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Abstract

This article explores the consumption patterns of local and foreign film and television content of Mexican audiences living in the Northeast region of the country, a region bordering with the United States. Based on telephone surveys in four of the largest cities in the area (Reynosa, Monterrey, Saltillo and Torreón), the study presents data about television consumption that suggest that cultural proximity factors are stronger in Mexican northerners than their geographical, commercial and historical proximity to the US. The concept of cultural discount seems to apply in this part of Mexico, due to the differences in language, practices and traditions despite the proximity and familiarity with US culture (except in the case of Hollywood films, as in many other countries in the world).

Keywords

audiovisual flows, cultural discount, cultural proximity, film preferences, Mexican audiovisual media, television preferences

Media flows between countries have always been controversial. On the one hand, fears of cultural consequences if imbalances occur and concerns about the symbolic value of cultural and media products – mainly going unidirectionally from industrialized countries to developing countries – have historically been put forward by international communication scholars (Beltrán, 1978; Esteinou, 1993; Mattelart, 2002; Oliveira, 1988; Schiller, 1991, 1992). On the other hand, cultural studies and cultural proximity scholars have argued that local and regional audiovisual counterflows, in addition

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to cultural and linguistic factors in active audiences, avoid the predominance of Anglo-American media contents (Garcia Canclini, 1989, 1996, 2001; Lozano, 1992, 2005, 2008a; Straubhaar, 1991, 2003; Wilkinson, 1995). Despite the relevance and intensity of this debate, empirical research looking for evidence from one approach or the other has been relatively scarce. Elasmr and Hunter (1997), testing the assumptions of cultural imperialism scholars about the impact of foreign television in the cultural identity of local audiences, did a meta-analysis of empirical studies available (most of them carried out from a cross-cultural effects perspective because they could not find enough empirical studies from a cultural imperialism or cultural dependency perspective) and concluded that 'at most, foreign TV exposure may have a very weak impact upon its audience members' (1997: 64). Later, Elasmr (2003) collected several empirical studies in a volume both from the same cross-cultural effects perspective and from the cultural proximity approach, and in the closing chapter concluded that foreign TV did not seem to have a homogeneous influence across individuals and effect types, but that it could be influential, depending on key antecedent factors (knowledge, beliefs, attitudes) and their interrelationships (2003: 177). In a different vein, empirical research carried out from a cultural proximity perspective has also found indications that audience members in different developing countries are more attracted first to their local media contents and then to regional media contents, leaving preference for US television contents last except with regard to genres and types of contents not available locally (Burch, 2002; Davis, 2003; La Pastina, 2007; La Pastina and Straubhaar, 2005; Lozano, 2008b; Martínez, 2005; Straubhaar, 1991, 2003).

This article provides an overview of the patterns of consumption of audiovisual content within a very particular segment of the Mexican audience: the inhabitants of the Northeast region. Based on telephone surveys in four of the largest cities in the area, the study focuses on audience members who, due to their geographical proximity to the US and their historical, cultural, economic and touristic contact with their powerful neighbor to the North, would be more likely to exhibit consumption habits indicative of a preference for US audiovisual imports.

Media flows between Mexico and the United States

When Canada, Mexico and the United States signed a trilateral trade agreement that came into effect on 1 January 1994, Canada, historically overwhelmed by US imports due in part to its lack of cultural discount (Hoskins et al., 1989), particularly in Anglo-Canada, and in part to the economies of scale of the American market, included an exemption for its cultural industries 'to prevent the cultural standardization of content and the complete foreign control of distribution' (Hoskins et al., 1997: 65). In contrast to Canada, Mexico decided not to ask for a cultural exemption clause. The dominance of local content in the broadcasting sector due to the existence of large national conglomerates like Televisa and TV Azteca and the cultural discount of most US cultural products due to linguistic, historical and cultural factors inclined Mexico not to seek an exemption clause (Lozano, 2008b). The Mexican negotiators were also very interested in avoiding any barriers to the large Spanish-language market in the United States, not only for commercial reasons but also for the political objective of preserving cultural

and linguistic ties with the large number of Mexicans living and working in the United States.

Some scholars have argued that, in fact, with or without NAFTA, the media flows between Mexico and the United States were already growing and responding to earlier liberalization and deregulation policies on the part of the Mexican government (García-Canclini, 1996; Lozano, 2003a). In the early 1980s, the administration of Miguel de la Madrid opened the Mexican economy radically, deregulating and liberalizing many areas of production and marketing, and in 1986, Mexico joined the GATT. The next administration, headed by Carlos Salinas de Gortari, deepened and completed the process of deregulation and privatization, including electronic media and telecommunications (Gómez, 2008; Lozano, 2003a). When NAFTA was put into effect on 1 January 1994, the national public network Imevision had already been privatized and converted into TV Azteca, the national telephone monopoly Telmex had also been privatized, and new film regulations had been passed allowing private and foreign investment in the production and distribution of Mexico's motion picture industry and a progressive decrease in the quota of Mexican films in theaters from 50 percent to only 10 percent (Lozano, 2003a).

