

The Effect of Popular Culture on the Identity of Adolescents

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Abstract. This paper explores the influence of popular culture, particularly fan culture and anime culture, on the identity formation of adolescents through interviews and questionnaires. By reviewing relevant literature and studies, it is found that adolescents, through their involvement in fan culture and anime culture, are able to explore and shape their self-identity in aspects such as emotional projection, idol imitation, and social interaction. These cultural phenomena not only provide emotional attachment and a sense of social belonging for adolescents but also assist them in constructing self-identity in terms of values, behavioral norms, and individual recognition. However, excessive indulgence in idol worship and the virtual world may lead to negative consequences, such as psychological dependence, cognitive biases, and social barriers. To avoid such outcomes, while relying on popular culture, it is essential to balance the virtual with the real, strengthen reflection and critique, build positive fan communities, and engage with diverse cultures.

Keywords: Adolescents, identity formation, emotional projection, group identity, social belonging

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Identity formation is a comprehensive reflection of an individual's self-awareness, social belonging, and values during their growth process. According to Erikson's theory of identity development, adolescence is a critical stage in the transition from childhood to adulthood, marked by both an identity crisis and an exploration phase. During this period, the exploration of self-identity is particularly important, and popular culture plays an increasingly significant role in this process [1].

In recent years, globalization has accelerated the cross-border dissemination of cultural elements, allowing adolescents around the world to access forms of popular culture from different countries and regions. As a core component of global culture, popular culture not only facilitates the blending of cultural identities among adolescents from various countries and regions but also continuously shapes and reshapes their self-identity. Studies indicate that with the development of new media, adolescents increasingly rely on virtual communities and popular culture to shape their self-identity, form a sense of group belonging, and establish self-worth [2,3].

1.2. Research significance

Although popular culture has a positive motivational impact on adolescents' psychological development, it can also have potential negative effects. Therefore, this paper focuses on the impact of popular culture on adolescents' identity formation, further expanding the application of existing identity theories. Traditional research on identity formation tends to emphasize the role of family, school, and peer relationships in shaping adolescents' self-identity, while this study highlights the unique role of popular culture as an emerging socializing factor in the construction of adolescent identity.

This study aims to furnish empirical evidence in the realm of psychological health, assisting adolescents in sustaining rational identity recognition during cultural consumption, augmenting their critical thinking, and mitigating the adverse effects of popular culture.

2. Research design

2.1. Research methods

The objective of this investigation is to investigate the influence of popular culture on the identity development of adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18. Specifically, it will examine the ways in which these cultural forms form their self-identity, foster a sense of community, and influence their values and behaviours in real life. This research employs questionnaires and in-depth interviews to gather data to develop a comprehensive understanding of the influence of popular culture on the development of adolescents' identities.

The research focused on dimensions such as emotional projection and idol identification in the questionnaire survey, which was distributed online. The objective was to analyse the engagement of adolescents aged 14-18 with popular culture, identity formation, and related influencing factors to obtain representative statistical results. A total of 102 responses were collected. To guarantee the precision and comprehensiveness of the data, the collection process was monitored in real time.

To further understand the identity construction process of adolescents in popular culture, 20 middle school students with varying degrees of cultural participation were selected for face-to-face interviews. The interview results primarily focused on three themes: individual identity, community belonging, and the balance between reality and the virtual world. Through in-depth conversations with the adolescents, the study explored their more specific psychological experiences, cultural identification methods, and the concrete manifestations of identity in real life, compensating for the limitations of the questionnaire survey.

2.2. Research results

2.2.1. The impact of popular culture on identity formation

The data from the questionnaire survey show that adolescents who have long been involved in fan culture or anime culture exhibit a stronger sense of identity than those who have not participated. These adolescents generally believe that popular culture helps them construct self-identity, enhances their sense of belonging, and allows them to gain recognition within cultural communities. More than half of the respondents indicated that fan culture or anime played a crucial role in the establishment of their identity, revealing the key role of cultural symbols and emotional recognition in the growth of adolescents. Furthermore, adolescents' values, interests, and behaviors are

influenced by idols or anime characters, as they project emotions through these cultural forms, constructing an idealized self-image.

In interviews, participants commonly concurred that popular culture offers a means for them to examine their self-identity. Some fans assert that they derive motivational strength from their idols' experiences, which subsequently influence their values and life aspirations. Anime culture provides adolescents with the chance to engage in varied identity experiences, including the exploration and expression of their authentic selves through cosplay and fan creations. Certain respondents indicated that anime culture enhanced their willingness to embrace individuality and augmented their self-confidence.

