Adolescents’ Uses of Media for Self-Socialization

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett

The emphasis of this paper is on the role of media in the socialization of adolescents. First, a typology of adolescent media uses is presented, including entertainment, identity formation, high sensation, coping, and youth culture identification. Then, these five uses are discussed in relation to adolescent socialization. The central point of this discussion is that media differ from socializing agents such as family, school, community, and the legal system in that adolescents have greater control over their media choices than they do over their socialization from these other sources. The result is a substantial degree of self-socialization, in the sense that adolescents may choose from a diverse range of media materials the ones that best suit their individual preferences and personalities. Another result is that there is often a lack of integration in the socialization of adolescents, in the sense that they may receive different socialization messages from media (and peers) than they do from the adult socializers in their immediate environment.

INTRODUCTION

Part of the environment of nearly every adolescent currently growing up in the United States and other industrialized countries is daily use of a variety of media. American adolescents, on average, listen to music for about four hours a day (Leming, 1987) and watch television for another two hours (Lichty, 1989). Seventy percent of popular music recordings are bought by 12–20-year-olds (Brake, 1985). Teenaged adolescents watch more movies than any other segment of the population. More than 4 million

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the fifth biennial meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence, San Diego, California, February 10–13, 1994.

1Associate Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, 31 Stanley Hall, Columbia, Missouri 65211. Received Ph.D. from University of Virginia. Research interests include adolescent reckless behavior, adolescents’ uses of media, and the transition to adulthood. To whom correspondence should be addressed.

519
adolescent girls monthly purchase magazines such as Seventeen and Sassy (Evans et al., 1991), and three-fourths of white females aged 12–14 read at least one magazine regularly (Klein et al., 1993). Add to this videos, books, and newspapers, and the total amounts to a significant part of the daily experience of adolescents.

If it is striking to consider the extent to which adolescents in contemporary industrialized countries are immersed in media as a regular part of their daily lives, it is perhaps made more striking to consider the phenomenon in historical perspective. At the beginning of the 20th century, most adolescents’ (and others’) exposure to media would have been limited to print media such as books, magazines, and newspapers (if anything). There were no electronic media at all—no television, no radio, no record players or stereos or CD players. In the space of less than a century, all of these media have become a central part of the cultural environment of industrialized societies.

What does this transformation in the cultural environment portend for the socialization of adolescents? Essentially it amounts to the creation of a new source of socialization. Of course, the media have become part of the social environment of people of all ages, but their potential role in the socialization of adolescents is perhaps especially strong. Adolescence is a time when important aspects of socialization are taking place, especially with regard to identity-related issues such as occupational preparation, gender role learning, and the development of a set of values and beliefs. However, it is also a time when the presence and influence of the family has diminished, relative to childhood (Larson and Richards, 1994). While the influence of the family has declined by adolescence, participation in other socializing experiences such as marriage and long-term employment typically has not yet taken place. That certain socialization issues become intensified, and yet familial sources of childhood socialization have diminished and sources of adult socialization are not yet present, may make adolescents more inclined to make use of media materials in their socialization than they would be at younger or older ages.

Although there are many contemporary media researchers and theorists who view the media solely in terms of what they perceive to be its effects (e.g., Comstock and Strasburger, 1990), there is by now an alternative tradition of several decades, the “uses and gratifications” approach, in which an understanding of media is sought that emphasizes the role of social and psychological factors in mediating (and mitigating) individuals’ media consumption (Blumler, 1979; Katz, 1959; Katz et al., 1974; Klapper, 1960; Lull, 1980; Rosengren, 1974; Rubin, 1994). This approach stresses individual choice and how “people intentionally participate and select media messages from communication alternatives . . . what people do with
the media, instead of what the media do to people" (Rubin, 1994, p. 421). This is the perspective that will be taken in this article.

The focus of this article will be on the ways that adolescents use media in a kind of self-socialization, independent of the influence of parents and other adult socializers. First, however, it is necessary to specify adolescents' principal uses of media.

