

## Reality by Remote: Analyzing the Impact of Television Content on the Social Cognition of Adolescents

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### Abstract

This paper examines how television affects the social cognition of female adolescents in a semi-urban area (Bijnor) in Uttar Pradesh to fill an unmapped gap on how the mediated lifestyle and consumer scripts can be used to shape the self and social behavior of adolescents. The study employs a quantitative descriptive design, and data were gathered with the help of the structured questionnaire that was given to 45 adolescent girls (1518 years) who watch TV regularly. Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations were used for data analysis in SPSS (v26). The results suggest that television exposure was crucial to affect the cognitive and behavioral orientations of adolescents: 64.44% reported an impact on cosmetics and appearance-related choices, 55.55% on social interaction patterns, and 48.88% on career aspirations. Additionally, 61 percent of the respondents claimed to have over six hours daily of media usage that was linked to the interference of sleep, eating habits, and face to face interactions. Decoded into Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Gerbner's Cultivation perspective, the findings suggest that adolescents actively imitate televised ideals assimilating media-constructions of social reality. The study gives micro level evidence in a semi-urban environment in India and the necessity of school-based media literacy and parental mediation to develop critical media literacy among adolescence.

### Keywords

Behavior Modeling, Consumer Behavior, Cultivation Theory, Identity Formation, Media Literacy, Semi-Urban Youth

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## 1. Introduction

The adolescence stage is a critical period in life where cognitive restructuring, exploration of identity and emotional sensitivity are experienced. At this stage, adolescents learn their identities and place in relation to others and society. The world around adolescents and especially the impact of media dictates the core of self-perception, beliefs, and actions (Santrock, 2015). Television is one of the potent socializing agents among other forms of media. The television content tends to mirror and affirm social norms, idealized

lifestyles, the consumer culture, and expectations of roles. These images and descriptions can be internalized by adolescents, and a consequence of this is the influence on their social cognition i.e. the way they perceive social realities, roles and relationships (Bandura, 2001). This is commonly known as television cultivation and has been seen to shape not only the perception of the world by adolescents but also their expectations of the same (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 2002).

In India, where the outburst of satellite television and regional channels has become a common phenomenon, adolescents are getting increasingly exposed to dramatized and glamorized material in both the urban and semi-urban regions. This exposure is not just but a recreation activity - it usually turns into a prism, through which the adolescents read through social experiences, pattern relationships and establishing personal identity (Vijayalakshmi, 2005). Here, the role played by television on the social cognition of adolescents is important to investigate regarding its effect on behavioral tendencies, ambitions, and self-concepts.

The main objectives of the study are

1. To examine the effects of television contents on the social cognition of adolescent girls in a semi urban area in particular self-perceptions, socializations and orientations of lifestyle.
2. To determine how much television viewing influences consumerism and ambitions of adolescents, both in terms of appearance, brand selections as well as career desires.
3. To analyse the relationship between the patterns of television use and their daily outcomes of behavior, including media dependency, elimination of face-to-face communication, and interference with the daily routine activities.

## **1.2 Rationale and Significance of the Study**

Although previous research have been carried out to study the impact of television on consumer behavior (Latif and Abideen, 2011) or gender-related media images (Ahmed et al., 2012), fewer studies have shed light on the role of television on social cognitive development, including in the nature of relationships, empathy, role identities, and societal norms, specifically within adolescents in semi-urban areas such as Bijnor. The necessity of the study is explained by the trends observed by modelling adolescent dressing sense, body image standards, social conduct, and career ambitions according to the television images. This glamorization of life, relationships, and consumerism may cause cognitive dissonance in the experiences people have in the real world and those created by the media (Zia, 2007). In addition, adolescents are not critical media literate and hence they can easily internalize shallow or stereotypical ideas (Ahluwalia and Singh, 2011). This paper marks out in its effort to fill this gap and points out how the remote-controlled realities are shaping the social cognitive conventions of the young viewers in subtle ways. These disruptions should be cognized by the educators, parents and policymakers who should instruct the adolescents on how to distinguish the mediated fiction and the real-life interaction.