During the last 15 years, audiovisual flows between Mexico and the United States have experienced some changes, but it is not clear if they have been products of NAFTA, the earlier deregulating and privatizing policies or a combination of both. Today, the US dominates the distribution and exhibition of films in Mexican theaters. The major distribution companies, most of them American, control the distribution of titles (Matute, 2006; Ramos et al., 2003), and US films account for about 90 percent of total screening time in movie houses, in contrast with 50 percent of total screening time during the 1980s (Martínez et al., 2007: 40; Matute, 2006). While in 1994, the first year of NAFTA, Mexican films accounted for 22 percent of all titles exhibited in theaters, by 2004 the percentage had decreased to a mere 3 percent (Martínez et al., 2007: 49).

In contrast to films, the supply of television in Mexico has shown a more complex and balanced situation. Several studies state that during the 1980s, US imports accounted for 30–35 percent of total transmission time on the main national television networks (Lozano, 2006: 110). In the 1990s, the percentage went up, reaching almost 40 percent of total time and between 34 and 44 percent of prime time (Lozano, 2006: 111). However, from 1999 through 2004 (Lozano, 2006: 111; Martínez and Lozano, 2005: 57; Straubhaar et al., 2003), US imports accounted for only 28–31 percent of total and prime time, while local productions accounted for almost 70 percent of total and prime time. However, the same studies found that in some particular genres, like movies and cartoons, US imports accounted for percentages ranging from 45 to 90 percent, increasing significantly the presence and potential impact of those imports on Mexican audiences.

Pay TV has understandably shown a very different proportion in the general supply of content, with US imports accounting for around 60–90 percent of total supply (Lozano, 2006: 110; Sánchez Ruiz, 2005) depending on the provider (e.g. Sky, Cablevision and Multivision).

In sum, in the last two decades the supply of American films in theaters in Mexico has grown to the point of almost total dominance of screenings, while the television supply has been controlled by local productions, with the exception of some genres like cartoons, movies and action and sitcom series.

Audiovisual flows in Northeastern Mexico

Northeastern Mexico is comprised of the states of Coahuila (2,495,200 inhabitants), Nuevo León (4,164,268) and Tamaulipas (3,020,225). The three states share an international border with Texas. The largest cities in the region are Monterrey (in Nuevo León), Torreón and Saltillo (in Coahuila) and Tampico, Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa and Matamoros (in Tamaulipas).

The audiovisual flows in this Mexican region, except for the cities located on the border with Texas, are very similar to those in the rest of the country. Over-the-air television is dominated by the main national networks, Televisa and TV Azteca, and by the large regional media conglomerate Multimedios Estrellas de Oro. Pay TV is also dominated by national and regional conglomerates (e.g. Televisa-Sky, Multimedios-Cablevision, Megacable, Cablevisión Saltillo). Movie theaters are part of national chains, either Organización Ramírez (Cinépolis), or MMCinemas/Cinemex. In the border cities of the Northeast (including Reynosa), in addition to the national and regional supplies of television and films, residents have the possibility of receiving US television channels over the air or attending the US movie theaters across the border. Consequently, except for these border cities, the rest of the towns in Coahuila, Nuevo León and Tamaulipas have access to a very similar supply of audiovisual media as is available in other regions of Mexico.

Flow studies of this part of the country are scarce. The only known study examined Monterrey, the capital of Nuevo León and the main city in the region (3,700,000 inhabitants in 2005), located 136 miles away from the border with Texas. According to Lozano and García (1995), in 1995, 42 percent of all prime time media shown on the local television channels in Monterrey was from the US, although the viewers also had access to the national networks of Televisa and TV Azteca, with their shares of national and US content. The five local channels, however, had a very high number of in-house produced programs, increasing the degree of origin diversity in the total television supply. Except for Monterrey, local audiovisual productions are not significant in cities in this part of the country, suggesting that the data on audiovisual flows at the national level will more likely be applicable to most cities of the region.

Audience research in Mexico and in the Northeast

Audience studies of the consumption of US audiovisual imports in Mexico and in the Northeast are not very abundant, but those available show that exposure to American content has never been overpowering. In a review of television ratings and surveys of consumption of US audiovisual content during the 1990s, Lozano (2005) found that, in general, Mexican audiences tended to prefer local television content over imports. In Mexico City, IBOPE AGB's ratings of Mexico City's metropolitan area consistently showed that the vast majority of the 20 or 50 programs with the highest ratings were produced locally (Lozano, 2005: 177–8), with only *The Simpsons* (dubbed in Spanish) and Hollywood movies (also dubbed in Spanish) getting into the top 20 or 50.

A survey of junior high school students in the border city of Nuevo Laredo in 1991 by Lozano (1992) found that 26 out of the 33 most watched television programs were of

Mexican or Latin American origin. The highest ranked US content in the list (ranked 16th) was cartoons watched on Saturdays on the US channels of NBC or CBS received over the air. In Monterrey, a telephone survey in February 1997 by the daily newspaper *El Norte* found that only four of the 20 most watched television programs were not Mexican: Hollywood movies, *The Nanny*, *The Simpsons* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, all of them in their dubbed-to-Spanish versions (Martínez, 1997). Another telephone survey (García, 1997) had similar findings: only five of the 20 most watched programs were not Mexican (including *The Nanny*, *The Simpsons*, cartoons and *Dragon Ball Z*). Finally, a telephone survey done in 1999 in Monterrey concluded that its residents by far preferred Mexican over foreign content (Lozano, 2003b). Most of these studies, however, when disaggregating the respondents by age, gender and SES, found significant differences between them. Youngsters, males and upper-class respondents were more likely to prefer US imports than any other groups, although they also watched a large number of Mexican programs (García, 1997; García Nuñez de Cáceres, 1997; Lozano, 1992, 2003b).

