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The Ecological Systems Theory: A Dimension of Understanding the Changing Youth in Pakistan

Abstract

The use of modern communication technology (MCT) has not only influenced the material lifestyle of young individuals but also has brought changes in their attitudes and perceptions regarding different issues concerning their daily lives. The present paper aims to explain these changes using 'Ecological Systems Theory' by Urie Bronfenbrenner. In the present study, a theoretical model has been developed from this theory to explain the complexity of perception and attitude development among youth. The present study deployed mixed-methodology. Quantitative research techniques were applied to collect data from 600 young respondents belonging to the age group between 20-24 years using self-administered questionnaire. To have a broader picture on the phenomenon, qualitative data was drawn from the parents through conducting in-depth interviews. Major findings of the study indicate that under the influence of complex nested systems of layers of environment, starting from the family of the young individuals to the global level, the change experienced by youth is more of a material nature whereas the basic fabric of values remains intact. The youth used to share their 'meaning of success in life' with their parents and prefer to make their choices in life according to their parents' approval. The relation with grandparents is of sentimental nature where they are considered as respectful figure. On the other hand, the use of increased MCT among the youth has decreased their neighborhood bonding and intimacy with near relatives as compared to previous generation. The use of MCT has increased the influence of consumer culture, creating an inclination towards the culture of "branded-products", however this has not created disloyalty towards country or alienation from religion among the Pakistani youth.

Key Words: Youth, Modern communication technology, Ecological systems theory, Consumer culture, Parents' approval.

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Introduction

The world's youth population is around 3.5 billion (UNESCO, 2013). Pakistan, being the sixth most populous country in the world with a population of approximately 192 million (PES 2015-16) also has a large bulk of youth population (nearly 63 percent population of Pakistan falls under the age of 25 years.). Today the youth has greater access to global information through the use of modern communication technology (MCT) like internet, satellite and cable channels and mobile phones. It is estimated that in Pakistan there are about 25 million internet users (ISPAK, 2014). The use of MCT's has provided youth with an instant connection to the global cultures, trends, religions and life styles, due to which this segment of society is experiencing transformation. The present study aims to explain this change using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1992).

The Ecological Systems Theory

The 'Bio-Ecological Systems Theory' popularly known as the 'Ecological Systems Theory' was contributed by a developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979. The theory has a significant recognition in explaining a young individual's development within the system of relationships that construct his/her environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Urie Bronfenbrenner negates the traditional unilinear approach towards development and defines a nested system of layers of environment, explaining the complexity in the perception and attitude development of youth.

The Ecological Systems Theory and Complexity in Perception and Attitude Development

Bronfenbrenner looks at the development of an individual from child to adult as a complex procedure involving both his social environment and biological development. According to him, the 'complexity' increases as experiences in the social and biological domain increase over time. The Ecological Systems theory provides an understanding of the complexity of influence on young individuals from the macro to micro level or in other words from the global to the local level.

On the basis of this theory, it is seen that human society is transforming and technology is gradually overpowering human relations (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). From the work place to social relationships, there seems to be a strong influence of technology. However, the influence of technology should mean "getting more freedom of time and space" for developing relations, which is not the actual case. Rather, today individuals are devoting more time to their work usually at a cost of their "family time". The 'high tech' infra-structure has brought efficiency in the processes of work, not individuals. Working mothers are also falling victim to this system. As a result, a 'deficit' is created in the parent-child relationship. Personal contact has gradually been replaced by mediated communication through technology.

Family as a part of society is absorbing its values and norms from the local to the global level (Giddens, 2006). According to Bronfenbrenner, such changes have strongly damaged the social environment and adversely affected the parent-youth relationship. Individualism is becoming the pre-dominant norm of

human society (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). Many steps have been taken to protect the physical environment but the social environment has been less taken care of, as a result of which it has been affected more.