## **2. Literature Review**

Television has long functioned as a powerful agent of cultural socialization, particularly among adolescents

whose developmental stage is marked by impressionability and identity formation. Beyond entertainment, television shapes perceptions, expectations, and social behaviors, and its convergence with online streaming has intensified the emergence of mediated identities, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between televised narratives and lived experience (Nesi et al., 2022; Arora & Singh, 2023). Media representations actively reconstruct understandings of self, relationships, and social norms, often replacing direct social experiences with fictionalized realities that influence contemporary identity construction (Sharma, 2023). Drawing on Bandura's Social Learning Theory, adolescents are especially likely to imitate behaviors modeled in media, positioning television as an informal instructor that provides scripts for appearance, lifestyle, relationships, and social roles (Bandura, 2001). Studies among Indian adolescents show that television viewing, often undertaken within the family context, functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium of bonding and value transmission (Verma & Larson, 2002). Repeated exposure to media stereotypes and role models significantly shapes self-image, peer expectations, and gender norms, reinforcing the role of screen-based learning in adolescent identity development (Ramasubramanian & Banerjee, 2021; Kaur & Kaur, 2020).

Television also facilitates the internalization of social roles related to gender, success, lifestyle, and consumption. Adolescents increasingly perceive television as a key source of social and lifestyle information, leading to the active assimilation of mediated norms into everyday thinking (Kumar, 2002). Entertainment-driven cable programming has been associated with shifts in attitudes toward fashion, relationships, and decision-making, often detached from cultural or ethical grounding (Zia Anjum, 2004). Consistent with Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, adolescents interpret televised narratives as social scripts, gradually reshaping expectations about reality, which manifests in heightened consumerism, celebrity idealization, body dissatisfaction, and distorted social cognition (Sundar & Lim, 2022; Tandon et al., 2021). Behavioral imitation extends to lifestyle choices, including Westernized dress, diet, and material aspirations, as well as unhealthy eating practices promoted through entertainment and food-related programming (Vijayalakshmi, 2005; Zia, 2007; Jain & Bansal, 2023; Tripathi & Mehta, 2024).

Moreover, television increasingly competes with family and educational institutions as a source of moral, emotional, and social learning. Research indicates that adolescents often rely on media representations and celebrity-endorsed messages when forming values and making decisions, sometimes prioritizing them over parental guidance (Ahluwalia & Singh, 2011; Daud et al., 2011; Ghosh & Nair, 2021). Excessive television exposure has been linked to academic disruption, altered perceptions of intimacy, reduced attention span, and declining empathy, reinforcing concerns about cognitive displacement effects (Amin & Mattoo, 2012; Ahmed et al., 2012; Sharma & Varma, 2023). While existing literature strongly establishes television's influence on adolescent behavior and imitation, fewer studies explore the underlying social-cognitive processes, such as empathy, role reasoning, relationship scripts, and identity coherence, particularly among semi-urban Indian adolescent girls. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how television exposure shapes social cognition among semi-urban adolescent girls in Bijnor, a population navigating the intersection of traditional and globalized value systems.

### **3. Methodology**

The research design adopted in this study was quantitative descriptive research design to investigate the effect of television content on the social cognition of adolescent girls in Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh. The study was conducted between October and December 2024, and a structured and pre-tested questionnaire was used to guarantee the reliability of the data and internal consistency.

#### **3.1 Locale and Sample Justification**

The research was carried out in Bijnor district (Uttar Pradesh), a semi-urban area with the rising digital exposure and social-cultural heterogeneity. This place was carefully chosen as it is a transitional social area where the traditional values meet those of the media driven lifestyles that are ideal in investigating the influence of the media on adolescents. The sample population consisted of 45 adolescent girls with ages ranging between 15-18 years old and were all regular television viewers (at least 1 hour/day). The sample size was chosen with regards to logistical feasibility and homogeneity of target population, which is similar to other micro-level studies (e.g., Vijayalakshmi, 2005; Arora and Singh, 2023). The participants represented a sampling unit each.