Surveys and statistics documenting movie theater attendance show that, in contrast to television preferences, Mexican audiences overwhelmingly watch US movies. This was the case before the signing of NAFTA, but after the treaty, with the lowering of the quota for national films to just 10 percent, it became even higher. According to the magazine *Telemundo* (1995), 75 out of the 100 box office movies shown in Mexico in 1995 (one year after NAFTA) were from the US, and only 10 were from Mexico. The 10 highest-grossing movies for that year were all from the US (Carro, 1996). A sample of Mexico's population in 27 states in December 2003 found that 58 percent of respondents reported watching mostly US movies during the previous year, in contrast to only 32 percent mentioning Mexican movies (Conaculta, 2004: 52). The study also found that younger, more educated and more affluent Mexicans were more likely to have watched mostly US movies during the last 12 months. In 2006, Mexico had the fifth highest number of movie screens (3700) in the world and was ranked 11th in box office revenues with 165 million tickets sold every year. However, only 5 percent of that amount was earned by Mexican movies (*El Universal*, 2006). In one week in the summer of 2008, 78 percent of all screens in Mexico were dedicated to only four titles (including *Iron Man* and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*; Young, 2008).

In Northeastern Mexico, the situation seems to have been very similar to that in the rest of the country. In his survey of junior high school students in 1991 in Nuevo Laredo, Lozano (1992) found that 77 percent of the movies they had most recently seen in theaters and 84 percent of those they had watched on VHS were from the US. In Monterrey, 16 out of 17 of the films with the highest box office grosses in the summer of 1996 were from the US (Guzmán, 1995). A telephone survey carried out in 1996 in Monterrey found that 68 percent of the movies most recently seen by the respondents in theaters or at home on their VCRs were from the US (Lozano, 1997: 166). As in the case of exposure to US television content, the survey found that youngsters and better educated respondents were more likely to view US movies than older and less educated persons.

Based on this review of the supply of US film and television content in Mexico and specifically in the Northeast region of the country during the last 30 years, the following research questions were posed for this study:

1. How pervasive was the consumption of US television and film content among Northeastern Mexican audiences in comparison with their consumption of local and national media messages in the mid-2000s?
2. What was the preferred US and Mexican content among the audience members of this region of Mexico?
3. Were there any significant differences in their consumption of US content depending on variables like gender and age? Were upper-class male youngsters the segment that was most interested in US content as suggested by prior studies?

Method

This study was based on a multistage probabilistic telephone survey using the White Pages telephone directories in four of the largest cities in Northeastern Mexico: Reynosa, Tamaulipas (508,000 inhabitants); Monterrey, Nuevo León (3,700,000); Saltillo, Coahuila (633,667); and Torreón, Coahuila (548,723). Reynosa is the only one of these four cities that is located right on the border with Texas. The other three cities are at least 150 miles away from the border but have a strong historical relationship with Texas. The four surveys were performed in 2005. The sample size in each city was 400 respondents.

Research teams were assembled and trained in each city. The Reynosa survey was carried out by professors and students of the Universidad México Americana del Noreste (UMAN). In Saltillo and Torreón, the surveys were done by professors and students of the Universidad Autónoma de Coahuila (UAdeC). In Monterrey, professors and students of the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (UANL), the Universidad de Monterrey (UEM) and the Tecnológico de Monterrey were responsible for administering the survey.

The main variables examined in the survey were: availability of TV sets, DVDs and pay TV in the household; time devoted to watching TV and films at home; frequency of movie theater attendance; and preferred over-the-air and paid television channels and programs by origin, gender, age and years of education.

In Mexico, including in the Northeast, telephone fixed line subscribers comprise a small percentage of the population: There were only 19 fixed lines per 100 inhabitants in 2008 (Gascón, 2008). In cities like Monterrey, that figure is higher: at the time of the survey reported here, the city had 29 fixed lines per 100 inhabitants (Galán and Barrientos, 2006). However, this means that these telephone surveys were not representative of the population as a whole in each city but only of the people who had fixed telephone lines at home, most likely middle- and upper-class residents.

Findings

How pervasive was the consumption of US television and film content among Northeastern Mexican audiences in comparison with their consumption of local and national media messages in the mid-2000s? Despite their geographical, economic and cultural proximity to the United States, their television consumption heavily favored locally or nationally produced programs (Table 1), as in the case of Mexico as a whole.