Bronfenbrenner sees the development of a young person as a complex process. The physical, intellectual and social growth of a young person is looked after by the family which stands out as the best ‘care provider’ for the young generation. According to Bronfenbrenner, with change in time materialism has started to overshadow the traditional set-up where a support network was available in the form of extended family relations to help bring-up a more responsible and mature youth in society. Today the technological development has although brought material development but the family is moving towards a “*deficit model*”, where parents lack the supportive network of relations. For this reason the (dual earner) parents are experiencing stress in managing their time between their work and the time they give to their young children. The process of nucleation of family is more rapid in the Western developed world, therefore the tenacity of neighborhood, religious institution and other community-based services are searched in order to overcome the deficit experienced by the family. However, Bronfenbrenner finds the educational institution as the major contributing agent which can provide support by developing long-term personal relations with young children. Bronfenbrenner explains this as a multi-layered influence on children coming from their families, neighborhoods, religion and educational institutions. The process becomes complex because each institution not only have their own unique set of values, customs, and laws, but are also influenced by the larger global social and economic system.

Multi-layered Environment Constructing the Global Influence on Youth

Bronfenbrenner explains a multi-layered environment influence on youth in the process of their perception and attitude development. According to him, the *Micro-system* is the immediate layer of environment to the young individual, creating a “bi-directional influence” with his/her family, school, peer group and neighborhood. This reciprocal effect plays a significant role in the perception and attitude development process. For example, parents have a strong influence on the young person’s beliefs and behavior; similarly the youth also plays an important role in influencing the attitudes of the parents. Neighborhood is a symbol of creating ‘we-group’ feelings in societies. Its role in shaping the attitudes and behavior is also significant. Studies have shown that during the early teens the individual is most influenced by its peer group and sometimes it plays a pivotal role in developing his/her social identity (Hetherington, Parke & Locke, 1999). Similarly, the individual’s behaviour constructs the group behaviour in society (Macionis, 2005).

The second layer, *Meso-system* layer explains the influence of ‘parent-school’ relationship along with the influence of religion and neighborhood on the perception and attitude development of the young individuals. The *Exo-system* explains the larger societal landscape in which the structures of the micro-system such as the parent’s workplace schedule, or community based family resources influence the perception and attitude development of the young individuals (Berk, 2000). The *Macro-system* layer comprises of cultural values, customs, and laws of

the society in which the young individual lives. This layer has a holistic effect on all the other layers in the system. For example, by the use of MCT's how the global trends have influenced the youth's attitude towards relationship within the family or how the educational environment has changed under this impact?

The *Chrono-system* includes external events influencing the youth, such as parent's death or divorce, as well as internal changes based on the chronological maturity of the young person (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). It may also include the personal experiences from the individual's socio-cultural surrounding having a long time impact on the personality. For example how a person sees and interprets the happenings around him. This is the reason why an individual reacts differently to similar social situations at different ages depending on his/her mental maturity.

Social Identity Formation of Youth and Global Culture

The influence of global values in shaping the perception and attitude of youth in a local context has also been explained by Arnett (2005). He explains how the social identity of a young individual is influenced by the local and the global culture. The local experiences include the experiences with the family, neighborhood, community based on local traditions, whereas the global experiences result through the use of modern communication technology such as internet, cable/satellite channels and mobile phones. The global consumer culture of 'branded-products' is another manifestation of this experience.

Arnett sees the influence of these experiences in diverse forms. According to him due to the early socialization of the young individual within family, in school and in neighborhood a social identity is developed having the influence of local traditions. Parallel to this local socialization a global identity is being created by the influence of internet use, watching satellite/cable channels and the use of mobile phones. The global culture comprises of events, practices, styles and information from all around the world. In this scenario according to Arnett, the youth may sometimes develop a *hybrid identity* which comes to the young individual as a blend of local and global experiences (Arnett, 2005).