#### **3.2 Research Design and Variables**

The research was survey-based descriptive design and aimed at gathering self-reported information on television exposure and cognition and behavioral impact. Dependent variables consisted of:

- Influence on appearance and body image

- Consumer preferences and brand loyalty

- Social interaction patterns

- Career and lifestyle aspirations

Independent variables included age, family type, birth order, residential background, and educational level.

The design allowed quantification of cognitive and behavioral tendencies linked to television exposure through measurable constructs such as the 'Media Dependency Score' and 'Cognitive Influence Index'.

#### **3.3 Instrumentation and Validation**

Data were collected using structured questionnaires of socio-personal profile (age, family type, food habits, background) and media exposure and social cognition (preferences, influence, and aspirations). The questionnaires were pre-tested with 10 adolescents from a nearby school to refine clarity and item wording. The instrument was reviewed by three subject experts in psychology and home science to establish content validity. The internal consistency of the Likert-scale items yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, indicating high reliability. Later, responses were manually coded and entered SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) to ensure accuracy in processing and tabulating results. Data were coded and analyzed using SPSS (v26), ensuring accurate tabulation and reliability checks for scale-based measures.

### 3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Primary data were collected through face-to-face administration of the questionnaire. Researchers also helped the respondents, especially those who were not so digital in the rural regions to understand and fill the survey correctly. The administration was face to face, which reduced the bias in response and increased the completeness of data. As per institutional policy, formal IRB approval was not required for anonymous, minimal-risk survey research; however, informal consent was obtained from participants and guardians. Additionally, anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout data handling and voluntary participation emphasized, with withdrawal rights clearly stated.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Responses were summarized using descriptive statistics like frequency, percentage and cross-tabulation. Bar and pie chart were used to interpret. The quantitative measures (Media Dependency and Cognitive Influence) were created to reflect patterns of mediated cognition and behavioural imitation.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section presents a detailed discussion of the effect of television programming on the social cognition of adolescents based on the data gathered on 45 adolescent girls in Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh. There is also the incorporation of the pertinent academic literature and cognitive theories like the Social Learning Theory of Bandura and the cultivation theory, to put the findings into perspective.

### 4.1 Socio-Personal Profile of Respondents

The socio-personal attributes of the adolescent respondents were shown in Table 1 (N = 45). All the respondents were female teenagers aged between 15 to 18 years. The greatest percentage of the respondents was within the 17-18 years age group (44.44), then the 16-17 years category (35.55) and the 15-16 years category (20 percent). In terms of residential background, 60 percent of the respondents lived in urban localities, and 40 percent lived in rural environments. When it comes to family structure, most of the respondents (60 percent) said they lived in medium-sized families. The eating habits exhibited that 62 percent of the adolescents were vegan, and 38 percent were non-vegetarian in their diet.

**Table 1:** *Socio-Personal Profile of Adolescent Respondents (N = 45)*

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Age Group	15–16 years	20.00
	16–17 years	35.55
	17–18 years	44.44
Gender	Female	100.00
Residential Background	Urban	60.00
	Rural	40.00
Family Type	Medium-sized family	60.00
Dietary Habit	Vegetarian	62.00
	Non-vegetarian	38.00

Socio-personal distribution reveals that most of the participants were regularly exposed to television and other associated media technologies, which gives an adequate ground to consider how media exposure patterns and their relation to social cognition and behavior tendencies among the adolescent female population in a semi-urban setting.

#### 4.2 Choice of Media in Selection of Dress

Television strongly influenced adolescents’ sense of fashion and appearance. Magazines and internet emerged as dominant sources due to visual appeal and accessibility, but television retained a foundational influence. Respondents often referred to TV shows to emulate celebrities’ clothing styles, indicating a transfer of mediated appearance ideals into their cognitive frameworks. This supports earlier findings by Vijayalakshmi (2005), who observed that foreign TV programs reshape youth dressing styles and cultural preferences.