Table 1. *T*-tests of frequencies of watching each television genre by gender

	Gender	N	Mean ^a	SD	t	Sig.
National news	Female	823	3.8	1.4	1.423	.155
	Male	617	3.6	1.4		
<i>Telenovelas</i>	Female	825	3.5	1.5	14.784	.000
	Male	617	2.4	1.5		
Local news	Female	822	3.4	1.6	1.147	.251
	Male	613	3.3	1.5		
US films	Female	817	2.8	1.5	-6.098	.000
	Male	611	3.3	1.4		
Mexican films	Female	820	2.6	1.3	-.733	.463
	Male	614	2.7	1.3		
Mexican comedy	Female	822	2.5	1.3	-4.442	.000
	Male	616	2.8	1.3		
Sporting events (Mexican)	Female	820	2.4	1.5	-14.535	.000
	Male	615	3.6	1.5		
Game shows (Mexican)	Female	823	2.5	1.4	2.587	.010
	Male	612	2.3	1.4		
US sitcoms	Female	816	2.4	1.4	-2.321	.020
	Male	611	2.6	1.4		
US drama series	Female	817	2.9	1.5	8.647	.000
	Male	614	2.2	1.4		
Documentaries	Female	820	2.4	1.4	-4.564	.000
	Male	613	2.7	1.4		
US action series	Female	819	2.1	1.3	-6.550	.000
	Male	614	2.6	1.4		
US comedy	Female	822	1.9	1.2	-4.228	.000
	Male	611	2.2	1.3		
Japanese cartoons	Female	823	1.7	1.3	-3.876	.000
	Male	614	2.0	1.3		
US cartoons	Female	819	2.1	1.5	-3.076	.002
	Male	613	2.4	1.5		

^aOn the scale of 1 'Very rarely'; 2 'Rarely'; 3 'Regularly'; 4 'Frequently'; 5 'Very frequently'.

Genres

The three most preferred genres were national news, local news and *telenovelas*. Social and cultural proximity factors (Straubhaar, 2003) seemed to lead Northeastern Mexico's inhabitants to prefer content that allowed them to connect to their nation or their local community: on one hand, they preferred programs providing them with information about current events in their locality and their country in proportions even higher than in the rest of the country, where audiences are generally more interested in movies and magazines than in news (Jara and Garnica, 2007: 111). On the other hand, Mexican *telenovelas* were also preferred, showing that Northeasterners were in tune with the melodramatic tradition characteristic of Latin American culture in general: 'the means of expression more suited to the way of life and the feelings' of people of this region (Martín-Barbero, 1987: 243) and the genre that 'has documented the cultural history

of Mexico and other national cultures in Latin America' (Lull, 1998: 13), although some scholars have argued that Mexican *telenovelas* in particular and Latin American *telenovelas* in general have been inspired by US soap models and 'permeated by Western capitalist values such as consumerism and the embellishment of class conflicts' (Biltereyst and Meers, 2000: 396). A massive survey in Latin America found that cultural proximity seems to be well in place in most countries, where local content and genres were preferred over US and other foreign television imports (Audits and Surveys Worldwide, 1997). In fact, the survey concluded that Mexico had the lowest preference for US television programs of all nations surveyed and the highest preference for national programming. The reasons for Mexico being the country in Latin America with the highest preference for local programming are not clear, but it may be the result of strong and pervasive national audiovisual media conglomerates like Televisa and TV Azteca, heavy producers of contents, and of the traditional and strong nationalist vein in the educational system, with a prevalent anti-Americanism in the national textbooks. Such factors may contribute to exacerbate the cultural and linguistic proximity also present in the rest of the countries in the region.

US movies, ranked as the fourth most preferred genre, were the type of US content preferred the most by Northeastern Mexican audiences, a fact perhaps best explained by the worldwide popularity of Hollywood movies and not by the region's geographical proximity to the United States or by NAFTA. That US movies are the most popular television imports in Mexico as a whole can be seen in national ratings, where they have consistently appeared among the top 10 most watched programs (usually dubbed to Spanish). According to Jara and Garnica (2007: 91), 17 out of the 20 movies shown on over-the-air national television in Mexico with the highest historical ratings were from the US. Many scholars have provided evidence of the preponderance of Hollywood films in most Latin American countries (Atkin, 2003; García Canclini, 2004: 199; Getino, 2006: 237; Sánchez-Ruiz, 2004: 28) when explaining the historical, economic and political reasons for their success, providing indirect evidence that Northeasterners are not more prone to watching US films than any other Mexican or Latin American population. La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005: 273), in addition, explain that when local audiences prefer foreign genres, it is usually because they are too expensive to be produced locally or regionally or because they rely on the most common denominators, like sex and violence. That seems to be precisely the case of films, with meager numbers of national and Latin American movies being produced every year. Genres coming next on the preference list were Mexican films, Mexican comedy, Mexican sports events and Mexican game shows. The second US genre on the list, sitcoms, appeared in 10th place. In sum, eight out of the 10 television genres with the highest rankings were Mexican despite the availability of much more US content both on over-the-air and on pay TV. In the early 1980s, Boyd-Barret (1982) and Fejes (1984) pointed out the need to take into account the countervailing local and national supplies of content when examining the consumption of foreign audiovisual media in a receiving country. At that time, media imperialism approaches were very popular, and flow studies tended to focus mainly on the availability of US media content without assessing the local media output and the actual patterns of consumption by local audience members. These findings validate for Mexican Northeastern viewers Straubhaar's (2003: 80) argument about audiences'

tendency 'to prefer programming that is closest or most proximate to their own culture: national programming if it can be supported by the local economy'.

