LIFESTYLE AND THE SHAPING OF MEDIA COMPETENCY THROUGH FICTIONAL STORIES

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Abstract: Our individual media style is part of our lifestyle. This paper considers the issue of the shaping of the media competency of children and young people, with a particular focus on the reception of audiovisual programmes. Media competency is profoundly shaped during adolescence, when young people form their own media style. This article presents the results of a research project conducted among more than 2,000 users of the Czech–Slovak Film Database (www.csfd.cz).

Key words: media competency, viewer, preschool age, adolescent

Introduction: Gender and cultural specifics in the area of media reception

The media offer the kind of lifestyle and consumer choice that lets us create our own individual media identity through the combination of various styles (Giles, 2003, p. 156; Signorelli and Bacue, 1999, and others). Our media preferences change over the course of our lives, and it is only natural that the fastest and most distinct changes occur during childhood and adolescence, when an increasingly critical approach to media production is progressively formed and our preferences for media content are, to put it simply, marked by a shift from simple content to complex content.

In terms of frequency of use, television and video/DVD predominate during childhood, being gradually joined by computer games. Computers, the Internet, mobile phones, etc. come to the forefront of interest among adolescents, and this is accompanied by the increasing influence of contemporaries and a decline in the importance of the influence of the family. Watching television is a form of relaxation for adolescents, particularly if they have a television in their own rooms. Children watching television in their owns rooms is generally more acceptable to parents than the idea of what might happen if their children are amusing themselves outside (cf. Giles, 2003). As children grow, their preferences also become more specific, with adolescent boys generally turning to sports programmes and girls to romantic programmes (Livingstone and Bo-

vill, 1999). Pubescent children show a greater interest in programmes for adults, which would seem to suggest that they might watch television with their parents. Children tend, however, to form their own "different" style during this stage of development, which frequently leads to an increase in the number of television sets in the household (Pasquier et al., 1999). In Western Europe and North America, what's more, the need for one's own space is seen as one of the basic human requirements, and children can pursue such activities as diary writing, creating graphics and videos, painting, daydreaming about their favourite characters, listening to music or watching audio-visual programmes undisturbed in their own rooms. The authors Steele and Brown (1995 in Giles, 2003) and Livingstone and Bovill (1999, 2001), studying the culture of children's rooms, discovered that media integrated into the architecture of children's rooms are becoming an individual part of their identity, though they also found gender differences. While 27 % of girls stated that they spend the majority of their time in their rooms, only 14 % of boys shared this view, and considered time spent in their room a symbol of an inability to succeed in society. It is, then, generally girls who spend most of their time in their room with their best friend watching programmes, listening to music and dreaming about their favourite characters.

Although the findings of Larson and Verma (1999) come from a time before broadband Internet (as another fundamental variable), for example, was available to wide sections of the population, their finding of a global nature that the average amount of time spent watching television differs between cultures is deserving of attention. The average time spent watching a moving image ranged from 1 to 3 hours in the evening. The figure for the USA and Great Britain was 2.8 hours, while in Italy adolescents spent only 1.1 hours in this way. In Western countries, where adolescents are used to spending more time out of the house, the amount of time spent watching television was lower than among cultures with a greater focus on the family (Japan, for example). These authors also discovered that even one third of poor Indian children have access to a television and watch it daily. Suess et al. (1998) noted other differences between cultures, finding that Finnish children were much more confident computer users than Spanish children. While the majority of Finnish children aged 6 or 7 were confident computer users, Spanish children aged 9 or 10 still required the assistance of their parents to play games (here we must again take the time at which the study was conducted into consideration). The socialisation function of the media may also have a cultural impact. Lonner et al. (1985 in Giles, 2003) produced research findings in this area, demonstrating a significant difference in the acceptance of Afro-Americans by children from Alaska before and after the introduction of television broadcasts. Their relationship to another ethic group, which they had practically no chance of meeting in person, showed a slight improvement after encountering it on television.

