

# MEDIA-INFLUENCED DEVELOPMENT OF SELF IMAGE OF A YOUNG PERSON AND THE POSSIBILITY OF SUICIDE

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## 1. *Consumerist media society and self-image*

Young people often find it difficult to realize opportunities of self-government of their lives, and still further it can also happen that such an option is not occurrent to them. First, they don't have proper understanding of emotions (Munger 2009; Galimberti 2009, 108), because they are experiencing adolescence and in this time first major challenges of their self-image are present. And secondly, if we look closer to the comparison of a brain of a young person and a consumerist oriented media we can expose some of the striking similarities between both. With this I wish to claim that the correspondence between both can explain why teenagers can often very easily relate to them. A brief, but also very revealing comparison can be made between both along the following dimensions. First, a teenage brain is constantly changing or adapting (well all brains are, but if we compare the younger and an older brain the former are the most active one in respect to changes). And if we turn the attention to the media we can see that they are constantly changing too, they follow, interpret and adapt to every change in society. Secondly, a brain of a young person is very responsive to the environment. So are media; they react even before something obviously occurs. Thirdly, teenage brain gets really excited when it comes to rewards, emotions, new experiments (Galvan 2013). And we can see that media always offers, promises rewards, new things, new experiences, and are very enthusiastic with promoting emotion of happiness, which every human being wants. Thus, young people are easily influenced by the media with consumerist intentions. For these kids, the most common characteristics that stand out are difficulties with decision-making, inability of dialogues, rejection of responsibility, longing for recognition, misunderstanding of values or superficiality. These characteristics are related with serious problems of today's society, especially the ones involved in today's consumerist media society. One can sort them into four distinct groups.

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In what follows there groups are briefly described, just to hint at their dimensions and after that I discuss what the reasons for them are and how they are connected with negative morality of media.

*Image.* The research evidence reveals that viewing and following this particular form of the media may encourage youths to develop an interest in obtaining cosmetic surgery (Markey & Markey, 2012, 211). Specific data (America Plastic Surgery Society) for the year 2011 confirms that, but we can easily generalize the point. For example, one of the top five female surgical procedures is breast augmentation. We see that at the age between 13 and 19 the growth of plastic surgical procedures begins, but one cannot related that necessarily to the looks or image perspective; the reasons behind it might be purely medical. This is the period in which their bodies change a lot and in this time some possible disfunctionalities are revealed, for which medical intervention is needed. It is interesting that from the age of 20 and until 29 these numbers multiply almost for four times and with ages till mid thirties further drastically increases. What is happening here? Why their self image is so corrupted and therefore influenced, that they perceive the need for a drastic changes to their bodies?

*Suicide among young people.* Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among young males and third leading cause among females (*European Child Safety Alliance*). And usually this is connected with their perception of lives they are in the moment and if we look at research it show that young persons want to feel more important (their priority is not necessary for safety, as we would be inclined to think). This is an important issue and what is of interest is the question on what influences this feeling. What is also interesting about young suicides is that girls nearly four more times than boys attempt to commits suicide, but out of these attempts boys are much more likely to die (Wasserman et al., 2005). The open question remains what is so different about girls; is that only their nature or something more?

*Drugs and other addictions.* The third problem is drugs and other addictions, which are a big health concern and also a security problem. Here the results are again interesting. Between 80% and 94% of respondents, aged between 15 and 24 years, which were included in EU research on the issue thinks that there would be a high risk for health linked to heroin, cocaine and ecstasy consumption. There is a slightly different perception in relation to cannabis, where only 40% of young people saw a high health risk and 14% attributed a low risk to the use of this drug. And again only a quarter of young people saw high risks linked to the consumption of alcohol and tobacco. Young girls are drinking earlier and more than they have in the past. Recent studies show that young girls are drinking and using tobacco

and drugs at a higher rate than boys their age, although all underage use is decreasing (Young people and drugs, 2008).