**Table 2:** *Choice of Media in Selection of Dress*

Media Platform	Usage (%)
Magazine	71.11
Internet	70.66
Market Survey	68.44
Television	54.22

*\*Multiple responses were permitted; therefore, percentages may exceed 100*

#### 4.3 Choice of Media in Selection of Food

Adolescents’ food choices were shaped by diverse sources. While parental influence was still significant, nearly a quarter of respondents made choices based on TV advertisements. This demonstrates the subtle infiltration of consumerism through television media into adolescents’ decision-making and cognition about food and health, supporting claims by Latif & Abideen (2011) about media-induced materialism in youth.

**Table 3:** *Choice of Media in Selection of Food*

Source	Respondents Influenced (%)
Mobile/Product Label	28.88
Parents/Relatives	26.66
Television	24.44
Newspapers	13.33
Magazines	6.66

*\*Multiple responses were permitted; therefore, percentages may exceed 100*

#### 4.4 Dependency on Television for Identity and Lifestyle Decisions

A notable number of respondents relied on television for social cues related to self-presentation and identity formation. This highlights the deep penetration of television into everyday decision-making, particularly concerning beauty standards and perceived social success. Respondents revealed they were more likely to model their behaviors and appearances on TV characters, validating Bandura’s argument

that observational learning is a key cognitive mechanism. The glamorization of celebrity lifestyles, careers, and interactions leads to a skewed sense of self-worth, which many respondents reported through statements like feeling "out of line" when not matching media figures.

**Table 4:** *Dependency on Television for Identity and Lifestyle Decisions*

Aspect	Dependent on TV (%)
Entertainment	100
Cosmetics	64.44
Social Life	55.55
Occupation Ideas	48.88
Physical Appearance	48.88

This behavioral imitation illustrates the *observational learning process* central to Bandura’s (2001) theory, where adolescents reproduce behaviors modeled by rewarded or admired figures on television. As exposure increases, these learned patterns become self-reinforcing through social validation and aspirational alignment.

#### 4.5 Brand Preferences and Consumer Behavior

The findings indicate that Domino’s (35.55%) emerged as the most preferred brand, followed closely by Temptation (31.11%), while 33.33% of respondents reported no specific preference. These results demonstrate how television advertising and celebrity endorsements subtly influence adolescents’ consumer choices and brand loyalty.

**Table 5:** *Brand Preferences among Adolescent Respondents (N = 45)*

Brand Name	Respondents (%)
Domino’s	35.55
Temptation	31.11
None (No Specific Preference)	33.33

*Note.* Percentages represent adolescents’ preferred food brands influenced by television advertisements.

The fact that the distribution among categories is almost equal indicates that brand awareness is quite high, but critical judgement of adverts is scarce, particularly with the adolescents who are subjected to media advertisements on a regular basis. It is in line with previous research on the persuasion power of televised marketing on youth consumerism (Daud et al., 2011; Jain and Bansal, 2023). These inclinations reflect the media exposure to brand-based marketing. Adolescents have a tendency of equating brand popularity to status in society, which is created by regular advertisements on TV. This underpins the research of Daud et al. (2011) who were able to discover that advertisements create a change in lifestyle value and choices particularly among adolescents born in middle-class families.

#### 4.6 Behavioral Patterns around Media Usage

Most respondents (61%) used media for more than 6 hours per day, showing heavy dependency. Only 7%

reported less than 1 hour of daily use, consistent with patterns of digital immersion among adolescents.