While our viewing habits were still determined by television broadcasting itself at the beginning of the nineteen eighties, today we can follow any number of our favourite programmes that may have been made decades ago at any time we want thanks to the enormous archives available. This possibility of compiling our own media lifestyle has been studied by Jane D. Brown (2000) in her ethnographic study of reception and interaction between young people and the media. The author was interested in how young people work with the media, and created a model in which the decisive components in

the matter of the daily selection of programmes commonly include their purpose for the viewer's own individuality and identity. The selection of media by adolescents (and evidently not just adolescents) and their interaction with them takes place on the basis of an awareness of who they are and what they want to be like. Brown (2000), for example, divides adolescent girls into two groups. The first type develops as romantic idealists with a heterosexual identity – these girls will be looking for mainstream magazines for teenagers, romantic serials and gentle music. The second type are independent girls who are convinced that all the above products are silly – these girls listen to alternative music and look for cult films. The author then states two different ways of reading the same programme watched by these girls. In this case, girls corresponding to these two types would be exposed to the same talk show featuring couples with partnership problems. While the first group will identify with the issue of looking for love, the second may identify with the assertive reactions of women. The author also divided adolescent boys in an analogous way and reached the same conclusions.

Media diet pyramid (Jane D. Brown, 2000)

As adolescents gradually move from a position of dependence towards greater autonomy and clearly differentiated individuality, they also form their own idiosyncratic media diet pyramid. This pyramid, from which their uniqueness and independent identity arises, depicts their development from relatively passive consumption of general teenage culture towards interaction with the media, which also encompasses their shaping of their cultural world. The time at which this research was conducted (the use of audiovisual cassettes, for example) and the fact that her principal aim is not to give a precise enumeration of types of media consumption, must be taken into consideration.
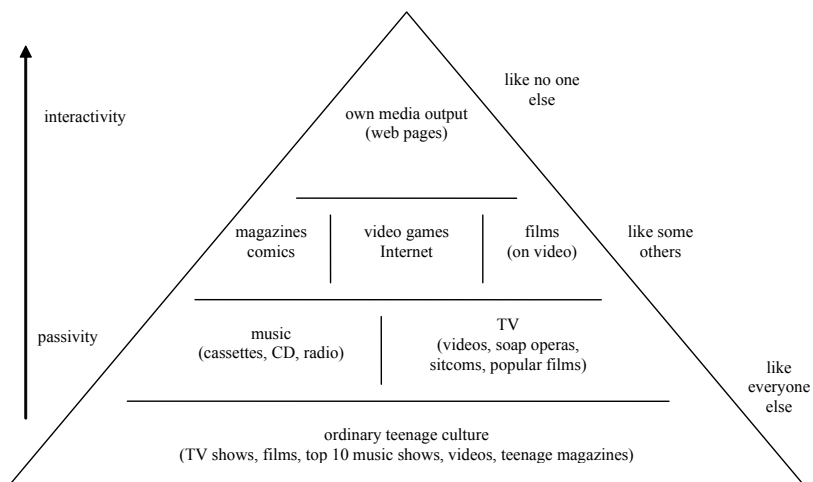
Jane D. Brown: Adolescents' media diet pyramid (BROWN, J. D. Adolescents' Sexual Media Diets. In *Journal of Adolescent Health*, August 2000. Vol. 27, Issue 2, Pages 35–40; In *Telemedium, The Journal of Media Literacy*. Fall 2002. Vol. 48, Issue 2, Pages 30–31)

The analysis of gender specifics in the reception of audiovisual culture is often considered a risky endeavour that can easily be influenced by traditional stereotypes about gender roles, but we cannot ignore the increasingly apparent differences in the preferences for various programmes among girls and boys. The majority of authors agree that we find no gender differences in terms of the choice of toys, television programmes, computer games, etc. until the age of around two (cf. Fagot, 1994; Valkenburg, 2004). Gender differences do, however, begin to become clear at the age of about three – children begin playing in groups of the same sex, boys take part more often in physically aggressive forms of games such as pretend fights and sports such as football, while girls tend more towards dressing dolls and so on. The same is true of their preferences for audiovisual programmes – boys show a preference for stories containing action and violence, sport, dinosaurs, aliens and monsters that they can overcome by identifying with heroes in the form of knights, soldiers, policemen, firemen, etc., while girls show a preference for stories dominated by relationships and topics such as castles, dance studios, schools and farms, with their principal heroes taking the form of princesses, ballerinas, fairies, models, etc. (cf. Valkenburg, 2004, p. 35).

The research conducted by Rydin (2003, p. 77–93) focused on gender differences in the reception of real and fictional dimensions by children of preschool and early school age. According to the author, it is generally girls who take an ambivalent position and are aware of both the dimension of reality and the dimension of fiction. According to her findings, the accounts given by girls of preschool and early school age were more comprehensive and indicative of both fantasy and reality, while boys of the same age tend rather to reflect how a programme is made in formal terms.

