

Jaylin Redman

Dr. Holderman

Senior Thesis

16 December 2022

Cultural Materialism Theory

Cultural Materialism is a theoretical approach to analyzing cultural texts. It is used to understand the influence of culture on society in an economic space. The belief is that technological and economic factors influence cultural advances. Things such as films, books, and other media are produced like material objects and are not directly a cause of innovation. Cultural advances are a not a result of revelation but a result of economic factors. Cultural materialism was introduced by Marvin Harris in the 1960's but popularized by Raymond Williams in the late 1970's. The theory was used to understand literature and focused on the production of their meanings and values. According to anthropologist and writer Marvin Harris, these "principles are concerned with the problem of understanding the relationship among the parts of sociocultural systems and with the evolution of such relationships." (Harris, 47). Essentially, cultural materialism operates heavily on the idea that the consumers of these cultural advances contribute to the influence of society, thus contributing to a capitalistic world. This framework of analysis has been crucial in understanding the production of media and cultural texts. Gesa Helms considers Cultural Materialism as a "powerful set of conceptual and empirical tools to study the ways in which cultures emerge, and hegemony is produced through cultural formations." (Helms, 425). This theory is very relevant in understanding different works from different time periods. It can be used to dive deeper into the socioeconomical structures in place

during the time it was written. It can also identify how society takes in these works and their influence on our own cultural standards and political climate.

Marvin Harris

Marvin Harris was an anthropologist. He first introduced cultural materialism in his popular book, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*. Harris' work was originally used to understand his anthropological studies and the ways in which culture was influenced in different places around the world. For example, Harris discussed the cultural patterns and their diversity plus their influences on social structure. In Hinduism, the cow is an important figure for worship. Harris explained why the reasoning behind the worship of a cow was significant in this culture and how it was misunderstood to others. "The Hindu ban on killing cows? Absolutely necessary as a strategy of human existence, Dr. Harris contended: they are much more valuable for plowing fields and providing milk than as a one-time steak dinner." (Lawrence Kuznar, 262). Harris focused heavily on cultural differences in specific places but argued that cultural products should be understood to those who use them. Whether this be in art or consumer goods, it was important to understand the influences on society and its structural components.

The Three Structural Components

When looking at Harris' work, he had three core levels of society that all work to influence cultural advances. These divisions are infrastructure, structure, and superstructure. Infrastructure focuses on reproduction and the influence of survival necessities in a culture. Structure focuses on societal beliefs and the systems that are followed by individuals. This can include gender roles, educational systems and/or importance, as well as the structure of family

life. Lastly, superstructure focuses on the innovative things such as arts, ideologies, and anything that was new and popular within that culture. These structures were essential in breaking down the components of what influenced a cultural product or idea in Harris' case. While Harris used cultural materialism to understand people, Raymond Williams took the theory and created a framework for cultural studies and research methods. Williams was focused on understanding more the product itself and its influence on individuals rather than the individual itself.

Raymond Williams

Raymond Williams was a left-wing writer who studied politics and culture. He wanted to better understand the ways in which culture and media contributed to Marxism. His work laid out the foundations of cultural materialism and the framework for using it to analyze cultural texts. He was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain which encouraged his studies on politics. He found himself conflicting with his ideas on two different theories which ultimately created the research method for cultural materialism. Williams took ideas from Marxist literary criticism and liberal humanism to create his theory on cultural texts and their influence on economic ideologies. While reviewing the Marxist framework, he found himself agreeing with most pieces, but finding the structure to be a little too simple. "A culture is common meanings... It is stupid and arrogant to suppose that any of these meaning can in any way be prescribed." (Williams, 96). Williams believed that there was a different way of understanding the cultural texts and means in which it was produced. His overall influence was significant in culture and its everyday applications to political ideologies as well as unique perspective on cultural studies.

Marxist Literary Criticism

Marxist Literary Criticism is the idea that literature is a product of history that can be analyzed by the conditions in which they were constructed. Carl Marx believed that cultural texts were influenced by societal conditions. According to literary critic M.H. Abrams, Marxist criticism explains literature “not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria but as “products” of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era.” (Abrams, 205). This framework suggests that cultural works reflect the era in which it was produced. That means that due to class struggle and a capitalistic society, many works are produced on those grounds. Marx believed that superstructural elements such as culture, law, and religion legitimate the power relationships in society. Raymond Williams did not fully agree with this perspective stating, “the other things I rejected... that since culture and production are related, the advocacy of a different system of production is in some way a cultural directive.” (96). Williams believed that the production of cultural works were contributing to the very power struggle they were criticizing. This is why Williams pulled ideas from Liberal Humanism theory.