Table 1 provides data for the analysis of genre preferences according to gender. As prior studies in Mexico have found (Díaz, 1995; Figueroa, 1996; Lozano, 1992; Olvera, 1995), women tend to be less inclined to watch foreign genres than men. Men were significantly more interested in US films, US series, US sitcoms, US comedy and US cartoons than women were. The only US genre showing a stronger preference among female viewers than males was US drama, but the frequency of exposure was still lower than their frequency of exposure to Mexican genres like *telenovelas* and news programs. These findings are similar to those obtained by García (1997: 38) in a telephone survey in Monterrey in 1997: 67 percent of all programs mentioned by women were produced in Mexico and only 15 percent in the US. In contrast, only 48 percent of all programs mentioned by men were produced in Mexico, and 33 percent originated in the US. This seems to be the case in most Latin American countries. According to the Audits and Surveys Worldwide (1997) findings, females all over Latin America were less likely than males to prefer US content and more likely than males to prefer programs from their own country.

As explained by Straubhaar (2003: 87), age is frequently a clear differentiating demographic characteristic in the preference for foreign media products: 'younger people tend to be more involved in global or at least transnational cultural patterns than older people'. Table 2 shows precisely the same phenomenon in the case of the four Northeastern Mexican cities: the younger the respondents, the higher their frequency of exposure to comedies, films, series and sitcoms produced in the US. The single exception was US dramas, where age showed no correlation with the frequency of exposure. Youngsters had significant differences in their frequencies of exposure to some Mexican genres, too, showing lower consumption of national films and local and national news compared to older respondents. As evidence of their wide popularity among Northeasterners, regardless of their demographic characteristics, there were no significant differences in the consumption of *telenovelas* according to age.

Programs

Table 3 shows the clear preference for specific Mexican television content among the individuals surveyed. Of the 30 most watched television programs, 25 were produced in Mexico, and only five came from the United States. Mexican *telenovelas*, variety/talk shows, dramas and musical shows were the preferred genres. The only US program in the 10 most watched shows was the animated sitcom *The Simpsons* (*Los Simpsons*) dubbed in Spanish. The second US program on the list was *Smallville* (16th place), followed by *Desperate Housewives* (24th) and *Friends* (28th), showing the low popularity in general of US television shows among audiences in Northeast Mexico. (The question asked the respondents to mention their three most favourite 'television programs'. Because of this, the respondents did not mention films, a category of content that, according to other questions and other sources, is indeed high in preferences, as noted earlier.) Again, gender was useful for detecting differences between respondents. In general, programs like *telenovelas*, dramas, magazine, gossip and game shows made it onto the list of the

Table 2. Pearson's correlations of the frequency of watching each television genre by age

		Age Females	Age Males
<i>Telenovelas</i>	Pearson correlation	-.054	-.062
	Sig. (bilateral)	.120	.123
	N	825	617
Mexican comedy	Pearson correlation	-.084(*)	-.154(**)
	Sig. (bilateral)	.016	.000
	N	822	616
US comedy	Pearson correlation	-.251(**)	-.231(**)
	Sig. (bilateral)	.000	.000
	N	822	611
Mexican films	Pearson correlation	.113(**)	.126(**)
	Sig. (bilateral)	.001	.002
	N	820	614
US films	Pearson correlation	-.181(**)	-.172(**)
	Sig. (bilateral)	.000	.000
	N	817	611
National news	Pearson correlation	.195(**)	.181(**)
	Sig. (bilateral)	.000	.000
	N	823	617
Local news	Pearson correlation	.124(**)	.140(**)
	Sig. (bilateral)	.000	.001
	N	822	613
US action series	Pearson correlation	-.109(**)	-.198(**)
	Sig. (bilateral)	.002	.000
	N	819	614
US drama series	Pearson correlation	-.013	-.059
	Sig. (bilateral)	.704	.145
	N	817	614
US sitcoms	Pearson correlation	-.175(**)	-.257(**)
	Sig. (bilateral)	.000	.000
	N	816	611
Documentaries	Pearson correlation	.055	.024
	Sig. (bilateral)	.114	.559
	N	820	613
Sporting events (Mexican)	Pearson correlation	-.041	-.007
	Sig. (bilateral)	.242	.867
	N	820	615

* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (bilateral).

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (bilateral).

top 10 television programs because of preferences mentioned by female respondents. In contrast, two of the four US programs included in the list, *The Simpsons* and *Smallville*, were much more frequently mentioned among men than women, while mentions of *Desperate Housewives* and *Friends* were more balanced between the two genders.

The long history of economic, cultural, migratory and touristic contact with the US has not driven Northeastern inhabitants toward a stronger preference for American television imports. In spite of their geographical proximity and historical ties with the

