, audience studies developed. The initial work, according to Fuenzalida, focused on ethnographic research on television and daily life, allowing for the reconsideration of such topics as fruition and entertainment. The *telenovela*, in this context, was considered a genre which generated a unique television culture. According to Fuenzalida, the transtextual culture of the audience participates in the creation of textual meaning (2006: 52). Chilean studies confirmed *telenovelas* as the genre influencing the most social and familial interaction. The ethnographic turn in audience studies helped to re-conceptualize television reception at home, at school and in the political sphere.

In Mexico, television reception research developed along several lines. Orozco and Padilla (2005) mention, as the earliest interest in television audiences, two research programs in the 1980s: one in the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (Corona, 1989) and the other one in the Universidad de Colima (Covarrubias et al., 1994; González, 1987, 1988, 1994). Both programs contributed greatly to demystifying empirically the impact and the effects of television, allowing for a view of audience members as active. Other pioneering studies were done with an educational angle. Scholars like Orozco (1988, 1992) and later Renero (1992) explored through the use of focused interviews the relationship between television and two of the most important socializing institutions, the school and the family, concluding that audience members were able to consume television in a critical and intelligent manner.

A different perspective on the reception of television in Mexico has been developed since the mid-1990s in the northern city of Monterrey. Lozano and Martínez, among other scholars, have studied through surveys and focus groups the reception of foreign television programming among the inhabitants of northeast Mexico, finding a strong preference for national over US content despite their geographical proximity to Texas in cities like Nuevo Laredo (Lozano, 1996), Monterrey (Lozano, 2003; Martínez, 1994), Reynosa, Saltillo and Torreon (Chong and Ornelas, 2006; García Álvarez, 2007; Hinojosa et al., 2005; Lozano, 2008).

Television audience research in the different Latin American countries, as stated above, has a short history in most cases and has centered on the role of television in the life of viewers. Several scholars, using different methodological approaches and choosing different subjects, have focused on describing these relationships.

After this general overview of reception research on television in Latin America, we proceed to analyze the 96 empirical studies on television reception found in the most important academic communication journals of the region from 1992 through 2007. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What was the relative importance of empirical television reception studies in comparison with other types of works published in the selected journals?
2. Did empirical research on television reception focus mostly on *telenovelas* or has Latin American research diversified taking into account other genres?
3. What types of audiences and what kinds of topics were studied the most?
4. Did a particular theoretical approach predominate in the studies' literature review and the analytical framework they used to interpret findings?
5. Who were the scholars cited the most by the authors of the studies?
6. What quantitative and/or qualitative techniques were used the most and with what sample sizes? Were sample sizes indicative of some shortcomings in the generalization and reliability of the findings?
7. How detailed and rigorous was the methodology employed in the studies?

## Method

This article reviewed a sample of 96 empirical studies on television reception published from 1992 through 2007 in some of the most important Latin American communication or social sciences academic journals. The study selected reports in full text found in electronic databases and in some printed versions available at the library of the Communication and Information Research Center of the Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico.

The database for the analysis included 55 journals and a total of 982 issues. The research was carried out by a team of 12 scholars working in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, México and Venezuela.<sup>1</sup> The 96 research reports on

television audiences found in the 982 issues were compiled from the following online data bases: Redalyc (Scientific Journals of Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal Network), Revcom (Electronic Journals in Communication Sciences of Brazil), Centro de Documentación CONEICC (CONEICC's Documentation Center), the website INFOAMERICA, the catalog *Catálogo de Revistas Académicas de Comunicación 2007* published in the *Núcleo de Pesquisa em Informação, Tecnologias e Práticas Sociais* of the Communication Faculty at Universidad Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil, and the original websites of the journals: *Diálogos de la Comunicación* (Perú), *Razón y Palabra* (México), *Global Media Journal, Iberoamerican edition* (México), *ZER* (Spain) and *Palabra-Clave* (Colombia). Printed versions of the following journals were consulted: *Comunicación y Sociedad* and the *Anuario de Investigación de la Comunicación CONEICC*, both from Mexico.