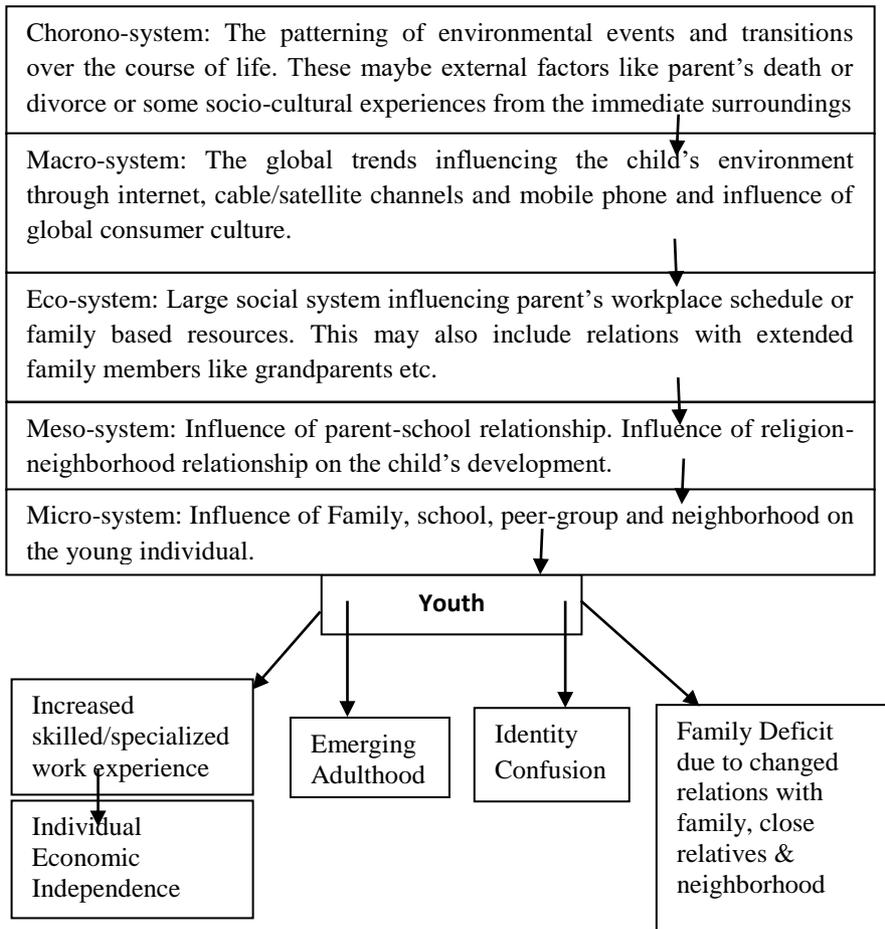
The youth may also experience '*identity confusion*'; unable to define his/her own identity in society due to the contradictions found in between his/her local and the global values. This trend is more visible among the urban youth as compared to the rural youth as there are more opportunities to experience the 'development' and 'modernization' brought about by globalization (ibid). The '*self-selected culture*' based on indigenous values is created among youth as a reaction to the homogenous global culture,. Usually the local culture is based on local religious values and traditional beliefs (Arnett, 2005).

According to Arnett (2005), due to a highly technological and information-based global economy, the period of taking adulthood responsibilities among youth, like getting a better job, marriage and having children has increased. In pursuit of higher education and greater skilled work experience, adult responsibilities are delayed, which Arnett calls as the '*emerging adulthood*'.

Theoretical Model for the Study

The present paper aims to explain the changes among Pakistani youth using Bronfenbrenner’s theory along with other theoretical debates discussed. On the basis of the theoretical discussion a model has been developed.

Figure 1: The model developed for study



The present study deployed mixed-methodology. Quantitative research technique was applied to collect data from 600 young respondents belonging to the age group of 20-24 years using self- administered questionnaire. Qualitative data was drawn from parents through in-depth interviews. On the basis of the developed model, a survey was carried out among the postgraduate students of University of the Punjab Lahore. The respondents belonged to Punjab province (70.0 percent), the Khyber Pakhtunkhawa (28.5 percent), Azad Jammu and Kashmir (approximately 8.0 percent) and about two percent of respondents were from the Sindh province.