*Relationships.* The fourth problem concerns bad relationships or lack of them. As an example we can point to young people, which usually have just one night stands for fun or to feel more important. For example when I was doing some research I found an interview with a girl, which reported: “I don’t want a relationship, I don’t need a guy to be happy, I need them only for my needs and fun and it is easy to find that kind of guy” (Pric Oreškovič 2008, 16–19). And on the other hand there are also a lot of emotional abuses of girls who stay in longer relationships, because they don’t know other person very well, or they think this is normal, or they just want to keep it no matter what.

Those four mentioned problems concern the influence the media have on young people, especially media with consumerist intentions. In what follows I will try to explain how media gets such a power over these young people and what the consequences are.

If we look at the four problems we can see a common feature, which is bad or unsound self-image of these persons, which were influenced by the media.

First, young people are comparing themselves to idealized features from the media, which can lead to negative emotions and destructive actions. Cultivation theory (Markley & Markley, 2013, 210) suggests that repeated exposure to the media leads viewers to accept media information as indicative of reality. Thus, the disparate nature of male and female beauty or image presented in the media and the beauty or image that the average person is likely exhibit extends as media contact increases. Of course, negative self-image can be already brought in to this media environment (if the young people have broken families, for example) and that is why this environment is definitely not encouraging for them. But as we can see their self-image can be influenced independently of their pasts.

Secondly, we can now address a problem of drugs and other addictions. We know that the primary goal of consumerist’s media is gaining consumers no matter the price, so that is why we are often witnesses of mere exploitation of values and emotions of the people who are in trouble. And consequently problems are not solved rather postponed. So if we imagine a young person with some problem she or he cannot solve. How does this feel? Let’s try to imagine. It all begins with a sense of anxiety and restlessness and she or he does not know how to handle these emotions. This person tries to lose the pains of the anguish, restlessness in the easiest way and as soon as possible; and does not try to ask herself or himself about this experience. So this

young person finds some media (newspaper, internet, ...), which advertises itself and offer advises, but those advises are coming from people who are not trained to deal with the problems this young person has and there is no real dialogue, no real human talk. But this media becomes to her or him like a person or a friend. This will not only fail to solve her or his problems but only enlarge them. Still another option is that young person can choose the media from which she or he becomes addicted and not being aware of this. This young person eventually loses contact with herself or himself and others. She or he won't be able to establish good dialogue which could give her or him authentic response to her or his problems and not some illusion of a solution. We can see that both choices solve other problems, which in fact are not the cause of the relevant emotions. A sense of emptiness–anxiety remains powered by this mind–set and does not allow to make a young person resigned, because this young person fears what it is waiting for the “outside” of the system, since, in fact, does not even know who she or he is. We can say that a young person has a mistaken idea about herself or himself. This idea was as possibly created with a help of a broken or no dialogue and social network as well as the media with consumer background. Therefore a young person with wrong or broken self–image searches for incorrect external solutions. But if we look from the point of view of the media point this was a success. They gained for themselves a new costumer. Such media systems take away freedom in an important way; the freedom to be what these young people truly are. So we can perceive the media here as a (group) person that is morally corrupted, with no conscience.

Suicide phenomena are also telling, young people are avoiding, not realizing or suppressing the pain. Media with its consumerist attack paralyze that kind of emotions too and instead offers artificial happiness and with that consequently effect on decisions and problems solving of young people; such example is fear of not selecting something (e.g. to become a member of a closed group), and therefore fear of not being selected in return. These people want to feel important and want to belong. So that is why they are prepared to do almost anything. The best of example is a world of fashion. Girls tend to starve, they take drugs, fall into a depression, have intimate relationships with intention to get a job, have a plastic surgeries and the worst outcome can also be a suicide, when they don't have any power left. When they don't know what they feel or who they are; they totally lost their identity.

