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Media and Peer Culture

Youths sharing norms and collective identities with and through media

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Abstract

When young people interact, they absorb the peer culture that underpins and sustains their relationships with each other. Peer culture encompasses norms and conventions, shared interests and activities, and the unique modes of communication deployed in the afore-mentioned elements. The ways in which young people integrate their media consumption into their peer culture is the focus of this chapter. Specifically, it examines how young people incorporate media content into their peer interactions and appropriate a variety of communication platforms to socialize with their peers, thus generating distinctive traits, norms, practices, codes and shared identities that make up their unique peer culture(s). It covers the three salient ways in which young people around the world today interact with one another: face-to-face, via the mobile phone and over the Internet's myriad communication channels. The chapter then provides a closer examination of youth subcultures that are media-based and media-facilitated.

Keywords

collective identity, Internet, mobile phone, peer culture, peer norms, youth subculture

Biography

Sun Sun LIM (PhD, London School of Economics) is Associate Professor and Deputy Head of the Department of Communications and New Media at the National University of Singapore. She studies technology domestication by youths and families in Asia and has conducted fieldwork in China, Japan, Korea, and Singapore. She has a particular interest in studying the media use of marginalized and/or understudied communities such as juvenile delinquents and youths at-risk, as well as transnational families.

Media and Peer Culture

Youths sharing norms and collective identities with and through media

As children and adolescents develop, they are socialized by adults as well as by their peers. These peer groups play the critical socializing functions which imbue in children a sense of their peers' norms, values and behavioral patterns (Handel, Cahill & Elkin, 2007). While young people imbibe the adult cultures that surround them, they also absorb the peer culture that underpins and sustains their interactions and relationships with other young people (Brown & Klute, 2003). Peer culture encompasses norms and conventions, shared interests and activities, social and instrumental interaction and the unique modes of communication deployed in all of the afore-mentioned elements. During the periods of adolescence and early adulthood in particular, peer culture assumes an important role in young people's lives because their emotional center shifts away from the family (Arnett, 2010). Key constituents of young people's peer culture, given the priorities of their life stage, often include shared interests and involvement in leisure pursuits such as play, sports, shopping and media (Larson & Verma, 1999). Print, broadcast and online media constitute an increasingly important part of young people's lives in both industrialized and developing countries and are invariably woven into their peer culture (Arnett, 2010). The ways in which young people integrate their media consumption into their peer culture is the focus of this chapter. Specifically, this chapter will review how young people incorporate media content into their peer interactions and appropriate a variety of communication platforms to socialize with their peers, thus generating distinctive traits, norms, practices, codes and shared identities that make up their unique peer culture(s). The chapter is structured according to the three salient ways in which young people around the world today interact with one another: face-to-face, via the mobile phone and over the Internet's myriad communication

channels. The chapter then provides a closer examination of youth subcultures that are media-based and media-facilitated. Throughout the chapter, effort has been made to draw examples from as wide a geographical scope as possible.

Media in face-to-face peer culture

Face-to-face interactions with peers is a key facet of youth development as they gradually mature and steer away from the social world of their families, towards that of their peer groups. As Pasquier (2008) observes, “[c]ultural preferences and practices are at the very heart of the organization of youth sociability, the base on which one elaborates individual and collective identities”(p. 457). Indeed, extensive research has gone into how media content and devices are appropriated by young people for socialization with peers, as both material for conversation and as a platform for communication.

Prior research has found that as young people interact in school and leisure settings, media content is often commandeered as topics of discussion. A qualitative study of young people in Finland, Switzerland and Spain found that media content lubricates conversation and play, with older children chatting about popular television programs and computer games for example, while younger children engage in role-play where they model themselves after characters drawn from popular culture (Suess et al., 1998). Notably, the teens they studied felt compelled to watch every episode of a popular television programme so that they could participate in discussions about the programme that were likely to take place in school the next day. Indeed, alongside parental mediation of young people’s media consumption, peer interaction about media content also generates norms about what constitutes acceptable content for the group and determines which media they should consume (Nathanson,2001). Similarly,

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Pasquier (2008) observes that the enjoyment of music assumes a crucial role in the lives of young people, and by implication, peer approval of one's musical tastes is key to peer acceptance. For example, she found an active disavowal of classical music which has a dated image amongst young people in France, in favor of trendier genres such as rap and grunge rock. To avert marginalization by their peers therefore, adolescents tend to subscribe to peer-endorsed musical cultures and the accompanying standards and injunctions.