Gender differences increase from the age of around six as a result of the increasing influence of children's contemporaries and the associated pressure on children to observe the behaviour of gender stereotypes. Boys aged around eight to twelve show a strong preference for action stories, sport, science fiction, adventure stories and animated stories. They are attracted towards male action heroes, though these must now be more realistic (from superheroes to detectives). Girls, on the other hand, do not find it so important to kill the enemy and emerge victorious. For films, games or serials to engage them, they must offer a sufficiently interesting and realistic story about relationships as they are in real life (this being permitted to them by the norms of gender stereotypes). They prefer realistic and attractive characters such as models, sports stars, film stars and pop music stars. Girls are also more interested in contexts, and search out other films and serials featuring their favourite actors and look for articles, biographies, etc. They are also more likely than boys to watch a programme from start to finish (Sanger et al., 1997).

These differences defined by the strong influence of children's contemporaries during pubescence, which demands of the individual the strict fulfilment of norms in the area of gender roles, generally weaken over the course of time. The question of gender differences in terms of preferences for particular programmes becomes increasingly complicated during adolescence, not least because the differences between the sexes are now more blurred than they were in previous decades. We can, however, conclude, for example, that young men have a deeper interest in audiovisual culture, as of the more than two thousand respondents that took part in the research presented here 74.2 % were male and 25.8 % female.

The research

The reception specifics of contemporary young people were determined by means of a questionnaire. The research task was to find out how many films and serials they watch a week on average and how they select the films and serials they watch. Another question focused on other materials used by these viewers (i.e. film magazines, databases, etc.). The data obtained was put into context with variables such as the age, gender and education of the respondents.

Distribution of the questionnaire was conducted through the Czech Internet pages about films that attract the largest number of visitors – www.csfd.cz (more than 120,000 users were registered at the time of data collection) – ensuring a range of respondents of various sex, education, etc. from all over the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The research group was comprised of 2,169 respondents replying during the course of less than two weeks in September 2008, of whom 74.2 % were men and 25.8 % women. In terms of age, the largest group was made up of young people and young adults.

Although more than two thousand young people from the Czech Republic and Slovakia with an interest in audiovisual culture answered the questionnaire voluntarily and out of their own interest, we are not generalising the data obtained with a view to the entire population of young people with an interest in audiovisual culture. It is, on the other hand, clear that more than 120,000 registered users of the Czech–Slovak Film Database provide a good representation of a large section of young people in the Czech Republic and Slovakia with a deeper interest in films and serials.

Number of films and serials watched a week in relation to age, sex and education
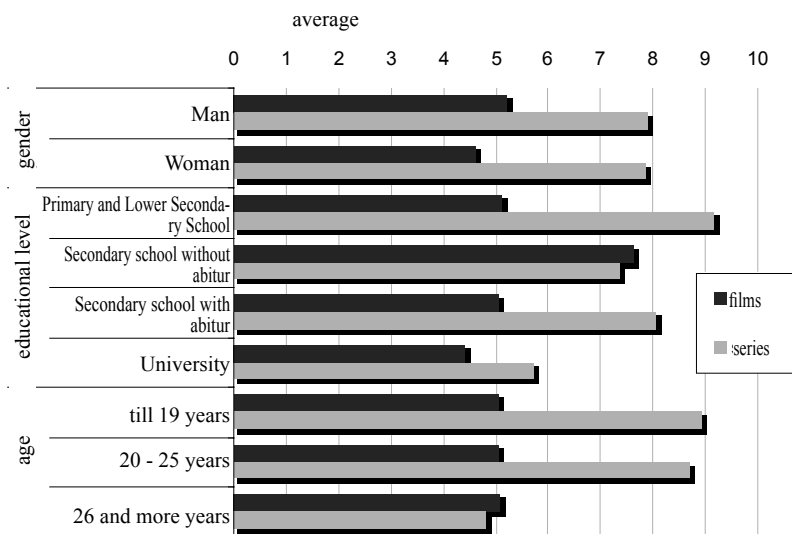
The number of films watched a week does not change greatly with age (5 films for all three age categories). In contrast, the number of episodes of serials watched by young people up to the age of 25 is around twice as high as among older people. Young people up to the age of 19 generally watch 9 episodes a week, those aged 20 to 25 watch 8 episodes a week, while the generation of people aged more than 25 watches only 5 episodes of serials a week. This distribution corresponds fully to the workload on the individual age categories, with secondary school pupils (and primary school children) having the greatest amount of time to follow serials on a regular basis or watch a large number of episodes of the latest serial at a single time. University students also devote almost the same time and attention to serials, while those aged more than 25 have rather less time for serials. A parallel can also be seen here between downloading serials and greater computer literacy among the younger generation, which allows them to watch entire seasons of the latest hit serials with no problem.