Table 3. Number of mentions of favorite TV programs by gender

Rank	Program	Females %	Males %	Total f
1	<i>Rebelde</i> (telenovela, Mexican)	66	34	117
2	<i>Otro rollo</i> (magazine, Mexican)	57	43	106
3	<i>Los Simpsons</i> (animated sitcom, US)	35	65	101
4	<i>Vida TV</i> (magazine, Mexican)	69	31	84
5	<i>Bailando por un sueño</i> (reality TV show, Mexican)	60	40	76
6	<i>Lo que callamos las mujeres</i> (drama series, Mexican)	90	10	73
7	<i>La vida es una canción</i> (series, Mexican)	80	20	70
8	<i>Ventaneando</i> (gossip show, Mexican)	79	21	66
9	<i>La oreja</i> (gossip show, Mexican)	71	29	63
10	<i>Vas o no vas</i> (game show, Mexican)	68	32	60
11	<i>Hoy</i> (magazine, Mexican)	76	24	54
12	<i>Amor en custodia</i> (telenovela, Mexican)	67	33	51
13	<i>Alborada</i> (telenovela, Mexican)	80	20	46
13	<i>La esposa virgen</i> (telenovela, Mexican)	89	11	46
15	<i>Mujer, casos de la vida real</i> (drama series, Mexican)	82	18	45
16	<i>El chavo del ocho</i> (comedy, Mexican)	45	55	42
16	<i>Smallville</i> (action-adventure, sci-fi series, US)	40	60	42
18	<i>Contra viento y marea</i> (telenovela, Mexican)	71	29	41
19	<i>No manches</i> (talk show, Mexican)	62	38	39
20	<i>Los 10 más pedidos</i> (music show, Mexican)	37	63	38
21	<i>Laura en América</i> (talk show, Peruvian)	78	22	37
22	<i>100 mexicanos dijeron</i> (game show, Mexican)	54	46	28
23	<i>La parodia</i> (comedy, Mexican)	50	50	26
24	<i>Esposas desesperadas</i> (comedy-drama series, US)	60	40	25
24	<i>Piel de otoño</i> (telenovela, Mexican)	88	12	25
26	<i>Los protagonistas</i> (sports talk show, Mexican)	0	100	24
26	<i>Tempranito</i> (magazine, Mexican)	68	33	24
28	<i>Friends</i> (sitcom, US)	52	48	23
29	<i>Cada mañana</i> (magazine, Mexican)	86	14	22
30	<i>El rival más débil</i> (game show, Mexican)	57	43	21

US, audience members in this region exhibited patterns of television consumption very similar to their counterparts in the rest of the country, showing a clear preference for national content over foreign, with the blatant exception of US films.

Consumption of US films in theaters and on DVD

Movie theaters. The data related to the consumption of films in theaters and through DVD players are consistent with the consumption patterns of films on television and with the evidence already presented. Table 4 shows that more than 80 percent of all of the films mentioned as having been seen recently in the region were US movies, in contrast with only 4 or 5 percent of the mentions referring to Mexican titles. This overwhelming preference for US movies over Mexican films or movies from other countries, as argued before, is not particular to this border region with the United States but a general trend not only in Mexico, but also in many other regions of the world (see Atkin, 2003;

Table 4. Origins of the three films most recently watched at movie theaters by gender (in percentages)

Origin	Females % N = 743	Males % N = 647	Total f N = 1390
US films	86	82	1170
Films from other countries	9	12	147
Mexican films	4	5	56
Origin unidentified	1	1	17

Pearson chi-square, 3.453(a), d.f. = 3, $p = .327$.

Ramírez, 2006; Sánchez Ruiz, 2004). It is difficult to determine whether the results reflect a dislike of Mexican and other Latin American films or whether the high consumption of US films is just a product of the lack of non-US movies in theaters. In a one-year study of the supply of films in Mexico City's theaters, Martínez and Lozano (2005) found that 80 percent of the total number of screenings in that year were of US films. In preparation for NAFTA, in 1992 the Mexican government privatized the state-controlled distribution system of films in the country, allowing US major film studios to enter the market. Today, the majors control most of the distribution of films in Mexico, forcing exhibitors to screen many US movies through the mechanism of 'block booking', providing Hollywood blockbusters only in packages with many other much less popular US movies (García Canclini, 2004: 200). This lack of Mexican films on the supply side as well as the distribution strategies of the majors for the exhibition of Hollywood films in theaters accounts for the patterns of consumption and preferences not only of Northeasterners, but of Mexican viewers all over Mexico. As García Canclini (1995: 141) put it: 'people do not watch what they prefer; they prefer what is offered to them'.

Table 5 shows that the films most recently seen in theaters were all Hollywood blockbusters, in consonance with the characteristics of the supply. As explained earlier, cinema chains in the Northeast region belong to the same national chains that control the exhibition of films all over the country: Cinépolis, Cinemark and MMCinemas. *The Fantastic Four*, *Harry Potter 4*, *Madagascar*, *War of the Worlds* and *Herbie Fully Loaded* were the five titles with the most mentions in a list lacking a single Mexican film. Despite the homogeneity in the origins of the movies, men and women showed some perceptible differences in the mentions of the three more recently seen films. The top five titles for women were mainly family and romantic comedies: *Herbie*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Chicken Little*, *Bewitched* and *Deuce Bigalow: European Gigolo*. The top five titles for men, in contrast, were more related to action, adventure and horror: *Star Wars Episode 3*, *Corpse Bride*, *Goal*, *The Amityville Horror* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Gender differences among Northeasterners, according to these findings, were very similar to those found in other Latin American countries: men prefer action movies (thrillers, adventures, suspense) and women are more inclined to view family and romantic comedies (García Canclini, 2004: 200).