**FIVE USES**

Five uses of media by adolescents can be specified: entertainment, identity formation, high sensation, coping, and youth culture identification. This list is not meant to be exhaustive; media are too diverse, and adolescents too diverse in their uses and interpretations of them, for any exhaustive classification to be possible. Rather, these five uses are intended to represent the most common uses of media by adolescents.

Other typologies of media uses have been offered (Blumer, 1979; Greenberg, 1974; Katz *et al.*, 1973; Lull, 1980; McQuail *et al.*, 1972; Rubin, 1979). However, most of these have been specific to television (with the exception of Blumer, 1979), and none of them have focused specifically on adolescents. In the typology presented below, all of the uses described except entertainment are theorized to be developmental, in the sense that they may be more important for adolescents than for children or adults. This is not to suggest that these uses are unique to adolescents, simply that they may be more important for adolescents than for others. The typology presented here is theoretical (although based on empirical studies), and is intended to contribute ideas that may be useful as a basis for empirical investigations of adolescents' uses of media. Each of the five uses will be discussed in turn below. Following this, the implications of these uses for the socialization of adolescents will be discussed.

**Entertainment**

Adolescents, like adults, often make use of media simply for entertainment, as an enjoyable part of their leisure lives. As Michael Brake notes, "The central theme of leisure is fun, a feature often overlooked in sociological studies of mass culture" (1985, p. 187). Adolescents cite music near the top of the list of things that make them happy (Ban, 1986). Recorded music often accompanies adolescent leisure, from driving around in a car to hanging out with friends to secluding themselves in the privacy of their bedrooms for contemplation (Larson, this issue). Since its beginnings, rock music has been equated with fun, "putting responsibility on
hold, enjoying the moment, and being dramatic and outrageous with no apology" (Snow, 1987, p. 327). Adolescents state that one of their top motivations for watching music videos is simply entertainment (Sun and Lull, 1986). Television is used by many adolescents as a way of diverting themselves from personal concerns with passive, distracting, undemanding entertainment (Larson, this issue).

Identity Formation

One of the most important developmental challenges of adolescence, from the perspective of most developmental psychologists, is identity formation, the cultivation of a conception of one's values, abilities, and hopes for the future. In cultures where media are available, media can provide materials that adolescents use toward the construction of an identity (Swidler, 1986).

An important aspect of identity formation, and one for which adolescents may especially make use of media, is gender role identity (Steele and Brown, this issue; Brown and Hendee, 1989; Greenberg, et al., 1992; Larson, this issue). Adolescents take ideals of what it means to be a man or a woman partly from the media, which present physical and behavioral gender ideals in images through music, movies (Greenberg et al., 1986), television (Brown et al., 1990), and magazines (Evans et al., 1991). Girls who are just beginning to gain sexual and romantic experience are especially fascinated by media depictions of male–female relationships (Steele and Brown, this issue). Adolescents use the information provided in media to learn sexual and romantic scripts (Brown, et al., 1990). For both girls and boys, gender, sexuality, and relationships are central to the kind of identity exploration and identity building for which adolescents use media (Ward, this issue).

Magazines are a medium where gender role identity formation is an especially common implicit theme, particularly in magazines for adolescent girls. Nearly half of the space of the most popular magazines for teenage girls is devoted to advertisements, mostly for fashion and beauty products, and fashion/beauty is a prominent topic of the articles in these magazines as well (Evans et al., 1991). Magazines for adolescent girls also provide abundant "information" about boys and the intricacies of heterosexual relationships; such relationships are the most common topic of feature articles in these magazines (Evans et al., 1991).

Sex and gender are not the only identity-related topics that adolescents learn about from the media. There is evidence that television can serve as a source of occupational information for adolescents (Wroblewski
and Huston, 1987), perhaps contributing to the formation of occupational aspirations. Many adolescent heavy metal fans are inspired by the music and by their admiration for heavy metal stars to express an intention to pursue a career in music themselves (Arnett, 1991; in press). Watching television news and reading the newspaper is related to adolescents' political knowledge and participation (Garramone & Atkin, 1986), and provide materials that may be used in the development of political values.

