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The Stratifying and Socializing Role of Popular Culture in Shaping the Identity of Young Generation

ABSTRACT

Popular culture creates trends, shapes the world view, is a source of inspiration and identification of the young. The research results presented in this study show that youth in the final stage of adolescence judge the reality in a critical way. A significant number of the examined learners implement the model of identity shaped in the ‘down top’ direction. They reject media authorities and aim at creating their own concept of themselves. At the same time, a large percentage of the respondents respect media models associated with appearance and the consumerist lifestyle.

Keywords:

youth, popular culture, media models, identity

IDENTITY AS A DYNAMIC PROCESS

The identity processes taking place in adolescence have substantial significance for the development of an individual. The identity created in this period allows a young person for identification with particular standards, values, needs, and beliefs in various social situations. James E. Marcia defined the identity as “an inner, self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs and the life story of an individual” (Brzezińska, 2002, p. 242). In his model of identity shaping, the author has distinguished four different configurations (statuses) of achieving an identity. Which status of identity will be achieved by an adolescent

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depends on two basic developmental processes – exploration and undertaking obligations (Brzezińska, 2002, p. 243). Exploration consists in active searching, making attempts, testing oneself and one's own potentialities, as well as in examining the limits of social consent. In other words, a young person undertakes different orientation and search activities due to the set goals and preferred values. The subjects of exploration, apart from individuals themselves, are people from the close and extended environment. The period in which a young person searches for alternatives in life is called a crisis and is typical of early adolescence. The process of undertaking obligations, which appears in late adolescence, is manifested by making decisions and choosing particular areas of acting, in compliance with the ideas, needs and life plans preferred by an individual. According to the author, the occurrence or lack of processes of exploration and obligation, as well as their dynamics, complexity and stages, determine the course of the process of identity shaping. Four configurations (types) of identity can be distinguished (Brzezińska, 2002, pp. 243–246; Brzezińska & Piotrowski, 2010, p. 265):

- the status of diffusive (dispersed) identity – is characterized by the lack of obligations with simultaneous lack of exploration or its limited range. This status appears when an individual has no ability or opportunity to explore and the information communicated by the environment is not strong or coherent enough for individuals to undertake the obligations and responsibility for their fate;
- the status of adopted identity – appears in the case of undertaking obligations without the earlier phase of exploration or with largely reduced exploration. Due to the lack of occasions to act independently and to the undermining of any attempts to do this by the environment, a young person does not seek alternatives. Such individuals recognize the values, rules of conduct and judgement standards valued by others as their own. At the same time, the environment exerts strong pressure associated with undertaking obligations in a particular sphere. In this stage of their identity development, the young tend to idealize the persons or groups with which they identify. By their behaviour patterns, wearing certain clothes or hairstyles, teenagers reject their own individuality and manifest the adhesion to their choices. In the case of a positive reference group, this might be a developmental chance for an individual. Still, the lack of positive models and lack of support from the nearest environment can lead to applying a negative identity. It results from rebelling against the existing reality (Ziółkowska, 2005, p. 381). The status of negative identity of transitional character may also have some developmental values. Owing to self-defining, even through a negative identity, an individual gains the feeling of consistency and specifies the self-limits, aiming at autonomy;

- the status of moratorial (postponed) identity – appears when an individual is in a state of crisis for a long time – when the stage of exploration is prolonged without undertaking obligations. A young person explores the available alternatives but feels unprepared for making decisions or committing to a particular area of activity;
- the status of acquired (mature) identity – appears when obligation follows the stage of exploration. After an active search for the place in the world, after many undertaken attempts at acting, and as a result of various experienced consequences, an individual makes independent decisions concerning the further path of life.

Depending on the configuration of broad bio-psycho-social factors, the course of the process of identity shaping may occur more or less positively. It can also, temporarily or permanently, stop at its certain stage. Individual activity of a person living in a particular sociocultural circle determines the course and pace of the development of identity in a specific way. The range of the exploration areas may become a chance for development or a source of problem behaviour. It should be emphasized that a young person's exploration concerns what is both socially permitted and banned. The main reason of undertaking risky behaviour is discovering and recognizing the fundamental for all people limits of their own psycho-physical endurance as well as the endurance of other significant people for an adolescent. Therefore, many behaviour patterns in adolescence have the form of provocation and manifestation (Szymańska, 2015).