The number of studies reviewed from the most prominent and accessible Latin American academic journals on the area of study, provides a good sample for what may be the general tendency in empirical television research in the region during the last 15 years.

For each of the 96 empirical audience research works reviewed in this project we analyzed the country of origin, the method employed, the size of the samples, the theory used, the clarity of the study's central research questions and the authors cited two or more times within the text. Articles were carefully reviewed and their methodology evaluated according to quantitative and qualitative dimensions.

## Results

What is the relative importance of empirical television reception studies in comparison with other types of works published in the selected Latin American journals? Table 1 shows that only 10 per cent of all articles published in 982 issues of the 55 reviewed journals were empirical studies on television reception. If other types of empirical research are even less popular than television reception studies (and that seems to be the case), then we may be looking at a pattern of Latin American communication journals favoring theoretical essays over empirical work. Or more likely, the journals may just be reflecting the current situation of Latin American scholarship in communication, more theoretically than empirically inclined due to lack of funds and deficient training in field work (Lozano, 2007).

Mexico and Brazil are the countries of origin for most of the authors in the studies (70% combined), followed by Venezuela (15%), with Chile, Colombia and Argentina far behind (Table 2).

Table 1 *Latin American empirical studies on television audiences published in academic journals 1992–2007*

Journal title	Country	Period reviewed	Number of issues reviewed	Number of empirical studies on television audiences	Percentage of issues with empirical studies on TV audiences
<i>Comunicación y Sociedad</i>	México	92–07	34	14	41
<i>Anuario de Inv. CONEICC</i>	México	94–06	13	10	77
<i>Culturas Contemporáneas</i>	México	92–06	27	4	15
<i>Razón y Palabra</i>	México	96–07	58	1	2
<i>Global Media Journal</i>	México	04–07	7	1	14
<i>Rev Mex de Ciencias Pol y Soc</i>	México	92–06	45	1	2
<i>Nombre Falso</i>	Argentina	01–07	9	2	22
<i>Comunicación</i>	C. Rica	00–06	11	0	0
<i>Reflexiones Académicas</i>	Chile	99–02	4	1	25
<i>Comunicación y Medios</i>	Chile	93–06	7	1	14
<i>Faro</i>	Chile	05–07	5	0	0
<i>Legeté</i>	Chile	03–06	7	0	0
<i>Re-Presentaciones</i>	Chile	07	2	0	0
<i>Cuadernos de Información</i>	Chile	93–07	12	0	0
<i>Tercer Milenio</i>	Chile	06–07	3	0	0
<i>Anagramas</i>	Colombia	01–05	8	2	25
<i>Revista Mediaciones #3</i>	Colombia	03–04	3	0	33
<i>Palabra Clave</i>	Colombia	97–06	44	3	7
<i>Diálogos de la Comunicación</i>	Perú	92–07	42	5	12
<i>Comunicação and Sociedade</i>	Brazil	02–04	5	0	0
<i>Contracampo</i>	Brazil	02–03	2	0	0
<i>Ciberlegenda</i>	Brazil	98–07	18	3	17
<i>Comunicação e Educação</i>	Brazil	94–07	36	1	2
<i>Comunicação: Veredas</i>	Brazil	03–06	4	1	25

(continued)



Table 1 (continued)