Movies on DVD. US movies were as popular on DVD as on the big screen. Table 6 shows that 81 percent of the films most recently watched on DVD originated in the US, with

Table 5. Number of mentions and percentages of films recently watched in theaters by gender

Film title	Female %	Male %	Total f
<i>Fantastic Four</i>	58	42	55
<i>Harry Potter IV</i>	53	47	55
<i>Madagascar</i>	59	41	46
<i>War of the Worlds</i>	61	39	38
<i>Herbie Fully Loaded</i>	76	24	37
<i>Flightplan</i>	47	53	34
<i>Deuce Bigalow: European Gigolo</i>	62	38	34
<i>King Kong</i>	50	50	32
<i>The Amityville Horror</i>	45	55	31
<i>Chicken Little</i>	67	33	30
<i>The Skeleton Key</i>	50	50	28
<i>The Chronicles of Narnia</i>	46	54	28
<i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i>	71	29	28
<i>Bewitched</i>	65	35	26
<i>The Island</i>	54	46	26
<i>Goal</i>	42	58	26
<i>Cinderella Man</i>	46	54	26
<i>The Exorcism of Emily Rose</i>	52	48	25
<i>Mr. and Mrs. Smith</i>	57	43	23
<i>Corpse Bride</i>	39	61	23
<i>Dark Water</i>	59	41	22
<i>Star Wars Episode III</i>	23	77	22

Pearson chi-square, 31.752(a), d.f. = 21, $p = .062$.

Table 6. Percentage of the origins of the three movies most recently watched on DVD by gender

Origin	Females % N = 1187	Males % N = 1068	Total f N = 2255
US films	85	76	1,824
Films from other countries	8	14	243
Mexican films	5	6	126
Origin unidentified	2	4	62

Pearson chi-square, 31.654, d.f. = 3, $p = .000$.

women being slightly more likely to prefer them over any other origin than men. The findings for consumption of films in theaters seem to hold in the case of DVD viewing as well.

The list of the most recent titles seen on DVD by Northeasterners is also consistent with their preferences in theaters. All of the movies were from Hollywood, and all of them had been blockbusters, like *Madagascar*, *Shrek*, *Harry Potter*, *The Incredibles*, *War of the Worlds*, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* and so on. Again, there were some differences by gender. Females more frequently mentioned animated, family and horror films like *The Incredibles*, *Herbie Fully Loaded*, *Madagascar*, *Finding Nemo* and *House of Wax*, while men reported having watched action and adventure movies like *War of the Worlds*,

Table 7. Number of mentions of films recently watched on DVD by gender

	Female %	Male %	Total f
<i>Madagascar</i>	69	31	74
<i>Shrek</i>	67	33	49
<i>Harry Potter</i>	42	58	36
<i>The Incredibles</i>	74	26	34
<i>War of the Worlds</i>	39	61	33
<i>Mr. and Mrs. Smith</i>	58	42	31
<i>Fantastic Four</i>	55	45	31
<i>Herbie Fully Loaded</i>	71	29	31
<i>The Ring</i>	62	38	29
<i>Lord of the Rings</i>	41	59	29
<i>Finding Nemo</i>	68	32	28
<i>The Passion of the Christ</i>	56	44	25
<i>The Day after Tomorrow</i>	60	40	25
<i>Spider Man</i>	60	40	25
<i>The Island</i>	62	38	21
<i>House of Wax</i>	67	33	21

Pearson chi-square, 24.550(a), d.f. = 15, $p = .056$.

Harry Potter, *Lord of the Rings*, *Fantastic Four* and *The Passion of the Christ* (Table 7). The high number of mentions of animated films in this list, in contrast with movies seen in theaters, suggests the possibility of parents, particularly mothers, selecting children's titles to watch with their children, although the survey did not provide explicit information about this.

In Guadalajara, the second largest city in Mexico, which is located far away from the border with the US, Sánchez Ruiz (1994/5: 174) found that 85 percent of the films watched on VHS in 1994 were from the US, a percentage almost identical to the 87 percent of films watched on VHS by youngsters in 1992 in the border town of Nuevo Laredo (Lozano, 1992), and also to the 81 percent reported in this study for movies watched on DVD.

In contrast to their preference for Mexican television programs over US content but consistent with what frequently happens all over the world, audiences in Northeastern Mexico showed a high degree of consumption of Hollywood movies both in theaters and at home. The complex interplay of preferences for Mexican and US media according to gender and age makes it difficult to draw easy or clear-cut conclusions about the importance of US audiovisual media in the consumption patterns of Northeastern Mexico residents. At any rate, what seems clear based on the present findings is that despite their geographical and historical proximity to the US, Northeasterners are not more prone than their Mexican (and even Latin American) counterparts to consume US audiovisual content.

Discussion

This study set out to examine the consumption patterns of US movies and television programs in Northeast Mexico, a region geographically close to the United States and

with strong historical, economic and cultural links to the state of Texas. The findings of the telephone survey of 1600 Northeasterners living in the cities of Reynosa (Tamaulipas), Monterrey (Nuevo León) and Saltillo and Torreón (Coahuila) show that despite having the highest availability of US media content in the country due to their proximity to Texas and to their higher income, education and access to paid television, Northeastern Mexicans clearly favored local and national television programming over US imports. As also found in other parts of the country and indeed all over Latin America, Northeasterners overwhelmingly favored Hollywood films over Mexican or any other films, a phenomenon that has grown in prominence since 1994 due in part to the radical drop from 50 percent to 10 percent in mandatory screening time for Mexican movies in theaters implemented by the Mexican government right before the signing of NAFTA, the abandonment of initiatives to promote and finance the production of national movies by recent administrations and the establishment of control by the Hollywood majors of the distribution of films in the country following the establishment of NAFTA.