Changes in Youth in Family Context

Applying the Ecological Systems theory, this study attempts to examine the changes in the youth in family environment. These changes have been studied under the following headings:

1. Change in Relations with Family, Friends and Neighborhood

According to the Ecological Systems theory the initial three layers of environment (i.e. the Micro-System layer, the Meso-System layer and the Eco-System layer) explain how the nature of contact and relationship of the young individual with his immediate family, friends and neighborhood plays a role in developing his attitudes, values and social identity. In the present study different aspects like emotional bonding, the level of trust, taking persons as role models were taken as indicators of the nature of contact and relationship.

In the present study it was seen that out of the total 600 young respondents there were 41.8 percent respondents who 'preferred' to communicate with family members, using mobile phones/internet instead of having face-to-face meetings. According to parents, one father's comments highlights parents perceptions who said:

When we were young we used to visit our relatives and friends, but today's youth does not have time for such things. The culture of mobile phones has further facilitated (constrained) their lives and removed the hurdle of actually going to meet someone; they just talk on the phone.

But looking at the relations within family this material change has not influenced the respect, love and trust among youth and their parents and the 'deficit model' as indicated by Bronfenbrenner in the Western family is not being reflected in the Pakistani family based on the selected population. Within the study it was found out that there were 50.1 percent youth who shared their 'meaning of success in life' with their parents. About 67.1 percent male and 69.1 percent female respondents stated that they always wanted to share their joyful moments with their parents, and 57.6 percent male and 60.6 percent female respondents shared their sad moments with their parents. Moreover the youth remains to look up at their parents for their guidance in life as 76.5 percent male and 75.6 percent female respondents took advice from their parents and about three fourths (68.5 percent) of the respondents, preferred to spend their spare time with parents. Furthermore the youth also had a sentimental relation with their grand-parents but their level of trust was greater with their own parents instead of them. The reason being, that parents could relate more than the grand parents to young children's life experiences. This shows that the use of modern communication technology has not affected the level of trust and emotional bonding among parents and their young children.

The 'Ecological Systems Theory' also identifies the importance of the neighborhood in filling the gap of parent-child relationship and replacing the 'deficit' created in family due to some reason like having a dual earner family, death of any one of the parent or separation etc. The neighborhood is also vital in creating we-group feelings and the *mechanical solidarity* (Ritzer, 1996) within the community. The present study showed that due to the influence of global values

the traditional culture of neighborhood bonding has reduced to a significant extent. More than one-half (57.0 percent) of the respondents said that they ‘rarely’ visited their neighbors, whereas the culture of visiting near relatives has also reduced to a considerable extent. There were 34.0 percent of the young respondents who reported that they visited their near relatives ‘only on special occasions’. This shows that under the influence of globalization, the Pakistani society is gradually moving towards individualism, where personal-relations are becoming less important. The alienation with the neighborhood identified by Bronfenbrenner, working at the Meso-System is visible in the present study, indicating the gap created between the neighborhood and the family.

2. Nature of Influence of global Trends

According to the ‘Ecological Systems Theory’, at the *Macro-system* the young individual’s development is influenced by the global trends through the use of MCT and the influence of consumer culture. This section comprises of two parts in the research;

- i- The nature of use of MCT
- ii- How the use of MCT has influenced the personal lives of respondents
- iii- The nature of change brought about by the influence of global culture

i- The nature of use of MCT

From the surveyed population some interesting findings were obtained. There were 51.7 percent males and 58.7 percent females of the total population who watched TV (local and satellite channels) for two to ten hours a day. The use of mobile phones was among 88 percent males and 86.6 percent females. Moreover, there were 68.4 percent males and 54.1 percent females who used internet for two to ten hours a day. The purpose of using internet facilities was mostly to ‘know about latest fashion trends’ among females and ‘following sports events from world over’ among males. Other areas which were explored by youth were ‘politics’ (mostly local), ‘information about different cultures’, ‘job opportunities’ and ‘health’. There were mostly girls who used internet for ‘academic purposes’ (the reported cases were 70.6 percent).