Journal title	Country	Period reviewed	Number of issues reviewed	Number of empirical studies on television audiences	Percentage of issues with empirical studies on TV audiences
<i>Contemporânea</i>	Brazil	03–07	8	3	38
<i>Diálogos</i>	Brazil	03–07	8	2	25
<i>Possíveis</i>					
<i>E-Compós</i>	Brazil	04–07	10	3	30
<i>Eco-Pós</i>	Brazil	02–07	12	1	8
<i>Em Questão</i>	Brazil	03–07	10	1	10
<i>Famecos</i>	Brazil	93–07	34	5	18
<i>Intercom</i>	Brazil	00–07	14	3	21
<i>Fronteiras</i>	Brazil	04–07	11	4	36
<i>Interface</i>	Brazil	97–07	23	1	4
<i>Intexto</i>	Brazil	97–07	16	2	13
<i>Rastros</i>	Brazil	99–07	7	2	29
<i>São</i>	Brazil	04–06	5	1	20
<i>Bernardo.com.br</i>					
<i>Anuario ININCO</i>	Venezuela	92–05	12	4	33
<i>Revista de CS.</i>	Venezuela	02,04	3	0	0
<i>de la Com y la Inf</i>					
<i>Comunicación</i>	Venezuela	93–06	45	2	4
<i>Encuentro</i>	Venezuela	94–05	36	0	0
<i>Educacional</i>					
<i>Espacio</i>	Venezuela	92–06	48	3	6
<i>Abierto</i>					
<i>OMNIA</i>	Venezuela	95–07	23	0	0
<i>OPCIÓN</i>	Venezuela	94–06	42	3	7
<i>Quorum</i>	Venezuela	04–07	8	1	13
<i>Académico</i>					
<i>Revista Científica</i>	Venezuela	05–08	9	0	0
<i>NEGOTIUM</i>					
<i>Revista</i>	Venezuela	05–08	9	0	0
<i>Científica ORBIS</i>					
<i>Revista de Artes y</i>	Venezuela	00–07	18	0	0
<i>Humanidades</i>					
<i>UNICA</i>					
<i>Revista de Ciencias</i>	Venezuela	01–06	11	1	9
<i>Sociales (RCS)</i>					
<i>Revista Venezolana</i>	Venezuela	97–06	20	0	0
<i>de Ciencias</i>					
<i>Sociales</i>					

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Journal title	Country	Period reviewed	Number of issues reviewed	Number of empirical studies on television audiences	Percentage of issues with empirical studies on TV audiences
<i>Revista Venez. de Economía y C. Sociales</i>	Venezuela	03–06	8	0	0
<i>Revista Venezolana de Gerencia</i>	Venezuela	96–07	33	0	0
<i>Telos</i>	Venezuela	99–07	24	0	0
<i>Teoría y Didáctica de las Ciencias Sociales</i>	Venezuela	96–07	12	0	0
<i>Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana</i>	Venezuela	96–07	36	0	0
<i>Zer</i>	España	96–07	21	4	19
Total			982	96	10

Note: Despite its non-Latin American origin, the Spanish journal *ZER* was included in the database because in published four empirical research studies on television reception in Latin America during the period.

Table 2 Country of origin of the author

Country	Number of authors	%
México	43	36.4
Brazil	36	30.5
Venezuela	18	15.2
Chile	6	5.1
Colombia	6	5.1
Argentina	4	3.4
USA	2	1.7
Denmark	1	0.8
Holland	1	0.8
Perú	1	0.8
Total	118	100

Note: The total is higher than 96 because of articles written by two or more authors.

Jiani Bonin, Ana Uribe, José Carlos Lozano, Juan Enrique Huerta and Martha Renero (between four and seven publications each) were the authors with more reports published in the reviewed journals (Table 3). Well known and cited scholars in this research field like Guillermo Orozco and Valerio Fuenzalida appeared with two studies each while theorists like Jesús Martín-Barbero, Néstor García-Canclini and Jorge A. González had not a single empirical work on this topic published in the 982 issues reviewed in this period of time.

The two Latin American journals with more empirical work on television audiences were Mexican: *Comunicación y Sociedad*, from Universidad de Guadalajara, with 14 studies and the *Anuario de Investigación de la Comunicación CONEICC*, with 10. In third place with five articles each were *Diálogos de la Comunicación*, edited by FELAFACS, and FAMECOS, edited in Brazil. As shown in Table 4, the rest of the Latin American journals had between one and four reports published in this period of 15 years, which reflects the poor empirical tradition of the region in this subject.