**High Sensation**

Adolescents tend to be higher in sensation seeking than adults (Arnett, 1994), and certain media provide the intense and novel stimulation that appeals to many adolescents. There are many media products that appeal to adults as well as adolescents, but there are some that appeal almost exclusively to adolescents, at least partly because of the high-sensation quality of the stimulation. The audience for “action” films is composed mostly of adolescent boys and young men, because this is the segment of the population that is highest in sensation seeking (Arnett, 1994) and so most likely to be drawn to films that portray high-sensation scenes involving explosions, car chases (and car crashes), gunfire, and the like. Adolescent boys also dominate the audiences for the high-sensation musical forms of rap and heavy metal (Arnett, in press), and these are the two types of music that are most popular among teens (Bezilla, 1993). Heavy metal fans use high-sensation words like “intense,” “fast,” and “powerful” to describe why they like the music (Arnett, 1991; in press). Similar high-sensation terms could be applied to rap music, with the addition of vicarious excitement from the depiction of inner-city violence (Samuels, 1991).

**Coping**

Adolescents use media to relieve and dispell negative emotions. Several studies indicate that “Listen to music” and “Watch TV” are the coping strategies most commonly used by adolescents when they are angry, anxious, or unhappy (Kurdek, 1987; Lyle and Hoffman, 1972; Moore and Schultz, 1983). Music may be particularly important in this respect. Larson (this issue) suggests that adolescents often listen to music in the privacy of their bedrooms while pondering the themes of the songs in relation to their own lives, as part of the process of emotional self-regulation. In the course of early adolescence, when there is an increase in the amount of problems, conflict, and stresses at home, at school, and with friends, there is also an increase in time spent listening to music (while time spent watching tele-
vision decreases; also see Brown, et al., 1990). Certain types of music, such as rap or heavy metal, may appeal especially to adolescents who use music for coping. Little research exists on rap music, but adolescent fans of heavy metal report that they listen to heavy metal especially when they are angry, and that the music typically has the effect of purging their anger, calming them down (Arnett, 1991; in press). Heavy metal is the most popular musical preference of male adolescents with serious emotional problems (Epstein et al., 1990), which suggests that boys with emotional problems may use heavy metal as a way of coping with their problems. Another study of adolescents hospitalized in a psychiatric facility measured adolescents’ moods before and after music listening, and found that the adolescents who preferred heavy metal reported significant increases in positive affect after listening to heavy metal, whereas adolescents who preferred other types of music did not show this increase after listening to their preferred type of music (Wooten, 1992).

Although television-watching decreases in adolescence, teens watch television an average of two hours per day (Lichty, 1989), and during these hours they may use television for coping purposes. Larson (this issue) reports that adolescents use television as a way of turning off the stressful emotions that have accumulated during the day. Also, Kurdek (1987) found that adolescents use “watching TV” as a deliberate coping strategy when experiencing negative affect. Adolescents also may choose media materials for specific coping purposes. A study of Israeli adolescents, in the aftermath of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, indicated that the media were an important source of information during the war and that adolescents used the information obtained through the media to help them cope with the stress of the war (Zeidner, 1993).

Youth Culture Identification

Media consumption may give adolescents a sense of being connected to a larger peer network, which is united by certain youth-specific values and interests. In a highly mobile society, the media provide common ground for all adolescents. No matter where they move within the United States, adolescents will find peers in their new area who have watched the same television programs and movies, listened to the same music, and are familiar with the same advertising slogans and symbols. At the same time that media connect adolescents to other adolescents around the country and even around the world, the adults within their own families may be unfamiliar with many of the media products that provide the basis for youth
culture identification. Music, particularly, is a medium for the expression of adolescent-specific values (Roe, 1985).