MEDIA POP CULTURE

The process of identity shaping is determined by many psychological, biological and sociocultural factors. It is always formed in a particular sociocultural context. An adolescent receives diversified information sent not only by family and peers, but also by electronic media. Apart from informational communication, media make use of persuasion, the communication which provokes to certain behaviour, the so called propaganda and manipulation (Kozłowska, 2006, pp. 70–71). In various areas of daily life, media culture promotes different models, which bring about a promise of happiness and attractive life. A young person's heading for keeping up with cultural models leads to the situation in which this person is faced with contradictory values. This results in confusion and disorientation, which hinders making appropriate choices. Zbyszko Melosik draws attention to the stratifying and socializing role of popular culture in the process of shaping

the young generation's identity by emphasizing that "popular culture is stratified itself. Even some «high» forms can be distinguished within it [...] as well as «low» ones" (Melosik, 2013, p. 36). As the author writes, "the culture generated by upper classes is «universalized» in the society, through the mechanisms of power which these classes control. This culture becomes high and legitimizes the high status of those who can understand the meanings it carries and want to take part in it. On the other hand, popular, mass or folk culture – as the «low» culture which lacks legitimization – constitutes nothing else but a platform for confirming the low social position of those who prefer it" (Melosik, 2013, p. 32). For adolescents it is pop culture, which becomes an important source for constructing their identity as well as for generating "significant meanings" (Melosik, 2013, p. 34). According to the author, popular culture can deprive of freedom, force, or can regulate an individual's identity, but on the other hand – it can liberate and open space to new potentialities (Melosik, 2013, p. 24). While analyzing pop-cultural phenomena, the author interprets two ways of shaping an individual's identity, suggested by John Fiske: the 'top down' and 'down top'. "The former is based on disciplining and regulating the identity in compliance with the accepted dominating models of «normality», the latter results directly from individuals' own biographies, their family bonds and relations with the local community, as well as from the ways of spending their leisure time" (Melosik, 2013, p. 64). In the author's opinion, what seems important in a properly occurring process of identity shaping is not achieving any untouchable and stable identity but acquiring the control over shaping one's own self, the power directed against imposing an identity (Melosik, 2013, p. 64).

In the confrontation with growing social problems, attractive and invisible techniques of manipulation addressed to people, a question should be raised to what extent media pop culture is a source of inspiration and identification of the young.

In order to answer this question, the studies were conducted among upper-secondary (general education and technical) schools in John Paul II School Complex No 5 in Jastrzębie-Zdrój. The diagnostic poll research comprised 96 learners of the third and fourth class – 58 boys and 38 girls. In the developmental approach, the sample consisted of the youth² with significant experience in exploring various fields of their functioning and in undertaking important obligations.

² The examined group consisted of youth aged 18–19.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE AUTHOR'S STUDIES

With no doubt, possessing an authority enhances the process of building the own, individually created identity. It is often highlighted in expert literature that with growing frequency youth favour easy pleasure and do not search for traditional authorities any more. They substitute the authority of significant people or the heroes from high culture with the behaviour models or the cult of some figures from popular culture (Karwatowska, 2012, pp. 9–11).