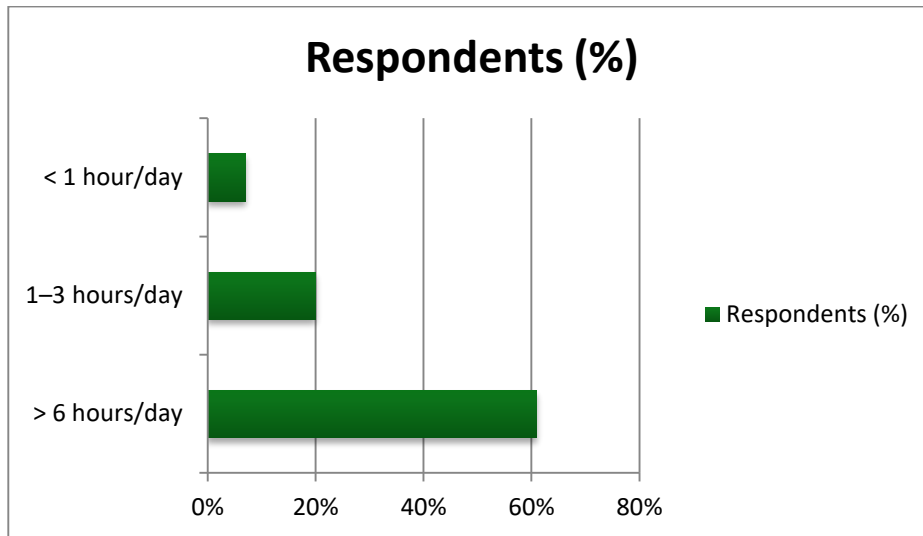


Figure 1: Duration of Daily Media Usage (Authors' survey data)

The majority reported they were either staying up late or skipping meals as they used the media, and this highlighted the interference with health and normal routine in line with the effects linked to overexposure.

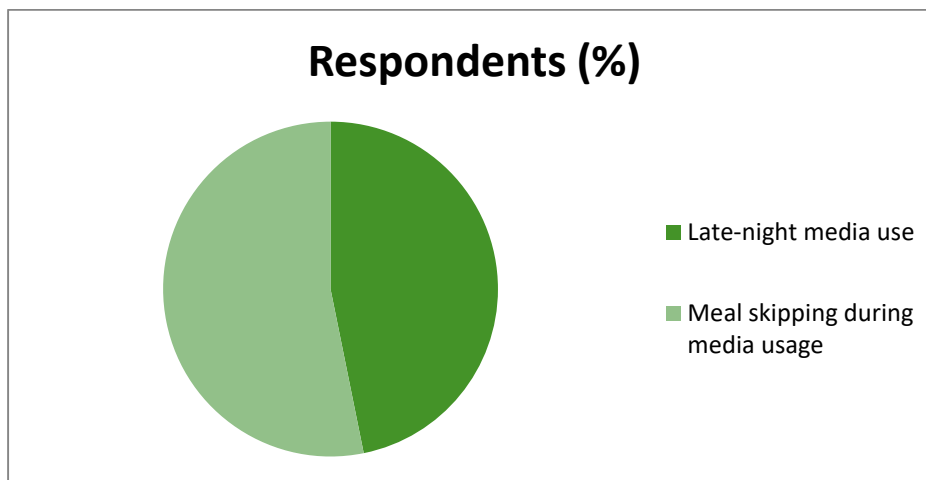


Figure 2: Respondents

These behavioral findings imply a clear pattern of media overconsumption leading to:

- Disruption of routine
- Reduced Physical Health
- Mental fatigue or sleep disturbances

This is similar to the results presented by Mensah and Nizam (2016) who have confirmed that there is a direct correlation between media overuse and academic, emotional, and physical health problems among adolescents.

#### 4.7 Cognitive and Social Displacement

Table 6 shows preferences of adolescents when they use media in comparing them with real-life social life. The findings are that there is an obvious change towards mediated communication. Most of the respondents (63) said

they preferred to utilize social media or media-based activities rather than to be involved in face-to-face social activities. Besides, 26 percent of the respondents stated that they liked using the media rather than talking to family members directly. Such trends indicate that there is a lesser dependence on the interpersonal interaction that is face-to-face among the respondents. Media interaction seems to dominate a fair share of the daily time in socialization of adolescents, especially when it comes to interaction with their peers and communication with their family.