Adolescents' identification may be not to youth culture as a whole but to a youth subculture. Recently in Europe, a subculture of neofascist skinheads has developed, mostly adolescent boys and young men. One of the unifying trademarks of this subculture is their music, known as "Oi" music. It is characterized by punk-style music, and lyrics that hurl insults and threats to foreigners and ethnic residents of their countries. Sales of the music have increased steeply in recent years, to hundreds of thousands annually, across Europe (Chicago Tribune, April 27, 1992).

This is one example of the way that adolescents may use media to establish a subculture, to carve out a subcultural identity that is distinct not only from the larger society but from other youth subcultures, as well. Of course, only a minority of adolescents ever become part of a distinct youth subculture. Roe's (1987, this issue) studies of Swedish youth suggest that one source of self-selection into youth subcultures is success or failure in school. In particular, adolescents who fail at school develop an oppositional view of the world, and seek out similar peers as well as oppositional music that gives a voice to their alienation and their group identity (also see Lull, 1987). Media, particularly music, provide a way of defining and uniting the members of a youth subculture as well as expressing their shared view of the world (Roe, 1987; Willis, 1978). In recent decades, youth subcultures have been defined by punk, heavy metal, and rap music.

THE USES OF MEDIA WITH RESPECT TO SOCIALIZATION

A common theme in the five uses of media specified here is that, in all of these respects, adolescents draw materials from media that contribute to their socialization. When they seek entertainment or high sensation from media, when they use media materials toward identity formation or for coping, when they participate in media-based youth subculture, adolescents are also, in a larger sense, participating in activities that are part of their socialization. That is, media are part of the process by which adolescents acquire—or resist acquiring—the behaviors and beliefs of the social world, the culture, in which they live (Arnett, 1995). It may be useful, then, to address the properties of media with regard to the socialization process.

The framework for this discussion will be the theory of broad and narrow socialization (Arnett, 1992a, 1992b, 1995). According to this theory there are seven principal sources of socialization: family, peers, school, community, the media, the legal system, and the cultural belief system. Three goals of socialization are specified as central to the process through
which people adopt the ways of their culture: (1) impulse control, including the development of a conscience; (2) role preparation and performance, including for occupational roles, gender roles, and roles in institutions such as marriage and parenthood; and (3) the cultivation of sources of meaning—what is important, what is to be valued, what is to be lived for. These are the things that children and adolescents must learn, and adults must possess, in order for them to function adequately as members of their culture. Generally, cultures that stress individualism and independence with regard to these goals can be said to have broad socialization, whereas cultures that stress obedience and conformity have narrow socialization. Broad socialization promotes a broad range of variability in social and psychological development among the members of a culture, as each person is allowed and encouraged to pursue their own preferences to a large extent. In contrast, narrow socialization encourages all members of a culture to adhere to a prescribed standard of beliefs and behavior.

As a socialization influence, the media tend toward broad socialization, particularly in a society where there is freedom of the press and the media are relatively uncontrolled and uncensored by government agencies. In such societies, there is tremendous diversity in the media offerings available, providing adolescents (and others) a diverse array of potential models and influences to choose from. This is likely to promote a broad range of individual differences in values, beliefs, interests, and personality characteristics, because adolescents can choose from diverse media offerings the ones that resonate most strongly with their own particular inclinations.

There is an important difference between media and other socialization agents in the adolescent’s environment—family members, school personnel, community members, law enforcement agents, and perhaps religious authorities. Typically, these other socializers have an interest in encouraging the adolescent to accept the attitudes, beliefs, and values that they have, in order to preserve social order and pass the culture on from one generation to the next (Wrong, 1994). In contrast, media are typically presented by people who have the economic success of the media enterprise as their primary concern. As a result, the content of media consumed by adolescents is driven not by a desire to promote social order and pass on the culture but by the uses adolescents themselves can make of media. Because the media are market driven to a large extent, media providers are likely to provide to adolescents whatever it is they believe adolescents want—within the limits imposed on media providers by the other adult socializers.