All three problems are connected to another mentioned problem, which concerns bad relationships or lack of them. In life of a young person lacking of encouraging relationships media could easily get into this “empty” space he or she has. A young person will first look for an answer from an adult or another person, what can help (example is psychiatrist Michael

Peck, who thinks, that young person who wants to commit suicide do in fact do not want to die, but rather wish that their pain to go away. They do not understand their situation well and all they need is to talk<sup>1</sup>). And if they do not have any trusted adults in their lives or not getting a dialogue, they can be caught in their own misery and cannot see they have choices (Stone 1999, 42, 43). Thus positive self-image, which starts with positive dialogue in intimate relationship and is needed to establish normal dialogue in social network is foundation for these young people.

We can say that the media embedded with consumerism are morally negative, because they more or less intentionally cause or create environment, they design a social environment, where young people lose their selves. I don't claim there are only negative. But if these young people have no positive self-image, media society with its negative aspects can manipulate on their self-image even more so they cannot establish normal, effective dialogues, which could connect them with reality. The first condition for good self-image is to understand emotions, which occurs in the specific moment. I would like to stress here Martha Nussbaum's theory of emotions, where she is talking about emotions can be received as thoughts and that is why emotions can be sculptured or worked on and used for good moral life (Nussbaum 2001).

## II. *Suicide of a young person and a meaning of life*

A few months ago there was a report that young boy left a suicide note saying he lost his meaning of life. When one start to research this field it is revealed that this is not an uncommon claim among psychiatrists of people, who tried to commit suicide (Kostnapfel 1979, 320). Does this claim hold equally for a young and for an adult person? To pose the question in a different way, can the loss of a meaning of life be a cause behind a decision for suicide of a young person?

What are the distinguishing characteristics between a suicide of an adult and that of a young person? I will be focused on four main points, namely decision, (understanding of) values/value of life, (understanding) emotions and environment.

Suicide is a decision made between life and death. And that decision is an answer to a problem we have in process of decision-making involving

1 »Death may seem like only solution to teenagers grieving over major loss in their lives. In the bleak words of 14-year-old girl: 'If I died, I wouldn't hurt as much as I do now.' But if you could say to them, 'Don't commit suicide because I can get you away from the pain without dying', says psychiatrist Michael Peek, they'd likely be ready to do it« (Stone 1999, 42, 43).

motivation (will), interaction (socialization), and rationalization. One can see that we have a source of the decision for suicide in this process of answering. When an adult makes a decision to commit suicide based on how it values, understands his or her life, there are two possibilities. First, that person did not developed proper values enough and this influenced on its understanding meaning of life. For example: for this person success in life, to have a lot of money, beautiful body, etc. is of great importance. In general this person has weakened personal values and thus seeks satisfaction in material stuff and therefore can this outside world easily bring him or her to suicide for example, if this person losses all money. The second possibility is more frequent. An adult commits suicide even when she or he understands proper values of life. But his or her inside world is broken. And thus not finding a solution to the initial question about meaning of his or her life, a person therefore commits a suicide with full understanding of values.

What about a young person deciding to commit suicide? First, the data for youth suicides should be taken more seriously, researched individually, because in many cases the reports and interpretations are not adequate. As an example we can see the following report: according to his parents the 14-year old boy shot himself, because he was upset about getting braces for his teeth (Stone 1999, 43). This is not the real cause of decision for suicide. If we go back to my point, we cannot say that this young boy decided to commit suicide with full understanding of proper values of life. We can just say, that that boy did not developed proper values enough and this influenced on its process of understanding meaning of life. And let us see more specifically why. First of all, the period of adolescence, growing up, is a period of swings of moods and behaviour due to sex hormones and this strongly influence the physical and emotional development (Juhant 2003, 175). So this biological instability makes it impossible for a young person's ability to make a "sound" decision as can be made by the adult. Secondly, life makes sense when it consists of meaningful relationships (Klampfer 2013). Thus a young person has not yet been able to develop the ability of full commitments in their life, relationships and thus related decisions. Maybe it has no or bad insight into the value system, because of no meaningful relationships, due to age, inexperience or because of the difficult environment. Thirdly, youth have problems in understanding their emotions. There are some researches that say they mistake responsibility to guilt (often we hear about suicides, because young person felt guilty, because she/he didn't pass the exam and that's why committed suicide<sup>2</sup> and anger to sadness (mass shot gun killings in schools and then suicides). We can clearly see connection between proper understanding of values of life and thus decisions of suicide due to