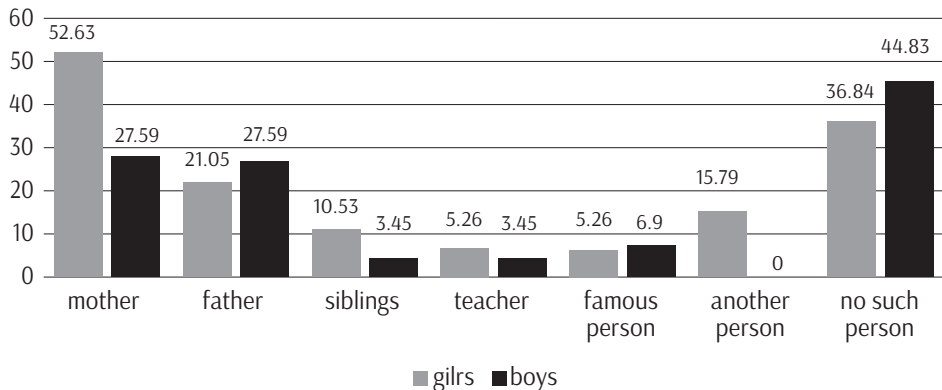


Figure 1. The role model of the respondents

As it is widely known, an authority as a role model (Marciniczyk, 1991) can be an outstanding person, perceived as ‘more’ perfect, treated with social respect, someone who passes down values, is admired, celebrated, ready to provide good advice and a good example. Thus, it seems that there is such a person in the nearest environment of every adolescent – at home or at school. Unfortunately, as Figure 1 shows, almost 42% of the examined learners (37% of girls and 45% of boys) have no role model. For 53% of female respondents, the mother is a model to follow, for about 21% – the father, for 15.79% – another person (in 5 cases – the grandmother, and in one case – a friend), for 10.53% – a brother or a sister, and only for 5.26% – a teacher or a famous person (Agnieszka Radwańska was mentioned twice). In the case of boys, the most frequently indicated role models were the father and the mother (27.59% each), and some famous personalities of the media world – Polish and foreign sportsmen and musicians: John Cena, Oliwier Romanowski (Bonus RPK), Oskar Mazurkiewicz, Jeff Seid (6.9%). A teacher was indicated as a role model only twice and the same number of indications took place in the case of siblings.

These research results confirm the opinion of the specialists exploring the situation of contemporary youth. According to them, the society of adults who handle their own problems has not got competences to interpret the surrounding reality and, in this way, to help the young to find a place for them in the ambiguous world, full of challenges and temptations. Parents and teachers have lost their ability to talk to children and youth, and the solutions suggested by them often do not work in particular life situations (Kurzępa, 2006, pp. 57–58). This might be the reason why 42% of the examined youth cannot find anyone in their environment that could provide inspiration.

The acquired data also indicate that youth do not find authorities in the world of media. As it might be supposed, the examined adolescents do not receive unreflectively the suggestions promoted by media and do not yield to their influence in an excessive way. They rather undertake their own reflective activity of creating themselves.

In compliance with the Marcia's model of identity, the respondents have already finished a certain stage of exploration, owing to which they have recognized their own potentialities and the environmental conditions of their further life and development. After this, they undertake decisions concerning themselves and their life plans by engaging in various activities. According to the applied concept of identity, this is the situation with the biggest developmental potentialities and it confirms learners' achievement of the status of mature identity.

Moreover, the authors exploring youth's self-esteem indicate that the young reach for the models offered and promoted by mass culture by introducing the cult of the body into their system of values on the basis of which they form their identity. In modern times, an individual's identity is more and more often recognized by appearance, the body. The young are subjected to various influences of media culture and, therefore, most of the attention is attributed to attractive and slim looks (Brytek-Matera, 2008, p. 62). It is a generally promoted belief that the future social success, self-confidence, health or the feeling of strong will depend on an attractive appearance (Niewiadomska, Kulik, & Hajduk, 2005, pp. 115–118).

In the opinion of the examined youth (Figure 2), mental qualities are more important than clothes and appearance. However, girls associate a person's looks with personality features of this person more frequently. As they declare, the following is important in perceiving other people: sense of humour, intelligence, interests, clothes, appearance, and – only to a rather small extent – knowledge, skills and body figure.