This means that adolescents have greater control over their socialization on the dimension of the media than they do over socialization from family, school, community, and the legal system. Two points are worth
stressing here. First, this results in a great deal of diversity in the media available to adolescents, from hip-hop to heavy metal, from public television to MTV, from Seventeen to Newsweek to Mad magazine, as media providers try to cover every potential niche of the market for media products. Adolescents can choose from among this diversity whatever media materials best suit their personalities and preferences, and on any given occasion adolescents can choose the media materials that best suit the circumstances and/or their emotional state. Second, to some extent this socialization goes over the heads of the other socializing adults in an adolescent's environment. Parents may try to impose restrictions on the music, television shows, movies, and magazines their adolescents consume, but these restrictions are unlikely to be successful if an adolescent is determined to avoid them. Parents and adolescents simply do not spend enough time in each others' company for such restrictions to be enforceable (see Larson and Richards, 1994).

As a source of adolescent socialization, media bear the most similarity to peers. In both cases, adolescents have substantial control over their own socialization, as they make choices about media and peers more or less independently of the preferences of their parents or other adult socializers. In both cases, adolescents sometimes make choices, from the range of options available to them, that adults find troublesome but can do little about. Both media and peers are often present in youth subcultures (peers by definition, media in some youth subcultures but not others), and adolescents' participation in youth subcultures is often disturbing to adults because such subcultures are often oppositional and explicitly reject the authority of adults (Brake, 1985; Lull, 1987).

Examples of how adolescents may use media in ways that are disturbing to their parents and other adults in their immediate social environment can be seen in relation to each of the five uses of media described above. They may find entertainment in "action" movies and other media that many adults consider disturbingly violent. In assembling materials toward identity formation, they may develop admiration for media stars, decorating their bedroom walls with the images of stars who seem (to adults) to reject the values of the adult world, stars who may in fact reject the very idea of "growing up" to a responsible adulthood (Steele and Brown, this issue). Adolescents also may be attracted to high sensation media that adults find disagreeable for precisely the reason it is so appealing to adolescents—the extraordinary high-sensation intensity of it. Adolescents may seclude themselves in their rooms and use media in coping with their problems, in a way that seems to shut out their parents (Larson, this issue). Finally, as noted above, adolescents may become involved in a media-based youth subculture that actively and explicitly rejects the future that adult so-
ciety holds out to them. In all of these ways, socialization from the media may be subversive to the socialization promoted by other adult socializers (Lull, 1987).

However, this portrayal of adolescents' media use as oppositional should be qualified in several respects. First, it bears repeating that media are diverse, and not all of the media content used by adolescents could be regarded as contrary to the aims and principles of adult society. Much of it is, in fact, quite conservative; many media providers, especially in television, shrink from controversy (Brown et al., 1990; Larson, 1990) and tend to avoid topics that could subject them to public attack (and advertisers' boycotts). Second, adolescents do not come to media as blank slates, but as members of a family, community, and culture who have socialized them from birth and from whom they have learned ideals and principles that are likely to influence their media choices and how they interpret the media they consume. Third, the range of media available to adolescents, though vast, is not unlimited. Some parents put restrictions on how adolescents may use media when the parents are present; schools often restrict adolescents' media use during and between classes; there are legal restrictions in the United States on the content of television programs (at least on the major networks) and on the magazines and movies that may be sold to adolescents under age 18. Fourth, profit is not the only motive of media providers. They have lives outside of their occupational roles, and they have interests as members of their families, communities, and culture that, at least for some of them, limit the extent to which they are willing to be perceived as undermining the socialization goals of the rest of society.