The ratio between the number of films and serials watched also differs in dependency on education. A larger number of serials than films are watched by, in particular, former primary school pupils (9 episodes as compared to 5 films) and secondary school leavers with qualifications (8 episodes), which of course includes current university students. These are again groups with a lower workload. Approximately the same number of films as serials (7.5) are ordinarily watched only by graduates of apprentice fields without qualifications, whom we can anticipate to have a greater workload than students. We can also anticipate a greater workload and, therefore, less free time that can be devoted to watching serials among university graduates. Although the number of films and serials watched falls after the attainment of a university education, serials (5.7 episodes) still dominate over films (4.4 films). This may be because these students have got used to watching serials along with their fellow students during the course of their university studies.

Gender does not play a significant role in terms of the number of films and serials watched. Men and women watch an average of 8 episodes of serials and 5 films a week (men 5.2 films; women 4.6 films).

Quantity is extremely important, as it enables comparison. We can observe that the views of experienced viewers are based on a more sophisticated sense of what makes for a good story and what elements of story construction within the framework of the genre build tension or engender doubt in the viewer (cf. Fisherkeller, 2000). This understanding encompasses basic concepts of work with the genre, characters, plot twists, thematic development and authorship (Fisherkeller, 2000). We generally find viewers who watch more films and serials to be more demanding and more critical and to make a more detailed assessment, as is clear from the comments made on individual films by users of the Czech–Slovak Film Database. The media experience of users who have seen and marked thousands of films and serials is particularly clear to be seen. We can also see a greater degree of cogency in their comments on individual films and serials. These media-literate users make comparisons with other similar works, comparisons of the performances of the actors and the work of the makers of these films and serials with their previous projects, the suitability of the music used, the use and choice of film locations, etc. based on their extensive experience. They use more colourful and apt metaphors in describing these works and emphasis the rhythm and other formal elements

of the work in making their assessments. They are not satisfied merely with expressing their pleasure or displeasure.

The method of selecting films and serials

The way in which audiovisual works are selected may be affected by one's surroundings, one's own interests and associated searches for related information. In the case of our respondents, no one else plays a part in their choice of films and serials – 82 % of respondents choose for themselves what they are going to watch; just 16 % of respondents agree with those around them on what they are to watch. Only 1 % of respondents leave the choice of a film or serial to their partner, while around 0.8 % leave this choice to their parents or someone else.

In choosing what they are to watch, our respondents show a clear preference for reviews in the press or on specialised websites, which (in the ideal situation) help them form their own opinion on the basis of the arguments and observations of the reviewer (89 % of respondents state that they definitely or probably use this method). A comparably popular method is to trust the views of friends or acquaintances (29 % definitely, 49 % probably), which understandably includes the views of other users of the Czech–Slovak Film Database with whom they are familiar (each user can choose 20 favourite users, i.e. users with similar tastes and opinions, whose comments and assessments are then displayed first, enabling the viewer to make a quick and easy decision). The preference for these two approaches (reviews and the opinions of acquaintances who have already seen the given work) is unambiguous testimony to the approach we would expect from media-literate individuals. In contrast, trailers help 37 % of respondents make their decision (5 % definitely and 32 % probably), while advertising, such as billboards and banners (little used in this country), is stated as definitely helping to make a decision by just 1.7 % of respondents and probably helping by 14 % of respondents who are able to decide on the choice of a film or serial in this way.
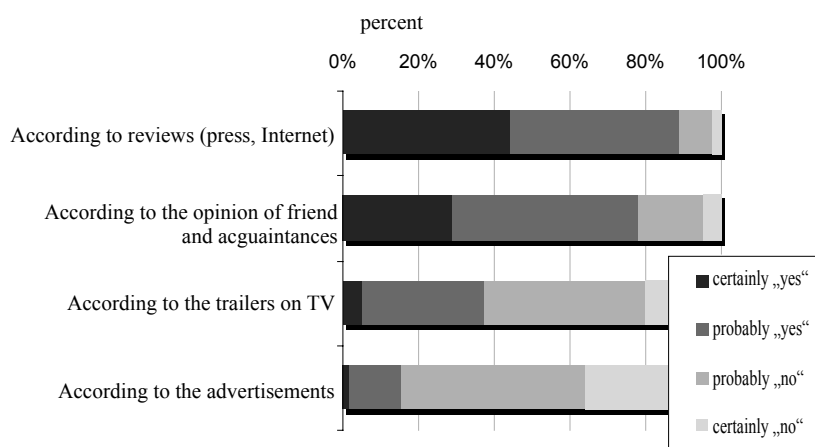
Additional materials used – on-line and printed magazines