Table 3 Number of studies by author

Author	Number of studies	%
Jiani Bonin	7	5.6
Ana B. Uribe	5	4.0
José Carlos Lozano	5	4.0
Juan Enrique Huerta	5	4.0
Martha Renero	4	3.2
Daniel Fernando López	3	2.4
Aída Cerda	2	1.6
Aimeé Vega	2	1.6
Ana Maria Strohschoen	2	1.6
Esther Durante	2	1.6
Frank Viveros	2	1.6
Guillermo Orozco	2	1.6
Inés Cornejo	2	1.6
Migdalia Pineda	2	1.6
Rafael del Villar	2	1.6
Simone Rocha	2	1.6
Valerio Fuenzalida	2	1.6
Others (1 study)	73	59
Total	124	100

Note: The total is higher than 96 because of articles written by two or more authors.

Table 4 Number of studies by journal

Journal	Number of studies	%
<i>Comunicación y Sociedad</i>	14	14.6
<i>Anuario CONEICC</i>	10	10.4
<i>Diálogos de la Com</i>	5	5.2
<i>Famecos</i>	5	5.2
<i>Anuario ININCO</i>	4	4.2
<i>Culturas Contemporáneas</i>	4	4.2
<i>Fronteiras</i>	4	4.2
<i>Zer</i>	4	4.2
<i>Ciberlegenda</i>	3	3.1
<i>E-Compós</i>	3	3.1
<i>Espacio Abierto</i>	3	3.1
<i>Opción</i>	3	3.1
<i>Palabra-Clave</i>	3	3.1
<i>Comunicación (Centro Gumilla)</i>	2	2.1
<i>Contemporanea</i>	2	2.1
<i>Diálogos Possíveis</i>	2	2.1
<i>Intercom</i>	2	2.1
<i>Intexto</i>	2	2.1
<i>Nombre Falso</i>	2	2.1
<i>Rastros</i>	2	2.1
<i>Anagramas</i>	1	1.0
<i>Comunicação e Educação</i>	1	1.0
<i>Comunicación y Medios</i>	1	1.0
<i>Eco-Pós</i>	1	1.0
<i>Em Questão</i>	1	1.0
<i>FAMECOS</i>	1	1.0
<i>GMJ en español</i>	1	1.0
<i>Quorum Académico</i>	1	1.0
<i>Razón y Palabra</i>	1	1.0
<i>Reflexiones Académicas</i>	1	1.0
<i>Revista Comunicação: Veredas</i>	1	1.0
<i>Revista Contemporânea</i>	1	1.0
<i>Revista de Ciencias Sociales</i>	1	1.0
<i>Revista Intercom</i>	1	1.0
<i>Revista Interface</i>	1	1.0
<i>Revista Mex de C Pol y Sociales</i>	1	1.0
<i>Revista São Bernardo.com.br</i>	1	1.0
Total	96	100

### From telenovelas to the general supply of television contents

If McAnany and La Pastina (1994) found 26 empirical studies on *telenovelas* during the period of 1970 through 1993 in journals, books, theses and dissertations, we found that only a quarter of the 96 studies reviewed

Table 5 *Number of studies by genre studied*

Genre	Number of studies	%
Various	48	50.0
Telenovelas	24	25.0
News	12	12.5
Series	4	4.2
Entertaining	2	2.1
Children	1	1.0
Reality shows	1	1.0
None	4	4.2
Total	96	100

focused specifically on the reception of this genre (Table 5). More than half the studies, in contrast, looked at the general consumption of television by audience members, taking into account several genres at the same time. Thus a trend in recent research on television in the region may be to account for the different types of contents consumed by different types of audiences. Some scholars were concerned with the geographical origin of the preferred programs (De la Garza, 1997; Huerta, 2004; Huerta y Cerda, 2002; Lozano, 1994, 2003), others looked at the diversity of contents preferred by specific groups, like the youth sector (Chavero and García Muñoz, 2005; González Hernández, 2006; López, 2003, 2004; Martínez, 1994; Orozco and Viveros, 1996; Renero, 1996) and still others were more interested in the mediation of the family during the process of watching television (Cornejo, 1992; Guadarrama, 1999; Renero, 1992, 1995, 1997; Vega, 2005).