There are also limits on the extent to which adolescents desire to be independent in their socialization. Socialization involves learning to accept and embrace the ways of one's culture (Spiro, 1994, chap. 5), and most people eventually do adopt the ways of their culture even if they have a period during childhood or adolescence when they resist or oppose those ways. This result is not merely something that adults inflict on less powerful children and adolescents, but something most young people seek out and respond to readily: it is the way human beings, so little guided by instincts, learn to impose some sort of order on the chaos of cognition, emotion, and experience (Berger and Luckman, 1966). Thus this paradox: even as adolescents use media toward an enhancement of their individuality, and sometimes to oppose the beliefs and values represented by adults, they also seek comfort in the security of finding others who like what they like (especially among their peers), they also seek guidance in what is most to be desired and preferred among the media choices available to them.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the portrait of socialization presented here applies to the contemporary West, and that socialization may
be quite different in non-Western cultures. In the latter, socialization tends to be narrower than in the West (Arnett, 1992a, 1995). Legal and parental controls over adolescents’ access to media are likely to be tighter in cultures with narrow socialization, so that adolescents are unlikely to be able to use media toward self-socialization to the same degree. However, even in many non-Western countries today, the introduction of Western media is opening up new possibilities to adolescents, loosening the extent of parental control and increasing the extent to which adolescents choose the materials of their socialization (Davis and Davis, this issue; also see Burbank, 1988; Condon, 1988).

**INDIVIDUALISM AND ALIENATION**

Because of the diversity of media available to adolescents in the contemporary West, and because of the freedom adolescents have to select among these media options, through their uses of media adolescents increase the extent to which they are independent of their parents and other adult socializers. Media allow adolescents to engage in self-socialization, as they select the media products most attractive to them and use them in diverse ways related to socialization: to promote impulse control or legitimate the avoidance of it; to learn the roles offered by adult society or to reject them; to find sources of meaning or to declare their angst over the lack of meaning in their lives.

The independence adolescents have in choosing the materials of their socialization exists not only because of the rise of the media but also because of the simultaneous decline in the power of the family as a socializer. In the course of the 20th century, compulsory school attendance, and the need for increased education to prepare children and adolescents for the demands of an increasingly information-based economy, has diminished the role of the family in providing occupational training. Increasing affluence during this time has decreased the economic power of parents over their progeny; more and more, young people have been able to make it on their own rather than waiting for their parents to provide them with land or an inheritance or a position in the family business (Modell, 1989). Parents also have voluntarily relinquished some of their previous authority over their children, as a parenting ideology promoting broad socialization values of independence and self-expression gained ascendancy over the previously dominant ideology that had placed narrow socialization ideals of obedience and conformity as the highest values (Alwin, 1988).

The result of the rise of the media and the decline of the family as socialization agents is, for adolescents, an increase in their independence
in the socialization process, as described above. However, it also results in a certain incoherence in the socialization process. We might say that there is a lack of integration in their socialization, in the sense that the socialization messages they receive from the media (and sometimes peers) may differ from the ones they receive in their families, schools, and communities. The independence and diversity of this may be exciting, in the great range of possibilities for living that are offered from these diverse sources. However, the contradictions among the messages may also be confusing, at some times and for some adolescents. An adolescent girl may learn from the media and (perhaps) peers that a young woman should dress in a way that is sexually provocative, while also learning from her parents and other adults in her community that a young woman who does so is not to be respected. An adolescent boy may come to believe, through media, that it would be a great thing to devote many hours each day to playing electric guitar so that he might become a rock star like his media heroes, while his family and his teachers consider this a disastrously deluded notion and urge him to apply that energy and dedication to his schoolwork. Perhaps these contradictions, this lack of integration, are in part responsible for the alienation and anomie that exist among some members of the current generation of adolescents (Arnett, in press).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The diversity of adolescents’ uses of media, and the diversity of media materials available to them, make it possible for adolescents to select some of the materials of their own socialization. However, the selections they make sometimes result in conflict with other socializers, when adolescents use media in ways that are antithetical to the values and goals of their parents and other adults. Furthermore, the independence granted to adolescents in making media choices may contribute to their alienation, as they attempt to sort out the dissonance between the socialization messages in the media they use and the socialization messages promoted by adults in their families, schools, and communities. Broad socialization allows for a high degree of individual choice and freedom, but at the extreme some individuals may find it disorienting, and find themselves struggling to choose from among the many paths available to them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Lene Jensen, Reed Larson, and Jane Brown for their comments.
REFERENCES