While the media holds general appeal for young people, its ability to traverse different social milieu and technological platforms is what makes it an excellent source of connection for young people in their peer interactions. In analyzing the worldwide popularity of Poke'mon, Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2003) discovered that children could engage with Poke'mon via the television cartoon, computer game and trading cards, and translate this knowledge into social interaction, be it of a playful, friendly or competitive nature. This "portability" (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003, p. 388) of the children's knowledge about the cartoon thus entrenched Poke'mon as a prime ingredient in their peer culture. With growing convergence across media genres and platforms, the portability of media content will become even more palpable, further enlarging the role which media will assume in young people's peer cultures.

Shared media use is another important way in which media enters young people's peer culture. With the rapid diffusion of portable media devices such as mobile phones, MP3 players, laptop computers and handheld video games, as well as media devices that encourage shared usage such as multi-player video game machines and tablet computers, face-to-face encounters with peers are likely to involve a physical convergence around these devices, and a joint viewing of media content. As observed by Suoninen (2001) of European youths, visiting friends to play electronic games or watch videos is a popular activity, with some teenagers planning special

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video nights where they watch a series of movies that may not have met with parental approval, thus fostering a sense of deviant youth culture. The rising ubiquity of smartphones with location-based services and always-on, always-available Internet access in some countries has also introduced a culture of documenting face-to-face peer interactions and sharing amongst the peer group. Singaporean teen girls, for example, take camera phone photographs during outings with friends and share them on-the-spot via Bluetooth or Facebook for their friends to view and access (Lim & Ooi, 2011). Through this instantaneous capture and dissemination of peer encounters, these young people construct shared memories that serve to enhance their sense of group identity.

Mobile phone peer culture

Another dominant mode of peer interaction amongst young people today is mobile phone communication. Conventions and trends in peer-to-peer communication via text, voice or photos constitute the cultural dimensions of young people's mobile phone interactions with their friend networks. Mobile phone peer culture comprises idiosyncratic communication practices and linguistic codes in the form of truncated, alphanumeric text-ese, which come with their own tacit rules of adoption and standards of social acceptability (Thurlow & Brown, 2003).

On an instrumental level, young people's use of the mobile phone to identify their friends' whereabouts and micro-coordinate serendipitous gatherings has created a peer culture where "mobility and flexible scheduling are central" (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu & Sey, 2007). Ling and Yttri (2002) noted from their study of Norwegian teens that this practice of vaguely specifying where to meet before progressively firming up appointments, while not unique to young people, is especially developed amongst teenagers. Such flexibility hinges on always being accessible to others, which in turn creates an always-on intimate community that

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keeps in perpetual intermittent contact, constantly updating one another on all aspects of their personal life, from the mundane to the weighty (Ito, 2004). This culture of communication also enables young people to engage in a live, stream-of-consciousness narration of daily events that enable them to live out and share in each others' lives, as seen in a Canadian study (Caron & Caronia, 2007). Clearly, these communication processes are of more than instrumental value, and serve to fortify the socio-emotional aspects of relationship-building amongst young people. Indeed, Taylor and Harper (2003) identified the "gifting" function of text messages amongst young people in Britain. While not laden with meaning in and of themselves, text messages are exchanged in a process of performativity where young people display their commitment to friendship, thereby seeking to cement social ties. For instance, the communication culture within a peer group can comprise forwarding text messages from one peer to multiple other members of a peer group network, with an expectation of reciprocity within the network. Such activities help to establish shared conventions and meanings amongst a group of peers, thus forging a sense of collective identity (Green & Haddon, 2009).

Apart from the communicative functions of mobile phone communications, the mobile phone's role as an item of signification is also important amongst young people. With its constant presence, portability and ease-of-adornment, the mobile phone is ideal for this purpose. Young people have been observed to personalize their phones through physical embellishments or the use of accessories, as noted in a US study (Katz & Sugiyama 2005). Among close-knit peer groups, there is a culture of embellishing phones in a way that marks a shared peer identity as evidenced for example in Japanese street youth practices (Okada, 2006) and amongst young Korean females (Hjorth, 2009).

Online peer culture

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Online communication platforms enable young people to extend their peer interaction beyond their face-to-face encounters with one another. This multitude of online platforms, including discussion forums, instant messaging, social networking services such as Facebook and foursquare, and virtual worlds such as Club Penguin and Webkinz etc., each with its own set of affordances, communication cues, styles and rhythms, offer additional means by which young people can nurture their peer cultures. These platforms are too numerous and varied to systematically review in the present chapter, however, key findings relating to young people's online peer culture will be highlighted.