The implications of these findings are manifold. First, the strong preference of most segments of the audience for local and national television content suggest that the fears of US television penetration and dominance among Northeasterners due to geographical proximity and the close historical relationship with Texas were unwarranted. Preferences for local programming continue to be very high, with more than 70 percent of the respondents expressing their preference for it over US content. Despite the growth of pay TV in the area (around 40 percent of households have access to it), and even despite the reception of over-the-air US television in one of the four cities surveyed, consumption of US programs was very low. The original argument of cultural imperialists about the availability of US television content in a developing country leading to automatic consumption and preference by local audiences (Mattelart, 1979; Oliveira, 1988; Schiller, 1992) is refuted yet again by this empirical study and confirms the validity of the pleas of Fejes (1981), Biltereyst (1991) and Sepstrup (1989), among others, to always include the analysis of the countervailing local supply when studying transnational audiovisual flows.

These findings show that cultural proximity factors (Straubhaar, 2003) were stronger than the geographical, commercial and historical proximity to the US of Northern Mexico residents and that the phenomenon of cultural discount was also valid in this part of Mexico despite being so close to the US and so familiar with US culture. Despite being dubbed to Spanish in many cases, US programming – with the exception of films – was not as attractive, useful, or likeable for audience members as the Mexican offerings.

Of course, equating US imports to hegemonic, ideological and negative content and local and national programs in Mexico to counter-hegemonic, non-ideological and positive content would be foolish. As Thussu (2007: 28) argues: 'In ideological terms, commercial contra-flows champion free-market capitalism, supporting a privatized and commodified media system. One should therefore avoid the temptation to valorize them as counter-hegemonic to the dominant Americana.' The large media conglomerates Televisa and TV Azteca control almost all of the production, distribution and transmission of both local and national programs, and it is clear that both follow the economic logic and are in favor of free-market, capitalist and consumerist values (Gómez, 2004; Orozco, 2005). However, having stated that, it could be argued that there are some ideological differences between local and national news, comedies, sports and *telenovelas*

and the US equivalents. The differences are relevant at the economic level because local productions provide jobs and circulation of money in the country, and they are relevant at the cultural level because, despite ideological similarities between US and local production, there will always be some degree of cultural differences, positions and values between them. The specific codes used for encoding the television programs change for each culture, and the conventions, practices, rules, settings, nuances, understandings and intertextual references are not completely equivalent and do not enable the exact same possible readings and appropriations. Cultural theorists such as Martín-Barbero (1999), for example, have documented the anchoring of *telenovelas* (one of the most watched genres in the Northeast) on Latin American culture:

In the melodrama of *telenovelas* everything is mixed up: Social structures and ‘feeling’ structures, most of what we are – *Machistas*, fatalists, superstitious – and what we dream to become, nostalgia and rage. Whether as *tango* or *telenovelas*, as a Mexican movie or as yellow journalism, the melodrama works in these territories as a deep vein of collective imagery, and there is neither access to memory nor projection to the future able to avoid the imagery.

La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005: 274) have explained that although cultural proximity is based to a large degree on language, ‘there are other levels of similarity or proximity, based in cultural elements per se: dress, ethnic types, gestures, body language, definitions of humor, ideas about story pacing, music traditions, religious elements, etc.’. Biltereyst (1991: 476), comparing Flemish drama programs in Belgium to US fiction, explains how local productions often use specific regional accents, dialects and expressions and also show specific regional situations – factors explaining to some degree why US imports lose out when competing directly with comparable domestic productions.

Focusing on flows has insurmountable limitations when trying to assess the actual impact of foreign programming. Flow studies cannot replace actual content analyses of the ideological values and visions of the world embedded in specific programs; nor can they substitute for audience research investigating the consumption and appropriation of this content. Many studies are needed that center on the actual ideological meanings, frames and imageries found in particular genres and programs to construct a map of topics of interest to explore among audience members. When doing so, however, particular emphasis will be needed on including local audiovisual content in the analysis to have the right context to interpret the findings. As Biltereyst (1991: 475) explained,

... to understand the functioning, the polysemic potential and the decoding of mass-produced US fiction abroad, one must pay attention not simply to US fiction alone. A comparison of its decoding with the decoding of other types of television fiction, with which audiences have different kinds of relationships. ... can open new perspectives to an understanding of the cross-cultural appeal of US television programs.

For now, studies like this one provide a plan for the identification of the precise genres and programs, either foreign or local, preferred by particular audience members in specific geographical regions. As discussed earlier, automatic adoption or increase of

US audiovisual consumption patterns have not resulted from the geographical proximity to the United States, the close historical relationship with Texas, or the signing of NAFTA; cultural proximity factors seem to act as powerful deterrents of massive consumption of US television imports. Scholars worried about the ideological visions of the world encoded in the audiovisual content consumed by audience members in this part of Mexico should refocus their attention on Mexican television programming while continuing to monitor Hollywood films. Whether the ideological meanings are equivalent across US and Mexican audiovisual content is an empirical question that has not yet been properly answered by communication scholars.

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