Liberal Humanism

Liberal Humanism is the idea of a literary movement in where an individual’s capabilities are important and valued. The theory takes an idealistic approach and places cultural works above the economic and political ideologies of society. Novelist Hywel Dix states that Liberal Humanism “assumes that it is possible to approach a literary text with no more knowledge of the world than that which is generated by the text itself.” (Dix, 28). This means that cultural works are then produced without influence from the societal and economic era of which it was subjected to. While Williams was less impressed with this way of thinking, he was drawn to the idea of the production of new cultural texts. While Williams did not see new productions as innovative, he found them

to be influenced by economic advancement. This fuels the theory even more because he could identify that cultural works were being used materialistically. Combining his knowledge from Liberal Humanism and Marxist Literary Criticism, these two ideologies were the base of Cultural Materialism.

Application of Cultural Materialism Theory in Literature

Once Williams influenced the academic world with his newfound research method, various authors produced the novel, *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*. These authors wanted to disprove that Shakespeare's plays are "timeless" and prove they are only understood in the context in which they were written. They note that the power struggle in the era of Shakespeare has a lot to do with the context of this cultural text. Valerie Quinney describes Cultural Materialists viewing Shakespeare as "a social and historical document, and that methods of literary analysis should not be considered natural or immutable but the social practices that they are." (Quinney, 162). Williams would, in theory, argue that Shakespearean works fed into colonialism and were produced because of it. This power struggle is prevalent to that specific era, which was a cultural product that those of that time period could identify with. This proves Williams' theory because those in the working class who identified with these power struggles were infatuated with this relatable entertainment. This made these cultural works widely popular, thus reinforcing the way of life in society. The use of this method is important in the way its methodology allows for critical analysis of not only the cultural product, but of its originating culture. The way in which this theory is used can define critical points of understanding when viewing a cultural product as a whole. The links between the cultural products and its structural influences can provide insight on societal problems, trends, and social structure.

Application of Cultural Materialism Theory in Media

Cultural materialism theory has since been used as a form of analysis of other cultural texts. This includes movies, radio, television, and social media. Marie Moran, a student at UCD School of Social Justice, wrote about cultural materialism and the analysis of social spaces. She talks about cultural economy which is another way to describe the application of cultural materialism in media. Moran mentions that the significance of cultural economy and “particularly the relationship of capitalism to the society of which it forms a part, in a way which puts the domain of culture firmly on the agenda.” (Moran). She goes on to explain her analysis of the social space in social media by breaking down cultural materialism theory and applying it to the subject. Looking from this perspective, social spaces are intertwined with co-constitutive practices within our society. This means social spaces are a product of our current society and create these subcategories on their own. An example of this could be specific trends on social media that are contributing to the wrongdoing in societal practices. If we look at the murder of George Floyd for example, a trend emerged at first with good intentions to bring awareness, yet it turned into just that, a trend. Individuals began using the social space as a means to fit within it, causing this to actively work against the end goal that many wanted. “Culture, as Williams understands it, cannot therefore be seen as a discrete “part” of the social order, but instead must be understood as constitutive of it.” (Moran). The point to be made here is that social issues as a result of our failing government has bled into social media, and the use of these “trends” are actively working against what they are supposedly standing up for.

The Kardashian Family

Looking at these different applications, there are many ways to utilize cultural materialism theory to analyze cultural products. With this, I offer up the Kardashian family as a cultural product. This family has a very long history of fame within the media and have always found ways to entertain and stay relevant. It all started with Robert Kardashian, a lawyer for OJ Simpson who was on trial for allegedly murdering his wife. From there, his daughter Kim Kardashian began her trope of befriending celebrities. After her big claim to fame with a leaked sex tape, she landed a reality TV show called *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*. This then gave fame to the entire family including Kim, Khloe, Kourtney, and Rob Kardashian, and Kris, Bruce, Kylie, and Kendall Jenner. The first season of KUWTK aired in 2007 and is still on today in 2022. I will be analyzing different episodes from multiple seasons to showcase how the Kardashians can be analyzed as a cultural product on reality TV. There will be specific examples of how the show has contributed to the economic space.