The reception of news is a growing area of interest, particularly in a region in which research on journalism and news has mainly centered on journalists or on the content of news. The fact that 12.5 per cent of all empirical studies was devoted to the consumption of news highlights the attention this genre is receiving by some Latin American scholars. In contrast, genres like series and reality shows, despite their importance on the supply side, were almost ignored on the consumption side.

### Focus on teenagers and youngsters

The empirical studies suggest that Latin American researchers are focusing their efforts on analyzing television reception mostly on youngsters and teenagers (Table 6). Adults in general were also taken into account, but children and women have not merited enough attention for the few scholars doing empirical work. The selection of youngsters and teenagers (Bonilla and Rincón, 1998; Cerda, 2001; Chavero and García Muñoz, 2005;

Table 6 Number of studies by type of audience

Type of audience	Number of studies	%
Various	25	26.0
Youngsters	17	17.7
Family	13	13.5
Adults	10	10.4
Children	8	8.3
Teenagers	8	8.3
Women	5	5.2
Men	1	1.0
Unidentified	9	9.4
Total	96	100

Dalmonte, 2006; De Jesús and Albuquerque Patriota, 2007; De la Garza, 1997; Diez Martínez et al., 2000; González, 2006; Marques and Rocha, 2006; López, 2003, 2004; Lozano, 1994; Martínez, 1994; Orozco and Viveros, 1996; Renero, 1996) may be more a result of convenience than of theoretical or social concerns, due to the accessibility of these types of audiences for the researchers at schools and universities. Nonetheless, the studies provide evidence to understand the complex interactions between some of the most sensitive social groups and television.

### The predominance of Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies is by far the most common theoretical perspective underpinning the empirical studies on television audiences in Latin America. Table 7 shows that more than half the studies reviewed were based on this approach. Morley, Orozco, Martín-Barbero, García-Canclini and

Table 7 Number of studies by theoretical approach

Approach	Number of studies	%
Cultural Studies	49	51.0
Reception analysis	14	14.6
Eclectic	5	5.2
TV literacy	4	4.2
Uses and gratifications	3	3.1
Effects (agenda setting, cultivo, spiral)	3	3.1
Various	2	2.1
Other	7	7.3
Unidentified	9	9.4
Total	96	100

James Lull were the authors cited the most in the body of work reviewed. This is no surprise in a region where critical approaches like cultural imperialism and cultural dependency first and later Cultural Studies have thrived in the last decades. The seminal contributions of authors like Martín-Barbero, García-Canclini, Orozco, González, Fuenzalida, and others in the 1980s, in the field of Cultural and Media Studies, still form the foundations for most empirical work on television audiences in the region. It is interesting, however, to see that recent work on audiences have not reviewed the contributions of current empirical work in the region. Martín-Barbero, García-Canclini and González, for example, have not done any empirical work – and almost no theoretical work – on television audiences in the last two decades.

Our review shows a low degree of diversity and concern with other theoretical traditions. The dominant effects perspective of the United States (agenda setting, cultivation analysis, social learning, and so on) is completely absent in the body of work. Television audiences are not studied in Latin America from different, competing theoretical perspectives, like in the United States and Western Europe.

A surprising finding is the high number of studies with no explicit mention of the theoretical bases from which they derive their research questions and the interpretation of their findings: nine per cent of the reports. Some of them were descriptive surveys trying to provide basic information about consumption patterns (López, 2003, 2004). Others were done by scholars identified with Cultural or Media Studies perspectives (Covarrubias, 2001; Fuenzalida, 1992; Renero, 1996), but who for some reason were not explicit in their literature review, in their research questions or in the interpretation of their findings about their conceptual underpinnings. Five additional studies (Bonilla and Rincón, 1998; Huerta et al., 1999) approached the important topic of violence and television, but from a more eclectic theoretical perspective.