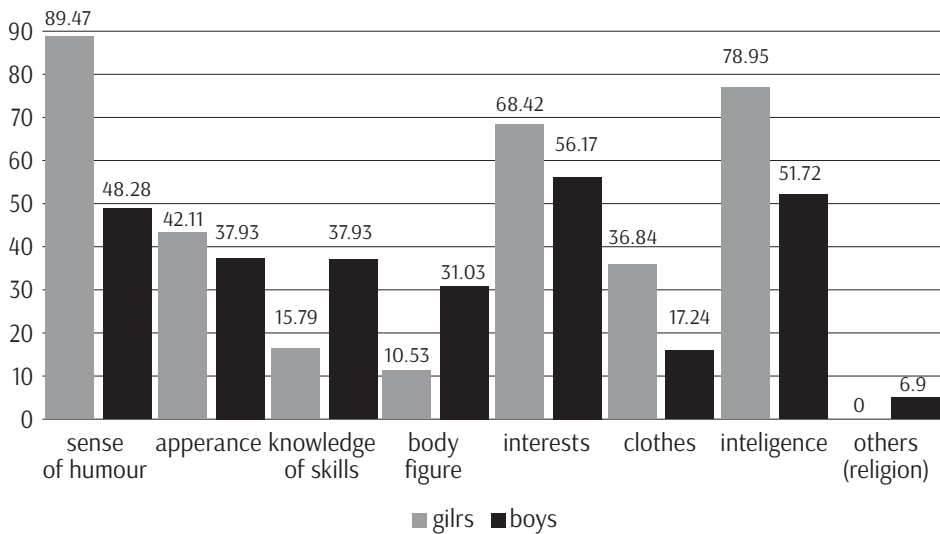


Figure 2. The qualities which learners value in other people

Similar choices can be observed in the case of boys, for whom the following is the most important in the evaluation of other people: interests, intelligence, sense of humour, knowledge and skills, and appearance. Relatively the least attention is paid by boys to the body figure and clothes. At the same time, boys indicate the body figure as an important criterion in evaluation of another person three times as often as girls. A substantial divergence in the declarations of girls and boys also concerns clothes, which are much more important for girls.

The presented data indicate that physical attractiveness does not determine the perception of people by the respondents. Due to their age, youth is naturally interested in corporeality, sexual and aesthetic attractiveness, but in the evaluation of others, the young are largely guided by personality traits. For the respondents, the following qualities are important: intelligence, interests and the sense of humour.

Mass culture seems to imprint in young recipients that good looks and beauty co-occur with other desired values, such as intelligence, wealth or happiness. By the identification with such messages, young people try to implement them in their life. They hope that, by being a part of the canon of beauty, they undoubtedly have many other qualities, desired in modern times and needed in the future, for instant, while searching for work (Wycisk & Ziółkowska, 2010, pp. 67–68). The consolidation of the cultural patterns and norms associated with the figure and looks intensifies the feeling of dissatisfaction with one's own body, especially among adolescents.

In the examined population of youth, there is a group showing the feeling of dissatisfaction with their own body and figure. 21% of girls and 24% of boys are very critical towards their figures. At the same time, a substantially larger number of the respondents (63%–66% of boys and 58% of girls) use various types of dieting. The declarations of the male part of the respondents do not surprise as they are compliant with the current cultural trends (Melosik, 2006). The information concerning the ideal weight, body shape, and image reach the young from many sources in an unceasing way. Therefore, contemporary young men focus more on themselves, taking excessive care of their looks. What can be confirmed is the growing popularization of the active approach to one's own health. However, it should be emphasized that not all activities are desired and some often contribute to ruining the health. This takes place in the case of excessive focus on body issues, e.g., by applying accidental and often drastic diets or taking anabolic steroids, which cause not only body mass growth but also bone and liver proliferation or can trigger off aggression (Rutkowska, 1999, pp. 174–176). In this field, the internalization of cultural patterns is surely not driven by health reasons but by binding trends.

Mass culture does not only create fashions, patterns and lifestyles, but it also influences the worldviews and aspirations of young people. It is stressed in expert literature that popular culture is entertainment, the time devoted to pleasure, because it is dominated by hedonistic and consumerist values or experiences. Consumerist patterns of life determine the lifestyle of the modern society (Strinati, 1998, pp. 15–30, 197–206).