2 Example is a young 12 year old girl from Slovenia. She committed suicide because her grade was not good enough (A. N., 2007).

mistake emotions. Finally, we learn from the environment in which we live in. We learn values from the family and also from the cultural environment and from other backgrounds which follow the development of a person. As young person we are tend to mimic and not to able to think for ourselves. And thus decision for suicide is a copied idea from the society. It is a mirror. Research in 90 countries by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2004 by has shown that exposure to media content on youth suicides and suicides of famous people increase suicides among young people. The WHO thus advises that such are not reported in media in full scale.

To conclude on this issue we can stress the following. Young people are not mature enough in understanding genuine values to make true or authentic decisions. If we reflect on our feelings and responses when a young person commits suicide we tend to see a greater loss and tragedy than compared to an adult person. This is precisely why as adults we are able to evaluate this decision within the framework of meaning. And this is also what young person lacks. Suicide as a decision of an adult is more deliberate in a sense that with this decision at least the basic preconditions are fulfilled for making one. In the case of a suicide of a young person this is more excusable from their own perspective, since there is no proper value framework. Environment greatly influences our value system and thus also affects our understanding of meaning of life. It is a responsibility of society to create an environment with at least incentives for youth suicides. If we begin with presupposition that every decision is based on values, than we have to recognize that this is deeply connected with our emotions. That is why it is important that we are able to recognize and understand emotions and enable youth to develop abilities to do so.

## *Conclusion*

In conclusion some of the connections between the discussed phenomena are drawn. First, consumerist media often create and then invade and enter a space that is marked with the feelings of emptiness, anxiety and non-fulfilment of young people, which emerges around them. In this space the mechanism of mimicry is very strong. This is closely connected also with the phenomena of youth suicide. One of the most direct and extreme expressions of such a state is the so-called copycat suicide, when a young person imitates the suicide of some figure, which is not necessarily famous, but is well-publicized (Goleman 1987). Secondly, the mentioned connections can be still more elaborate and deep. Consumerist media in a large extent disable a young person to develop proper values and healthy self-image and promote the development of non-authentic perception of oneself. And as it was demonstrated above this can also be an important factor in explaining youth suicide.

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*Summary*

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**MEDIA-INFLUENCED DEVELOPMENT OF SELF IMAGE OF A YOUNG PERSON AND THE POSSIBILITY OF SUICIDE**

The paper addresses some of the negative aspects of the consumerist media society, which creates a possibility of moral evil, especially if one reflects on the negative development of self-image of young people. In many of such cases the loss of a meaning of life can be at first sight seen as a cause behind a decision for suicide of a young person. In the paper I argue that the relation between such a media-influenced environment on the one hand and the meaning of life and suicide on the other is multi-faceted, in the sense that media society can directly trigger the decision for suicide or indirectly negatively impact on the formation of basic values involved in the meaning of life and healthy self-image.

In the first section I will discuss selected aspects of the consumerist media society, which is predominantly characterized by shaping of our abilities of reflection and decision-making with a clear goal of creating perceived needs in consumers. This heavily influences self-image and its development. In the second section I turn to connection between the meaning of life (or better, to the loss of it) and suicide, especially in relation to a difference between suicide of a young person and an adult. In conclusion I connect both of these phenomena.

**KEYWORDS:** consumerism, young person, suicide, meaning of life, decision, self-image, media, emotions.