2.2.2. The role of cultural communities in identity formation

According to data, over 80% of respondents developed new social contacts and personal identity due to fan culture or anime. This demonstrates that what popular culture provides to their adolescents is a platform and community to have common interests, which will create social recognition and develop social belonging. That is, the more an adolescent is involved with these cultural communities, the more social recognition and a sense of belonging they feel based on the data.

Most respondents said cultural communities helped meet emotional needs when experiencing loneliness or stress in real life. Involvement in cultural communities allowed them to find like-minded people and build their social confidence. These Gen Z individuals can express their attitudes and emotions about specific characters from these communities, revealing symbols that are meaningful to their culture and identity. Furthermore, people can integrate with peers around the world through online platforms, and this action of cross-regional and cross-cultural exchange broadens human horizons as well as decentralizes social relationship building..

3. Impact

3.1. Positive impact

3.1.1. Providing a sense of belonging and emotional resonance

Teenagers use the experience of popular culture as an emotional crutch, allowing them to define their sense of acceptance and belonging in the progression of their development. For example, fanship processes such as psychological projection, social learning, and compensatory mechanisms are used by adolescents to create and reinforce their self-identity [4]. Especially for adolescents, they may promote a sense of belonging, increase social interactions with other fans and fan-support activities, and achieve intimacy and recognition in the group through participation in fan communities. This contributes to their sense of self-identity, social confidence, and practical social skills, further reinforcing their community belongingness [5]. The idolizing behavior towards the idols is one kind of "ideal self" psychological projection, which helps teenagers to make up for some internal lack, such as status desire, achievement desire, and so on. Adolescents can become increasingly aware of both the characteristics with which they aspire to identify and the comparative strategies for improving attractiveness and success [6].

Additionally, adolescents can gain emotional resonance through popular culture. TV dramas, which depict themes of growth, friendship, love, family, struggle, setbacks, and dreams, often resonate with the lives of ordinary people. For instance, the TV show Reply 1988 resonates with

viewers of different generations through its stories of youth and family, evoking memories of their formative years. The growth, challenges, and emotional fluctuations of a character often serve as a medium for viewers to project their own emotions. Adolescents frequently regard idols as their ideal "role models" and seek self-identity confirmation and social reflections by imitating their behavior, style, and attitude. This is not only a form of consumption but also a means of expressing individuality and aligning with the values of the idol. For example, the "inspirational narratives" in K-pop culture resonate emotionally with adolescents, influencing their self-identity [7]. Moreover, contemporary adolescents also project their emotions onto virtual characters in anime, establishing emotional connections with them [8]. The instinctual cognition process allows the brain to momentarily set aside existing beliefs, enabling individuals to display behaviors and emotions that differ from usual, thus allowing virtual characters to penetrate the inner world and become objects for emotional projection. Adolescents project their emotional needs onto anime characters, gaining recognition and fulfillment through this emotional connection. The experiences, personalities, and growth of characters may help adolescents clarify their life dilemmas, even imitating their actions or beliefs to shape themselves.

3.1.2. Stimulating creativity and personal expression

Popular culture attracts a large fan base, who not only consume content but also engage in secondary creation to express their understanding and affection, gaining significant recognition within fan communities. Fan culture promotes secondary creation, which is not only a tribute to the original work but also a way for creators to express themselves. For instance, anime enthusiasts shape their identity through community interactions such as cosplay and fan creations [9]. Adolescents who participate in these anime communities can share their emotions and ideas while receiving feedback from other members. Through shared preferences for anime characters and works, they form collective identities and define themselves through interactions. This process of social engagement strengthens adolescents' sense of belonging and identity. For example, research has found that female fan creators form fan communities, create fan fiction, and exchange with like-minded individuals through online resources, where they feel a sense of community recognition that enhances their willingness to create [10].

The popularity of social media has made popular culture more interactive, allowing for active participation. New creative forms such as short videos, vlogs, and podcasts enable ordinary people to become content producers, offering everyone the opportunity to express themselves. Music and dance have become the most direct forms of emotional expression. With the rise of popular culture, more individuals can freely create, showcase their personalities, and resonate with global audiences through social media. From K-pop to hip-hop and electronic music, from street dance culture to fan dance challenges, adolescents are participating in music and dance creation in unprecedented ways, breaking traditional boundaries and expanding the possibilities of personal expression. In the past, music creation was mainly led by professional musicians and record companies, but with the development of popular culture and social media, music creation has become more democratic, allowing ordinary people to participate through covers, remixes, and original works. Social platforms help spread these creations to the public. For example, songs like Red High Heels became widely popular due to cover culture on social media. Olivia Rodrigo first gained attention by sharing cover songs on social platforms before creating her music and becoming famous. K-pop dance challenges have not only spread music but also made dance a significant form of fan interaction. Fans express themselves and find a sense of belonging by posting dance challenges related to their idols' songs on social media.