Adolescence is the period in which a young person approaches adulthood. It is widely known that adolescents look for the goals and sense of life, they start thinking and dreaming about a happy and interesting life, trips, adventures, love, raising a family. Their dreams as well as their constructed life plans are a sign of how they view themselves in the future.

The examined youth fulfil certain goals and life aspirations by learning in upper-secondary general education and technical schools. Table 1 presents the learners' declarations concerning the goals they want to aim at and implement in their future life.

In the group of goals most frequently indicated by girls, important ranks are attributed to: fascinating work (78.95%), family happiness (63.16%), and the life full of changes, adventures and attractions (57.89%). For over a half of the examined girls (55.26%), the most important is the implementation of moral values and respectful life, for 47.37% – knowledge, education and scientific achievements, for 42.11% – comfortable and problem-free life, for 31.58% – fortune and high living standards, and for 23.68% – social activity. The least significance was paid by

girls to professional career associated with a high position and managing people (5.26%) and to popularity, fame and success (10.53%).

Table 1. The goals which respondents want to fulfil in their life

Answers	Girls		Boys	
	N	%	N	%
comfortable, problem-free life	16	42.11	25	43.10
peaceful life among family and friends	24	63.16	36	62.07
popularity, fame, success	4	10.53	9	15.52
fascinating job, professional career	30	78.95	31	53.45
knowledge, education, scientific achievements	18	47.37	5	8.62
high position, managing people, making decisions	2	5.26	16	27.57
fortune, high living standards	12	31.58	25	43.10
implementation of moral values, respectful life	21	55.26	25	43.10
engagement in social issues, citizen activity	9	23.68	3	5.17
participation in culture, artistic activity, creativity	7	18.42	7	12.07
life full of changes, adventures, attractions	22	57.89	23	39.66
other aspirations, what?	3	7.89	7	12.07

In the group of boys, the most frequently mentioned life aims are: family happiness (62.07%) and fascinating work and professional career (53.45%), which is followed by (43.10% per each): implementation of moral values; fortune and high living standards; comfortable, problem-free life. Far less frequently the respondents indicate the life full of changes, adventures and attractions (39.66%), and the wish to achieve a high position and manage people (27.57%). Learners are the least interested in such values as: engagement in social issues and citizen activity (5.17%); knowledge, education and scientific achievements (8.62%); cultural and artistic activity (12.07%); popularity and fame (15.52%).

The presented research results suggest that youth aim at a peaceful life among family and friends and at fascinating work. Such preferences of the young are not surprising as they result from the natural need for aiming at a happy and satisfying life. It is worth mentioning that girls more frequently associate professional career with a peaceful life among family and friends and with the youthful passion for adventure and attractive life. In compliance with popular trends, boys are more often oriented to achieving a fortune and high standards, as well as to a comfortable, problem-free life. More frequently than for boys, moral values, social activeness, knowledge and education are important goals for girls.

CONCLUSIONS

What seems typical of a young person is the criticism in thinking. The examined learners, who are in the final stage of adolescence, judge the reality critically. The knowledge of the surrounding world, reflective evaluation and exploration undertaken in various areas allow the respondents for fulfilling their own ideals and values. Owing to cognitive and action activity, a substantial number of the examined youth implement the model of identity shaped in the 'down top' direction. By rejecting media authorities, they aim at creating the concepts of their own self. At the same time, a significant percentage of the respondents (both boys and girls) respect media models associated with looks. By applying various diets, they want to achieve an attractive appearance, which – according to popular models of media culture – constitutes one of the most important components of happiness and satisfaction in life.

Moreover, the consumerist lifestyle promoted in media results in youth's big consumerist and hedonistic expectations concerning their future. The respondents would like to achieve high living standards and material success. It is widely known that in the modern media culture hedonism constitutes a very popular lifestyle, which is characterized by aiming at pleasure and avoiding things that are unpleasant and require effort and responsibility. A considerably large part of the respondents aims at a comfortable, problem-free life (43%) and a life full of fun and adventure (47%).

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