Cultural Materialism Theory Applied to Keeping Up With The Kardashians

Starting off with Season 2, Episode 1: *Kim Becomes a Diva*, this episode was about Kim and her “diva” attitude. In this era, her celebrity status was skyrocketing, which was beginning to go to her head. The first recognition I had in terms of looking through the lens as a cultural materialist was Kim’s behavior. Her behavior was very rude and sassy as she made unachievable demands and had a meltdown when things did not go her way. Looking at the idea of what a celebrity was in 2008, often showed stuck up, entitled individuals who had a lack of empathy from everyone. A clearer example of this is when Kim was complaining to her mother, Kris Jenner, about the hotel that she had booked for her. Kris called Kim to ask how her trip was going and Kim’s response was “Mom, my hotel situation in Miami is all screwed up and I’m not going if I’m

not having a suite at the Setai.” This is a room that costs \$2500 a night and despite it being booked out for an entire year, Kim insists that it must become available for her. This attitude is a prime example of the idea of trying to fit into the celebrity world. Here we can say that Kim was becoming a diva due to the cultural products she was witnessing. The influence of her environment has pushed her to become like the celebrities that she has been exposed to.

Looking deeper, we can find that there is a connection between celebrities and their promotion of capitalism. Celebrities in general are glamorized for their talent or ability to entertain. Those who take on professions like scientists and doctors are not glamorized the way celebrities are. The commoditization of celebrities leads to the alienation of them from society which in turn is a capitalistic practice. Furthermore, the glamorization of a celebrity is a direct example of the economic system that is followed within our society. It is obvious that many celebrities make more money than most other professions, even doctors. Circling back to Kim Kardashian, she is acting in a way that will draw more attention to her as a celebrity, thus boosting her celebrity status and net worth, again, contributing to our capitalistic society in terms of the economy.

Moving on to Season 2, Episode 7: *Kardashian Civil War*, we still look at the diva side of Kim as she brags about her new Bentley she purchased. In this episode, Kim brings along her sisters to purchase her car, but it takes longer than expected. Khloé and Kourtney begin to get frustrated and try to stick up for Kim by telling the dealership man that he was wasting their time. Kim gets angry that they are being “rude” to the guy working on her car and tells them that they are just jealous of her. “You are just so jealous that you cannot get a Bentley, and you’re trying to ruin my moment for me,” says Kim. Khloe and Kourtney leave as Kim proceeds to call her mom and talk about how much they humiliated her and ruined her moment. This all builds up to a

physical altercation with Kim and Khloe, also feeding the “raunchy” side of reality television that audiences crave.

In this episode, we can see all parties acting out in front of the camera. The “diva” standard of being stuck up and snobby has now affected not only Kim, but Khloe as well. The narrative shown here is that owning a nice car makes others jealous, and if you cannot attain one, you are simply mediocre and wish you were someone else. Now, it is clear that in our society, materialistic things are what most desire. Kim’s fight with her sisters were over a nice car, which in a way is also a marketing tactic for Bentley. Viewers seeing Kim own a Bentley and making even the closest people to her jealous, gives them the idea that if they get a Bentley, they too will be of higher status and above others. This of course promotes our capitalistic and materialistic society that we live in, as well as those luxury components that glamorize celebrities entirely.

Jumping ahead to Season 6, Episode 11: *Getting to Know You*, Kim still keeps up the drama and diva outlook on life. In this episode, the family takes a trip to Bora Bora which includes Kim’s new boyfriend Kris Humphries. The two of them start playing around and Kris throws Kim into the ocean. After sharing a laugh, Kim realizes one of her diamond earrings fell out. Kim begins to panic and cry over the \$75,000 pair of earrings she was wearing. Upon telling her sister Kourtney, she responds with, “Kim, there’s people that are dying.” Kim’s mother tries to calm her down by telling her that they have insurance, so everything is okay. Kim goes on to say “Anyone would be annoyed. I work really hard, and I bought these. This was the most expensive thing I’ve ever bought.” This again shows the materialistic values of Kim, coinciding with her diva attitude. Many could not believe how dramatic Kim was being over the earrings when her family was at an over the ocean villa in Bora Bora.

From a cultural materialism point of view, we might conclude that Kim was playing up the drama in her reality TV show. Of course, KUWTK was becoming increasingly popular especially because of who the sisters were dating. Kim was becoming accustomed to putting on a performance in front of the camera. The reasoning behind her sister Kourtney's comment, was because Kourtney never cared for the fame to begin with and had a different outlook on life than Kim. The fame has not gone to Kourtney's head yet, but sure enough has gone to Kim's. While Kim's persona on KUWTK seems legitimate, no one outside of her family truly knows her, so this could potentially be a product of the world around her and what is influencing her to be this icon or as we know it, a cultural product.