The fathers reported of using the internet in their offices only, as and when needed. The mothers did not use the internet at all, and some of them did not even know how to use it, although they said that they remained vigilant about the use of internet by their young children.

The present study showed that watching cable/satellite TV channels has started to become an equally popular trend among the youth and adult population of Pakistan. One reason of not having time to visit relatives and neighbors can be that people spent a lot of their free time watching TV, whereas in the past visiting friends and relatives was also a source of recreation. The trend of watching different satellite/cable on TV was predominantly visible.

There were 59.6 percent male and 58.9 percent female respondents who reported that their shopping was influenced by the commercials they had seen on

different channels. Among parents, all the fathers reported watching the local news and sports; two fathers also reported watching USA and UK news channels. All of them were extremely very fond of watching talk shows on current affairs. Four mothers reported that they also watched current affairs talk shows and were also interested in watching the local news regularly, but their household responsibilities didn't allow them the time. However, majority of mothers watched Pakistani entertainment channels. Two mothers also reported of watching Indian plays. While talking about the influence of media, mothers offered similar views. One of the mothers said "I watch TV just to relax myself; but I don't take seriously what is shown in TV plays". The young females as well as the mothers also showed lesser trust in the credibility of news from the media, as compared to the information they got from relatives or close friends. But some mothers were of the view that some 'Pakistani plays' were very close to reality around them.

ii- How the use of MCT has influenced the personal lives of respondents

To see how the use of MCT had influenced the personal lives of respondents, they were asked questions about their relations with people, their personal happiness, the level of stress in their lives, etc. About 69.8 percent female respondents said that mobile phones had made their lives easier; the reason being that they could easily access their family from any place. There were 64.5 percent male respondents, who had the same opinion, whereas 52.7 percent of them considered that their relations with people had improved due to the use of MCT. Different studies have shown that watching TV is one cause of creating anxiety and stress among people. Moreover it is also placed responsible for promoting political alienation (Putnam, 1995; Taniguchi, 2002). From the present study it was seen that a very small percentage (16.0 percent males and 9.2 percent females) had this opinion, rather 59.8 percent male respondents and 68.4 percent female respondents were of the opinion that the use of MCT has 'to some extent' made them a happy person. The majority of the respondents (61.5 percent males and 48.8 percent females) were of the view that the use of MCT has connected them to the world.

Parents' answers provided the details to the youth's responses. Both mothers as well as fathers were of the view that the use of modern communication technology had really given them the feeling of being connected to the global world. One father said "Due to cable/satellite channels today, we get to know about major events in our country as well as around the world just as they happen".

Representing the feelings of all the parents, one mother said, "Because of the facility of mobile phones we feel connected with our children or our spouses, when they are not at home." Another aspect of mobile phone use was highlighted by a father who said, "Today one reason for not visiting friends and relatives is because of having the facility of these mobile phones. The frequency of face-to-face meetings with friends and relatives has decreased." The mothers said that because of the use of MCT stress in life had been reduced to 'some extent'.

To find out how consumer culture has influenced the buying behavior of the young respondents, another set of questions were asked. There were 49.4 percent males and 50.6 percent females who told that they bought foreign branded

products which gave them the feeling of being a part of the global community. Furthermore they negated the view that by buying foreign products one shows disloyalty towards ones country or religion and this also reflected that the respondents were not becoming a victim of '*identity confusion*'. Parents were of the view that the youth is more obsessed with the notion of 'branded products', whereas for them the quality, durability and the cost are more important aspects for buying any product. Both the young and the elders believed that their religious faith was not influenced by this commercialism and a considerably large population performed their religious practices like 'saying prayers', 'reciting Holy Quran' and 'fasting in the month of Ramadan' on a regular basis. Another indicator towards this aspect was highlighted by the fact that majority of the youth wanted to have their future life partner belonging to the same religion. Moreover majority considered Islam as a very practical religion which did not hinder the material development of any country.

iii- The nature of change brought about by the influence of global culture

The use of modern communication technology has connected the young people to the global world. Some changes due to this influence which have appeared in the culture are as follows.