### **Lack of attention to ideological readings**

Table 8 shows that despite the predominance of Cultural Studies as the theoretical perspective embraced by empirical studies on television audiences, few of them tackle the central question of the ideological impact of the medium and the ability of audience members to negotiate, resist or redesign its ideological preferred meanings. Only 12 out of the more than 49 studies based on Cultural Studies looked at decodings and readings of television contents (De Jesús and Albuquerque Patriota, 2007; Huerta, 2004; Lozano, 2003a, 2003b; Orozco, 1996; Sáez, 2002, among others), confirming the

Table 8 Number of studies by topic

Topic	Number of studies	%
Media consumption	19	19.8
Daily life	17	17.7
Ideological readings	12	12.5
Family mediation	10	10.4
Other mediation	10	10.4
Genre	3	3.1
US media consumption	2	2.1
News credibility	1	1.0
Other	2	22.9
Total	96	100

concern of Morley (1997, 2006) about Cultural Studies researchers forgetting issues of power and ideology when doing their empirical work.

The rest of the studies based on Cultural Studies or similar approaches were focused on the analysis and understanding of the integration of television in the daily life of the audiences selected (Cerdeña, 2001; Gendreau, 1997; Guadarrama, 1999; Marques and Rocha, 2006; Renero, 1995, 1996; Tufte, 2007; Yarto and Lozano, 2004) or the role of the family and/or the school in the mediation of television reception (Aguiló, 2004; Bonin, 2005a; Cornejo, 1992; Cornejo et al., 1995; Fuenzalida, 1992; González-Hernández, 2006; Huerta, 2004; Lozano, 2000; Orozco and Viveros, 1996; Padilla, 2007; Renero, 1992, 1997; Uribe, 1993; Vink, 1992, among others).

In contrast, many other areas of potential concern when looking at television reception, like violence, credibility of news, appropriation of the media agenda, adoption of the television versions of reality, and so on, are hardly covered in the body of work reviewed. This finding reveals the lack of diversity in the theoretical approaches utilized by Latin American researchers and might also indicate the lack of diversity in the training of potential and future scholars in the communication Latin American graduate programs.

### Improvements in the methodological front?

In their review of the 26 empirical studies on *telenovela* audiences from 1970 to 1993, McAnany and La Pastina (1994) concluded that their most striking finding was that

relatively few [studies] make any references to their methodologies, seeming to take their methodologies for granted. In general, the two methods most commonly used are the survey and the ethnographic case study, although focus group and action research and other methodologies are also employed. (1994: 839)



Our review of 96 television reception studies shows that in the last 15 years a significant number of Latin American researchers are still making few references to their methodologies (Tables 9 and 10). About 44 per cent of the works explained their methodology incompletely or not at all, and about 27 per cent of the studies did not include a formal method section. This finding shows that there is still work to be done in Latin America to train researchers in a more rigorous way and that journal editors and their evaluators need to be stricter in their reviews of submitted empirical studies.

However, on a more positive note, the studies reviewed seem to have achieved a better balance between the different techniques available for audience research (Table 11). Surveys are still important, but qualitative research has diversified through the use of in-depth or focused interviews, focus groups, ethnographies and other qualitative strategies. An interesting development is the growing use of both surveys and a qualitative technique in the same study (Bonilla and Rincón, 1998; Chavero and Muñoz, 2005; De Jesús and Albuquerque Patriota, 2007; Gendreau, 1997; Lozano, 2000, 2003a; Renero, 1996, 1997; Tufte, 2007), showing a tendency to look for triangulation in the findings. This is a welcome development in a region where the rejection of quantitative methods for their 'inherent' positivism (see Mattelart, 1976) and the divorce between the advocates of qualitative methods and the supporters of quantitative methods is still present in many cases.