**Table 6:** *Preference for Media versus Real-Life Interaction (N = 45)*

Type of Interaction Preferred	Respondents (%)
Social media over social activities	63
Media use over family conversation	26

*Note: Percentages reflect adolescents' preference for media engagement compared to real-world interpersonal interaction.*

The statistics also suggest that the use of media often went together with limited access to face-to-face social exchange at home and community levels. In general, the results represent an objective tendency of social interaction mediated using the screen-based platform instead of direct interpersonal communication, which indicates a change in the preferences of adolescents in their daily conversations.

#### 4.8 Cross-Tabulated Results and Pattern Analys

To explore associations between demographic variables and television influence, cross-tabulations were performed using SPSS.

- **Age and Media Dependency:** Older adolescents (17–18 years) demonstrated the highest Media Dependency Score, with 68% reporting television as their main reference for social and fashion cues, compared to 42% among younger participants (15–16 years).
- **Family Type and Media Exposure:** Respondents from nuclear families (62%) showed greater television reliance for behavioral and appearance modeling than those from joint families (38%), suggesting reduced parental mediation.
- **Residential Background and Cognitive Influence:** Urban adolescents (60%) exhibited higher Cognitive Influence Index scores, reflecting stronger internalization of televised lifestyles and aspirations.

These cross-tabulated findings underline how contextual factors- age, family structure, and residence- moderate media's cognitive impact, reinforcing the argument that social cognition is shaped not only by exposure but by sociocultural context.

Together, these demographic moderations echo Bandura's principle of reciprocal determinism, emphasizing that environmental and social contexts shape how media messages are internalized. Similarly, Gerbner's cultivation model is confirmed here, as adolescents' cognitive perceptions are shown to align with the degree and context of their television exposure.

**Table 7:** Cross-Tabulated Relationship between Demographic Variables and Television Influence (N = 45)

Demographic Variable	Category	% Showing High Media Dependency / Cognitive Influence	Interpretation
Age Group	15–16 years	42%	Lower modeling; less influence on fashion and social cues
	17–18 years	68%	Highest dependency; strong imitation of televised ideals
Family Type	Joint	38%	Higher parental mediation limits media influence
	Nuclear	62%	Greater behavioral imitation due to independent exposure
Residential Background	Rural	40%	Moderate internalization of media portrayals
	Urban	60%	Higher Cognitive Influence Index; media shapes aspirations

*Note:* Data derived from cross-tabulation of age, family type, and residence with Media Dependency and Cognitive Influence Scores using SPSS.

#### 4.9 Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute empirically to Bandura’s Social Learning Theory by demonstrating that televised models serve as aspirational guides for behavior in collectivist, semi-urban societies. Simultaneously, they extend Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory by revealing that repeated exposure to dramatized Indian and Western programming produces perceptual shifts in identity and social reality.

Together, these frameworks explain how adolescents not only imitate modeled behaviors (Bandura) but also internalize broader cultural worldviews (Gerbner), resulting in a dual process of behavioral modeling and cognitive cultivation. This dual influence underscores television’s evolving role as both a behavioral tutor and a cultural architect shaping adolescent cognition.

### 5. Discussion

#### Behavior Modelling and Observational Learning

The results are very helpful in proving the theory of social learning by Bandura that explains that girls during adolescent age actively imitate those behaviors and preferences that are represented on television screens. The high influence scores on cosmetics (64.44%), dressing, brand, and lifestyle desires are important signs to show that televised characters and celebrities are salient role models. Repeated exposure to rewarded and idealized media personalities promotes imitation especially on appearance and consumer related behaviors where teenagers need social validation and identity affirmation. This trend of observational learning represents the way that television is used as an informal teacher, the cognitive scripts that adolescents have concerning self-

presentation, consumption, and social achievement.