- 1- Pakistani society is a traditional society dominated by the Patriarchy structure. Here the female identity is always associated with the male. She is recognized in the society as a mother, wife, daughter or a sister of a male member of her family and is perceived as the custodian of family honor. Her decisions about issues concerning her and people related to her are decided by the male members of her family (Agarwall, 1994; Afshar, 2005; Donnan, 1997; Allan, 2000; Munawar, 2006). The data show that due to the influence of global values a significant change has come about. There were 61.6 percent young male respondents who were of the view that females made wiser decisions than males in family matters. It is worth noting that 41.3 percent men reported that the decisions made by females were good. This shows a change in the culture of male's perception towards females. Economic independence of females was approved by 59.1 percent of the male respondents. Moreover there were 50.7 percent young males who opined that earning females made wiser decisions as compared to non-earners. These findings suggest that the role of women in households is gradually changing and young Pakistani males have a greater acceptance towards the emerging participation of young females in the overall decision making process.
- 2- Due to the influence of global culture, the phenomenon of '*emerging adulthood*' is gradually prevailing in Pakistani society where the importance of attaining higher education and better job opportunities for youth has increased. Getting married at an early age (in teenage) is gradually becoming less prevalent. In the present study about 97.5 percent of the population which belonged to the age group of 20-24 years was single. Moreover the mothers during their in-depth interviews also emphasized to marry their children when they were economically stable and independent.

- 3- The culture of economic independence and materialism was less visible among the young respondents. Only 18.0 percent of the respondents reported that their inter-personal relations were influenced by their household income. These included their relations with their friends, teachers and the administrative staff of the institute where they studied. Moreover only a fraction (8.5 percent) of the respondents was self-employed and economically independent.
- 4- The culture of cousin marriage and having large family size is changing. In the study the preferred number of having children was two or three children. Instead of marrying within the same caste or biradari the preference was to marry in the same religion.

Conclusion

Due to the increased use of modern communication technology (MCT) the process of perception and attitude development among youth has become a complex process. Using the 'Ecological Systems Theory' the present study has aimed to explain the complexity of the influence in a multi-linear frame. The present study aims to explain the complexity from local to global influence on youth in which his/her attitudes and perceptions develop in context of parent-child relationship, family, neighbourhood, friends, religion and the local culture. As a result the young individuals are changing towards phenomena like '*hybrid identity*', where the local behaviours and attitudes become blended with global values. As a result the culture of visiting close relatives and neighbourhood has decreased. However the level of trust, love, personal communication and sharing life experiences between the youth and their parents has not been affected. Parents remain to be the role model for their young children and a source of personal guidance. The grand parents are a figure of respect for the youth.

According to the present study religion remains to be a social identity among the Pakistani youth, and religious rituals like 'saying prayers', 'reciting Holy Quran' and 'fasting in the month of Ramadan' are followed as symbols of collectivism. The influence of MCT has not brought '*identity confusion*' among the surveyed respondents. They remain to be loyal to their country and religion. However the use of MCT has played a role in attracting the young Pakistani's towards the material influence of consumer culture which attracts the young population towards global fashion trends and creates an '*acquisitive individualistic mentality*' (Trentmann, 2004). Moreover the traditional culture of arrange marriages within caste and biradari has somewhat decreased, although marrying within the same religion remains a popular practice among the youth. With an increase in the trend of attaining higher, specialized education among youth the trend of delayed marriages is gradually increasing. Therefore, it can be said that due to the increased use of MCT's, the complexity of influence of global culture is increasing. The influence of material culture is dominating among the Pakistani youth however the values due to which Pakistani culture is identified remains embedded in the perceptions and attitudes of the present youth.

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