The current range on the domestic market encompasses a number of popular and specialist printed magazines and a relatively large number of web projects devoted to film, which we can consider analogous to printed film magazines.

In view of the selection of respondents, it is not surprising that 98.5 % of the total number of respondents follow information from csfd.cz. The other web magazines read most often are Premiere.cz (22 % of all respondents), MovieZone.cz (21 %), Filmpub.cz (16.4 %), Tiscali.cz (8 %), Filmweb.cz (7 %), CinemaMagazine.cz (6 %), Kinema.sk (5 %), Zona.cz (4.5 %) and Nostalghia.cz (4 %). Only 2 % or less of the total number of respondents follow other web magazines given in the questionnaire (25fps.cz, Fantomfilm.cz, Nekultura.cz, Playall.cz, CinemaView.sk). 6 % of respondents follow other web periodicals that were not given on the questionnaire (imdb.com was usually stated).

As far as printed magazines are concerned, 45 % of all respondents follow the popular magazine Premiere, available for a relatively low price, and 22 % of all respondents follow the popular magazine Cinema, which used to be considered the most prestigious popular film magazine. Other magazines have a significantly lower readership among our respondents. Brno's cultural review Metropolis, distributed free, is followed by 7 % of all respondents. The traditional Filmový Přehled, as the oldest Czech film magazine issued by the National Film Archive, is followed by 3.5 % of respondents, the conservative popular magazine Film a Doba by 3 % of respondents, the specialist reviewed journal Iluminace by 1.5 % of respondents, and the specialist Slovak journal Kino-Ikon by 0.6 % of respondents. 42 % of all respondents follow no printed periodical.

Conclusion

This paper has presented cultural and gender specifics in the reception of fictional stories, with a focus on young people. Media competency is shaped most profoundly in adolescence, a period in which young people create their own media style on the basis of their sense of individuality and identity.

It is clear from the research presented here that while gender does not play a particularly significant role in terms of the number of films and serials watched, younger viewers (and students in particular) watch a larger number of episodes of serials a week. This larger number of episodes watched continues, however, among university graduates, who probably become accustomed to watching serials along with their fellow students during their university studies. Age and education play a less significant role in terms of the number of films watched.

In terms of the way in which films and serials are selected for viewing, the respondents preferred reviews in the press or on specialised websites (89 % of respondents stated that they definitely or probably used this method). A comparably popular way is based on the views of friends and acquaintances. As far as the use of additional materials is concerned (i.e. film magazines, etc.), the given viewers prefer electronic sources distributed over the Internet.

It is clear that our media preferences, as part of our lifestyle, change over the

course of our lives, and although the comprehensive and unique development of each individual has a fundamental role to play here, there can be no doubt that changing conditions in the area of the distribution, presentation and archiving of media products, which are becoming ever more accessible to us, have a great influence on shaping our personal media style.

Acknowledgement

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ŽIVOTNÍ STYL A FORMOVÁNÍ MEDIÁLNÍ KOMPETENCE PROSTŘEDNICTVÍM RECEPCE FIKČNÍCH PŘÍBĚHŮ

Abstrakt: Součástí našeho životního stylu je také náš individuální mediální styl. Příspěvek se zabývá problematikou utváření mediálních kompetencí u dětí a mládeže se zaměřením především na oblast recepce audiovizuálních programů. Výrazněji je mediální kompetence formována v adolescenci, kdy si mladí lidé utvářejí svůj vlastní mediální styl. V článku jsou prezentovány výsledky výzkumného šetření realizovaného na více než 2 000 uživatelích Česko-Slovenské filmové databáze (www.csfd.cz).

Klíčová slova: mediální kompetence, divák, předškolní věk, adolescent