### **Social Displacement and Cultivation Effects**

Culturally, based on the findings of cultivation, long-term television viewing is part of slow changes in the minds of adolescents in their cognitive interpretations of social reality. The result, 61 percent of the members took over six hours a day to be on media and fewer people now had in-person communication and interaction with their families, depicting a social displacement process. In line with the Cultivation Theory put forward by Gerbner, heavy viewing seems to gentrify mediated lifestyle and relationships where adolescents internalize the television-mediated reality as opposed to the lived social experiences. This sort of displacement can undermine interpersonal interaction and recapitulate anticipations towards relationships, achievement, and societal standards.

### **Semi-Urban Context as a Disruptive Power**

The semi-urban background of Bijnor has a significant moderating role in the enhancement of media influence. In the transitional situations of adolescents, there is a clash between old familiarity and swift modernity of media discourses that brings cognitive strain between reality-based norms and television-based ideals. The increased media dependency between teenagers in nuclear families implies that less parental mediation is present than in joint family situations where there are more prevalent cases of shared viewing and value affirmation. On this point, television can tend to shape identity and social cognition by filling the gaps created by a lack of alternatives surrounding role models. This notes the necessity of media literacy programs with cultural sensitivity and better mediation of families in semi-urban areas.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The sample size (45 adolescent girls) of the study did not allow generalizing to larger cohorts. Both the sample and the gender identities such as boys were not considered and this may have indicated more differences in the effect of the media. The analysis was limited to television only, not covering the impacts of social media, gaming, and OTT platforms, which are taking over in the youth culture. Regardless of anonymity promises, self-reported information could have been affected by social desirability bias. The research was cross sectional with no measurement of the changes in social cognition over a long period of time.

### **Conclusion**

This study contributes micro-level empirical evidence on how television shapes the social cognition of adolescent girls in a semi-urban Indian context. Interpreted through Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Gerbner's Cultivation perspective, the findings demonstrate that adolescents are active processors of media who both model televised behaviors and internalize mediated constructions of social reality, particularly in relation to identity, lifestyle, and aspirations.

The findings carry important implications for parents, educators, and policymakers. Parents and teachers must recognize television's role as a powerful socializing agent and actively guide adolescents' media engagement through discussion and critical reflection. At the policy level, there is a need to promote socially responsible programming and integrate structured media literacy initiatives within school curricula to mitigate cognitive and behavioral distortions arising from excessive media exposure. Thus, strengthening media literacy education alongside consistent parental mediation is essential to help adolescents distinguish between mediated representations and lived social realities.

### **Recommendations**

The schools are to introduce systematized modules of Media literacy that educate adolescents to objectively interpret and analyze the content they watch and read on the television and the internet (Tandon et al., 2021). Educational-based media literacy programs may be used to support adolescents in better interpreting mediated content and mitigating the negative cognitive impact of excessive screen time through the encouragement of reflective and mindful media use (Sharma et al., 2024).

Parents should engage in active co-viewing and discussions about TV content to counter unrealistic or stereotypical portrayals. Government and broadcasting agencies should encourage socially responsible programming and restrict misleading advertisements aimed at young audiences. Teachers and counselors are advised to emphasize the role of excessive exposure to the media on physical activity, nutrition, and mental well-being. In addition, awareness campaigns on the importance of moderated media consumption and real-life social interaction can be done at the semi-urban schools.

### **Future Scope**

Future studies can increase sample size to cover both genders and various socioeconomic groups. They may compare television to new streaming and social media platforms to investigate cross-media cognitive effects. Moreover, simple longitudinal studies can be undertaken to determine how the self-concept of adolescents' changes with time. The scholars may add qualitative research (focus groups, interviews) to describe the emotional aspect of media influence. Future studies may test the issue of regional and linguistic differences of the impact of televised content on youth cognition.

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### **AI Declaration**

The authors declare no part of this manuscript involves plagiarism or fabrication of data, and all ethical guidelines for educational research have been strictly adhered to during the conduct of the study. AI tools, if used, were solely for language refinement, grammatical clarity and formatting assistance. No AI tool was used for generating the core ideas, analysis, interpretations, or findings of the research.

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