While many of these episodes have revolved around Kim, there was a transition within KUWTK where more members of the Kardashian family came into the spotlight. In season 10, Episode 10, Bruce Jenner (Kim's stepfather and Kylie and Kendall Jenner's biological father), decides to come out as transgender. This is a huge scandal in the season that brought even more popularity to the show. This revelation turned into a two-part special in the series titled, *About Bruce Part 1* and *About Bruce Part 2*. 2015 was a big year for LGBTQ rights as gay marriage became legalized. From this standpoint we can say that this may have been a push for Bruce to come out as Caitlyn. Looking through the lens of cultural materialist theory, we might say that KUWTK capitalized on their LGBTQ viewers (and those who were curious about the transition), by turning this personal conversation with family into an entire episode. The first part starts off by showing words on screen that state:

“In these family specials, we captured a specific moment in time, many months ago, as our family had intimate and emotional conversations about my decision to live publicly as the woman that I've always been on the inside. Families of trans people often feel like they need to grieve the loss

of the person that they thought they knew. My family's feelings are included here in the hope that other families will know that they are not alone, and to show that families move on from this grief. Today, my family loves, supports, and accepts me as I am- and I am so grateful.”

This statement was from Bruce Jenner, as the show kicks off. As a cultural materialist, there are many ways the show, and the Kardashians benefitted from this special. This intimate moment was shared with the entire world, free for them to watch whenever. Firstly, it brought a lot of viewership to the show from many new and old viewers. Of course, there were thousands that wanted an inside scoop on how the family was dealing with this new revelation. Next, the show used this opportunity for the Kardashians to appear more “human” to their audiences and make them more personable. That connection can easily grow their fanbase and encourage more people to watch as they see them as regular people more than just celebrities. Whether the content within this conversation are dramatized or true and authentic, the latter appeared to fans and many really were intrigued. Through all of the tears and dramatic conversations, the show ends with the family appearing to be stronger and happier. The season goes back to their regularly scheduled programming, continuing to document Caitlyn's transition but also focusing on other dramatic events. However, all members of the family began finding their own drama that the world would become invested in, of course as all cultural products such as them would.

Kylie Jenner slowly found her claim to fame in 2015 when she admitted to having lip filler. On Season 10, Episode 9: *Lip Service*, Kylie is faced with the question of whether she has had work done on her lips or not. She admits to it being her biggest insecurity and that she doesn't want to talk about it. Khloe says that there is nothing wrong with having work done, but it is only right for her to own up to it. Kylie spends the episode dodging the question from reporters and saying that she was not ready to talk about it yet. In the end, she realizes it is okay to be insecure

and having her lips worked on is not as big of a deal as she originally thought. This scandal went on for a while before this episode was released. Fans were disappointed to find out Kylie had been lying about her lips and she faced a lot of backlash for it. However, the Kardashian family did what they do best, and capitalized off of the negative publicity. Kylie began formulating her own makeup line- featuring her popular lip kits.

From a cultural materialism view, we can see that Kylie turned her scandal into a business. We can see how “big lips” were a trend within the beauty industry due to Kylie’s filler. Once Kylie started working on her business and teasing her lip kits, big lips revolutionized the makeup industry. There even became a “challenge” that kids and teens made up and participated in called the “Kylie Jenner Lip Challenge.” This challenge consisted of individuals finding an object such as a bottle or bottlecap and shoving their lips inside to make them swell up and appear larger. This trend was very dangerous and caused nerve damage, bruising, and scarring. Kylie was not at fault for this since she did not condone this trend, but this shows how she is a cultural product. Kylie was an icon that influenced many to purchase an overpriced lip product (despite its poor quality) and influenced many to get their lips done as well. This trend formed in the beginning of a new age with digital media consumption. This will continue to affect every instance beyond this point involving the Kardashians. Many scandals became public knowledge through social media and were later explored through KUWTK. This contributes to the way the Kardashian family capitalizes off of their show in the digital media world and furthers themselves as cultural products in our society.

In fact, many of the Kardashians have created and promoted their own brand on the show. Kim started two brands under her name that have done really well. One brand is titled “KKW Beauty” which is a makeup brand, and the other is titled “SKIMS” which is shapewear and

loungewear. Kourtney Kardashian also started her own brand titled “Poosh” which is a health, wellness, and clean beauty brand. Another big brand is “Good American” which is a denim line created by Khloe Kardashian. Not all of these brands were turned from scandals, but all were products of the world and their focus on e commerce and the success of it. It is not unusual for celebrities such as the Kardashians to profit off of their name in other areas such as retail, but it is a direct effect of the society we are today. The influence of celebrities impacts our culture because of the way we consume media. Everything is now an ad, including KUWTK. Those that watch the show or see them on social media automatically find brand placements. This is yet another example of the Kardashians as a cultural product.