3.2. Negative impact

While popular culture has a significant influence on individual expression and social trends, it may also have some negative consequences, such as psychological issues, identity crises, and social challenges.

Today, many celebrity images are meticulously crafted, emphasizing standards such as slimness, fair skin, high noses, and large eyes. This has led many adolescents to become dissatisfied with their appearance, resulting in feelings of inferiority, anxiety about cosmetic surgery, or extreme dieting behaviors. Similarly, negative psychological issues arise from blind idol worship. Studies have found that prolonged idol worship can cause adolescents to develop emotional dependence, idealize idols, and believe they can fulfill all their emotional needs. This dependence can lead to emotional emptiness, anxiety, and depression, even affecting their real-life and interpersonal relationships [11].

Research suggests that the younger generation's comprehension of contemporary social events is significantly lower than their consumption of entertainment. As a result of excessive idol worship, adolescents may experience feelings of isolation and social obstacles over time. Even though they may experience a sense of belonging within fan groups, this may, to a certain extent, exacerbate their isolation in real life [12]. Furthermore, conflicts between virtual and real identities may arise as a result of an excessive amount of time spent in virtual characters and worlds. Adolescents may experience a sense of belonging and an ideal self in the virtual world, but they may grow dissatisfied with or attempt to escape from real life. This escapism may result in a loss of self-recognition in the real world, which can make it challenging to adjust to changes in social relationships and roles. Conversely, adolescents' capacity to establish autonomous identities in real life may be compromised by an excessive dependence on virtual identities. Their self-identity may be influenced by virtual characters and fantasy worlds, which can make it difficult for them to establish a genuine sense of self in the real world.

4. Recommendations

4.1. Balance virtual and real worlds

In the globalisation and advanced digital media age, adolescents are easily attracted to online media invading their living space and depending on their idol and virtual world, foregoing participation in the real world. That is why it is important to help teenagers balance the virtual and real worlds and develop diverse interests by telling them how to do it. Families can help teenagers develop good time management strategies to prevent over-indulgence in cultural communities, therefore reducing dependence on virtual identities, while also encouraging them to get involved with current events and develop popular culture hobbies in artistic lessons such as painting or writing.

4.2. Strengthen reflection and critique

As social media and commercial activities are booming in a way that intensifies mass culture, their influence on the identity of adolescents makes them susceptible to misleading information and irrational identity development. Hence, it is imperative to cultivate critical cognition and independent judgment skills among young people, allowing them to engage with popular culture at least rationally, instead of relying on only certain cultural circles for establishing their identities. Schools can offer media literacy classes to help students differentiate between accurate information and lies and lessen the effects of extreme fan culture. Furthermore, adolescents should be

encouraged to focus on the moral characteristics of the people they idolize rather than worshipping them without any critical thinking, and the fact that the personas of these individuals are often manufactured for the sake of profit.

4.3. Build positive cultural communities

Cultural communities significantly influence adolescent identity development. Consequently, it is essential to cultivate healthy, affirmative community settings that enable adolescents to develop positively through cultural involvement. Community managers can facilitate offline fan meetups, allowing adolescents to connect with like-minded individuals and enhance their social interaction skills. Furthermore, fans ought to be urged to emphasise idols' social responsibilities, foster significant cultural exchanges, and mitigate detrimental behaviours such as "fan wars" and "intense competition."

4.4. Exposure to diverse cultures

The identity formation of an individual is determined by their ethnicity, nationality, and cultural background. If people are over-immersed in a particular cultural environment, it will result in cognitive fetters or cultural bias. Thus, exposing adolescents to different cultures and exploring intellectual borders helps them develop a more tolerant and inclusive identity. The families should help growing teens to learn foreign languages and engage in international cultural mechanisms, which would enhance cultural understanding and reduce bias or information isolation from a single cultural background. Educational institutions may recommend literature and films from various countries with separate value systems to help teens understand disparate cultural traits and values.

5. Conclusion

The influence of popular culture on the development of adolescents' identities is multifaceted, encompassing emotional resonance, social belonging, and individual identity shaping. It is evident from a review of pertinent literature and research that popular culture not only offers emotional support and a sense of social belonging but also serves as a significant platform for adolescents to investigate, develop, and verify their identities.

Popular culture has the potential to have both positive and negative effects on the development of adolescent identity. These negative impacts include an overreliance on virtual worlds, identity anxiety, and social barriers. Future research should be conducted in a broader cultural context and with larger sample sizes to obtain more objective and authentic data, thereby addressing current research gaps. Additionally, in the context of emerging phenomena like the commercialisation of fan economies, additional research should investigate the most effective methods for assisting adolescents in engaging in rational consumption of popular culture.

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