Table 9 *Number of studies by the degree to which the method is explained*

Explanation	Number of studies	%
Completely	57	59.4
Incompletely	32	33.3
No explanation	7	7.3
Total	96	100

Table 10 *Number of studies by inclusion of a method section*

Method section	Number of studies	%
Existent	42	43.8
Existent but with a different name	28	29.2
Non-existent	26	27.1
Total	96	100

Table 11 *Number of studies by technique*

Technique	Number of studies	%
Survey	19	19.8
Interview	19	19.8
Survey plus a qualitative technique	18	18.8
Focus group	17	17.7
Ethnography	9	9.4
Life stories	5	5.2
Secondary data	4	4.2
Other qualitative	4	4.2
Other quantitative	1	1.0
Total	96	100

Sample sizes, however, were for the most part still problematic, as was the case in the analysis of McAnany and La Pastina (1994). Table 12 shows that almost half of the articles reported sample sizes for surveys with less than 300 respondents (samples that may not be representative). The other half of the articles based on this quantitative strategy oscillated between 300 and 3000 respondents. The only studies surpassing the 2000 mark were the ones carried out by the associates of the Televisa Chair in the Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Monterrey (Cerdeña, 2001; Lozano, 2000, 2003a; Yarto and Lozano, 2004), reporting the findings of a large probability sample from Monterrey, Guadalajara, and Mexico City on television and daily life. Another large sample was a survey of 1134 Junior High School students in Bogotá, Colombia, carried out by the Universidad de la Sabana (López, 2003). Apart from these works, many surveys lacked adequate discussion of the population and sample sizes, the sampling procedures, the research design and any other relevant information to assess the quality of the field work.

In the qualitative studies reviewed it was more difficult to evaluate the adequacy of the number of informants or the number of sessions due

Table 12 *Number of quantitative studies by sample size*

Number of informants	Number of studies	%
Less than 300	12	45.7
300–600	7	26.6
1134	1	3.8
1200–1300	2	7.6
2680	4	15.4
Total	26	99.1

to the flexibility and the variability of characteristics and objectives to be taken into account. What seemed problematic, however, was the fact that 16 per cent of studies based on qualitative interviews did not mention the actual number of informants who participated and 32 per cent of the studies based on qualitative techniques did not explain completely or did not explain at all the methodology of their field work (Tables 13 and 14). Without this information, it was impossible to assess the relevance, validity and quality of the findings reported in the studies. Why the journals selected allowed a large number of qualitative studies to ignore or not to explain fully their methodology is not clear.

### Increasing the numbers

Table 15 shows that the interest of Latin American researchers in empirically studying television reception is increasing. While between 1992 and 1999 the total journals reviewed reported three or four studies of this kind, between 2000 and 2007 the number of these reports grew significantly, especially in the last three years, reaching between 9 and

Table 13 *Number of qualitative studies based on interviews by sample size*

Number of informants	Number of studies	%
1–4	8	19.5
5–9	3	7.3
10–14	5	12.2
15–19	3	7.3
20–29	7	17.1
30–40	5	12.2
50–70	3	7.3
90–100	2	4.9
129	1	2.4
180	4	9.8
Total	41	100

Table 14 *Number of studies based on focus groups by sample size*

Groups	Number of studies	%
1	1	12.5
2	2	25.0
4	3	37.5
7	2	25.0
Total	8	100

Table 15 *Number of studies by year*

Year	Number of studies	%
1992	4	4.2
1993	1	1.0
1994	3	3.1
1995	3	3.1
1996	5	5.2
1997	4	4.2
1998	4	4.2
1999	2	2.1
2000	5	5.2
2001	6	6.3
2002	6	6.3
2003	8	8.3
2004	9	9.4
2005	16	16.7
2006	11	11.5
2007	9	9.4
Total	96	100

16 published studies. The larger number of academic journals or the incorporation of more scholars from the region may be the factors accounting for this increment. This new data is relevant and positive and helps redress some of the omissions and gaps on audience research in the region.