After a long 20 seasons, Keeping Up With The Kardashians ended in 2021, and rebuilt a new show with the same idea but different view on characters. This show only shows Kim, Kourtney, Khloe, Kylie, Kendall, and Kris. The new season was highly anticipated to be popular by viewers and contain a lot of drama. There of course was buzz all over social media about drama with Kim and Khloe, pertaining to their love lives and the behind the scenes that they have been waiting to catch up on. There is also an interest in the children that the Kardashians have as they grow and become more prominent on the show. A new fan base is being brought in to watch the Kardashians as the family grows and evolves, but that can also be harmful to what is shown to young viewers.

On Season 2, Episode 2: *Prada You!* Kim talks to Khloe and how much weight she has lost. Kim starts off by saying “You look very skinny. I will say that Kendall and Kylie, not that I’m trying to out them, but they did text me and say um... that they were a little concerned for you because you’re really skinny.” Khloe appeared to be ecstatic about this news replying with “And Kendall said it. The model?” As she continued to gasp with a huge smile on her face. Khloe has

been dealing with the drama of her significant other cheating on her while they were about to have another child together. Despite this, fans criticized the way Khloe was elated to appear so skinny to the point that people who loved and cared about her were concerned. Historically, Khloe has had her struggles with body positivity and comments always being made about her weight. In many past episodes, she was always referred to as overweight and the bigger sister. There has been a lot of speculation around whether she was getting surgery or if she was working out to look the way she does.

Looking through the lens of a cultural materialist, we can easily point to Khloe's body change as a product of her environment. Brazilian Butt Lifts (BBL's) have been a very big part of pop culture for the past year. The Kardashians have been known for their BBL like body (they never admitted to having them done) but are now being accused of removing them to appear smaller. The Kardashians are a large part of the reason that BBL's became so popular, but now the trend seems to be dying down where individuals now desire a petite frame. Some embrace this change for them, while others find it to be excessive and show they are bad role models. Looking at not only this trend but trends in general can show how impressionable the Kardashians are. This quality is something that cultural products possess. The relationship between celebrities and social media trends automatically falls into the cultural product category. This is a new way of looking at cultural materialism as our society develops along with the everchanging landscape of social media.

Conclusion

Through these various examples, The Kardashians have proven to be worthy for the classification of cultural products. Raymond Williams' theory is an important framework that is

relevant just as much today as it was in the 1970's. Using this framework helps individuals to understand cultural texts and other media forms plus its overall impact on our economic system. The Kardashians used their power of fame to influence society as well as create an economic impact. This was done even before they began opening businesses and selling merchandise. Ever since 2007, the Kardashians turned their name into a brand through their reality show. This brand has allowed them to grow within their industry and promote themselves as celebrities, while simultaneously impacting our society. This is not exclusive to the Kardashians; however, they are an exception as they are celebrities who became so from a scandal. Additionally, they are cultural products that used scandals and drama to their advantage by capitalizing off of them. Kylie using her lip filler scandal to create an entire makeup brand and beauty trend has contributed to the way our society views beauty standards. In turn, this brand promoted the purchasing of lip products to enhance those features. Another example is Kim with her shapewear brand. As previously stated, the Kardashians influenced the BBL era, which invited people to purchase products from Kim that would shape their body to look similar to hers. While there are many other examples, these are direct effects of the Kardashians being cultural products. Their influence on society like many other celebrities, have built them into who they are today, but also contribute to a materialistic and capitalistic society.

Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning, 2015.
- Dix, Hywel Rowland. *After Raymond Williams: Cultural Materialism and the Break-up of Britain*. University of Wales Press, 2013.
- Dollimore, Jonathan, and Alan Sinfield. *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*. Manchester University Press, 2012.
- G. Helms, Cultural Materialism, Editor(s): Rob Kitchin, Nigel Thrift, *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, Elsevier, 2009, Pages 425-430, ISBN 9780080449104, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-008044910-4.00674-X>.
- Harris, Marvin. *Cultural Materialism. the Struggle for a Science of Culture*. Altamira Press, 2002.
- Kamps, Ivo. Review of Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism, and: Alternative Shakespeares. *Minnesota Review*, vol. 27, 1986, p. 162-165. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/428652.
- Kuznar, Lawrence A. *Studying Societies and Cultures: Marvin Harris's Cultural Materialism and Its Legacy*. Routledge, 2016.
- "Marvin Harris." *New World Encyclopedia*, . 28 Aug 2018, 15:02 UTC. 12 Oct 2022, 04:29 .
Marxist Criticism, <https://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/marxist.crit.html>.
- Williams, Raymond, and Robin Gable. *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*. Verso, 1989.
- Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Materialism*. Verso, 2010.