### Authors cited the most

Table 16 shows that the authors cited the most in these studies were the classic theorists in Latin America: Jesús Martín-Barbero, Guillermo Orozco and Néstor García-Canclini. These scholars were pioneers in this field in the 1980s, establishing the theoretical foundations of audience research in the region and doing important empirical work on television audiences as well. A great number of authors of the studies reviewed considered these scholars an obligated reference in their research work. The non-Latin American authors cited the most were some of the key figures of Cultural Studies, like David Morley, Stuart Hall, Pierre Bourdieu and James Lull. It is important to point out, however, that studies carried out in this topic during the last 15 years, like the ones reviewed in this report, were hardly mentioned, despite their clear relevance to the research at hand.

Table 16 Number of times an author was cited twice or more in the same study

Author	Cited twice or more (number of studies)	%
David Morley	17	6.4
Guillermo Orozco	16	6.0
Jesús Martín-Barbero	22	8.2
Néstor García-Canclini	14	5.2
James Lull	9	3.4
Stuart Hall	9	3.4
Pierre Bourdieu	7	2.6
Jorge A. González	5	1.9
Klaus B. Jensen	5	1.9
Gilberto Giménez	4	1.5
Ien Ang	3	1.1
Maurice Halbwachs	3	1.1
Migdalia Pineda	3	1.1
Roger Silverstone	3	1.1
Others with one or two	147	55.1
Total	267	100

## Discussion

Despite the strong tradition of Cultural Studies in Latin America, the theorization and research on *telenovelas*, and the significant contributions of scholars like Martín-Barbero, García-Canclini and Orozco, not only at the regional but at the global level, empirical research on television audiences is still scarce. The tendency of Latin American scholars to opt for theoretical essays instead of empirical work due to lack of funds and in many cases deficient training in methodological issues, seems to have continued in the last 15 years.

The 96 studies on television audiences found in 982 issues of 55 leading Latin American journals provide some grounds to detect the main trends in the genres, audiences, theoretical approaches and research techniques that have characterized empirical work between 1993 and 2007. One of the most interesting findings is the displacement of *telenovelas* as the focus of reception studies in the region. While a quarter of the total number of studies may still reflect a continued importance of *telenovelas* in these studies, the last 15 years have shown a growing interest in looking either at the whole ensemble of television contents consumed by different segments of the audience or at the reception of television news. However, there seems to be a need for more empirical

research on particular genres that have become relevant in the supply and the consumption sides in most countries, like reality shows, series, cartoons and sports, among others. It is surprising to find no qualitative study on the reception or appropriation of a particular genre or program other than *telenovelas* or news.

For a region academically known worldwide for its concern with cultural imperialism and the ideological effects of transnational and local media industries on audience members, it is odd to find out that only 12 out of the 96 studies were concerned with the ideological readings and negotiations of viewers. Latin American Cultural Studies scholars seem to have followed the same pattern as their American and European colleagues, neglecting issues of ideology and power and focusing instead on topics like daily life or the mediating roles of families and school in the viewing process.

While the body of work reviewed in this article shows that Latin American empirical research on television audiences is becoming more plural and sophisticated in its use of quantitative and qualitative techniques, there seems to be a long way to go in respect of the methodological rigor and standards, in the research design and the field work as well as in the evaluation of the quality and relevance of their findings.

Latin American empirical research has great potential to make significant contributions to the understanding of the processes of consumption, negotiation and appropriation of television contents at the worldwide level, because of the size of the region, the value of local theoretical thinking in this area and the coexistence of tradition, modernity and post-modernity in Latin American countries (García-Canclini, 1990) that may allow for patterns of consumption and reception that may be significantly different from the ones identified by current international research in Western countries. Hopefully, Latin American scholars in the next 15 years will make a significant empirical contribution to the understanding of the consumption and negotiation patterns of regional audiences, matching the theoretical contributions already made by scholars like Martín-Barbero and García-Canclini.

## Note

With the collaboration of Carlos del Valle, Nilda Jacks, Ana Paula Knewitz, Daniel López, Nilse Maria Maldaner, Anny Paz, Migdalia Pineda, Adriana Rigo, Silvia Romero and Lourdes Silva.

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