First, extant research demonstrates that online interactions extend the face-to-face relationships of physically proximate peers and are used to showcase and assert their group identities. Indeed, it is unproductive to regard young people's online interactions as separate and distinct from their offline, face-to-face relationships. As Boudreau (2007) discovered from her study of Girls' Room, a message board created by a group of teen girls in Montreal, the message board rapidly evolved from a site where they chatted about the activities of the day, into a virtual community where they discussed issues in a more reflective manner. Through these online interactions, the girls strengthened their sense of belonging to their offline peer group. A similar finding was drawn from research on the media use of juvenile delinquents in Singapore, though with a notable point of divergence. The study found that a group of delinquent teens who used to congregate at a particular apartment building, but who were subsequently incarcerated for criminal activity, would 'meet' each other in an online chat group labeled '715' – the apartment building number - thus remotely sustaining their face-to-face peer culture even while physically absent (Lim, Basnyat, Chan, Vadrevu & Koh, 2011).

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Second, online interactions provide young people with a relatively less risky environment in which to acquaint themselves with the norms and rules of their peer groups. In her study of American teens' use of MySpace, boyd (2008) argues that social network sites allow young people to “work out identity and status, make sense of cultural cues, and negotiate public life” (p. 120). By observing the mutual interactions, validations and admonishments of peers in the socially-networked online setting, young people learn to interpret social situations and manage their public personae both online and offline. On a related note, Clark (2005) found that American teen girls appreciated instant messaging because it offered them opportunities to initiate interaction with peers that they would not have dared to attempt in face-to-face settings, and that the asynchronicity of online communication allowed them to plan in advance what they wanted to say and how they wished to present themselves.

Third, although online peer culture is situated within and shaped by offline culture, the dynamics of the online environment can influence the nature of peer interaction and alter the basis of peer culture. Online interaction can occur in text-based chat rooms or graphically-rich virtual worlds such as Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games and virtual environments in which young people participate via avatars, e.g. Club Penguin, Webkinz and Whyville. The visual anonymity and disembodiment of online text-based interaction relieves youths of the pressures of self-presentation and impression management (Holloway & Valentine, 2003). As the British teens in Holloway and Valentine's (2003) study attest, in text-based chat rooms, the peer culture is built more on shared interests than mutual propinquity, and interactions tend to be on substantive topics rather than the mundane details of everyday face-to-face relationships. With regard to interaction in graphically-rich virtual environments, young people can experiment with their identities as they use the virtual tools available to create personalized

avatars that can exercise agency and autonomy. Although expressing one's personality through a disembodied, online instantiation of oneself can be rewarding, online peer interaction then hinges on the appearance of one's avatar (Lim & Clark, 2010). As Lu (2010) discovered from her experience of Neopets.com and Burley (2010) from her explorations of Club Penguin, in these highly visual and visible virtual worlds, one risks social embarrassment if one's avatar is not sufficiently adorned with the 'right' virtual accoutrements.

Media and youth subcultures

Youth subcultures arise when peer interaction is of such intensity that it develops into an identifiable subculture with distinct beliefs, values and practices. Media can be a component of youth subcultures either as a focal point for the subculture's interest, or as a conduit for a subculture's members to interact and foster their collective identity. I will refer to the former as media-based subcultures and the latter as media-facilitated subcultures. It should be noted that the two are not mutually exclusive since there are media-facilitated subcultures that are not media based, e.g. online pro-anorexia groups, whereas media-based subcultures are almost always media-facilitated, e.g. fan groups. The internet in particular, given its ubiquity and versatility, has become a prime platform for the assertion of youth subcultures.

In media-based youth subcultures, a keenly shared interest in particular media genres or media personalities forms the foundation for peer group interaction. Notable youth subcultures have been centered around different types of music, where their members display strong identification with the attitudes and styles of particular musical genres. The straightedge subculture which has a following in Australia, New Zealand, North America and Europe for example, is largely limited to the punk hardcore music scene, and emerged as a form of resistance against the commercialized and self-indulgent mainstream youth culture (Williams,

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2003). Members of face-to-face straightedge groups in Australia often use the internet to amass information about straightedge music and raise awareness about cultural events. Similarly, the 'rave' subculture which centers around electronic dance music has embraced the Internet to share its anarchist philosophy amongst youths in Australia and beyond (Gibson, 1999). Another salient thread in the study of media-based youth subcultures is the analysis of fandom, particularly amongst teen girls. The dynamics within online fan communities is another interesting manifestation of young people's peer cultures. Mazzarella (2005) studied online communities of Chad Michael Murray fans and found tacit codes of conduct amongst the American teen girl fans, including expectations that they use the fan site platform to express their adoration for the celebrity via posts of fan-art, fan-fiction and fan-graphics, and a concerted collective effort to amass and post as much information about the celebrity as possible, no matter how trivial.

As seen above, youths use the media to facilitate their interactions with peers and particular youth subcultures have been especially empowered by the Internet and computer-mediated communication (CMC). CMC affords young people a degree of privacy and anonymity that cannot be experienced in face-to-face communication and provides peer cultures that are considered more 'deviant' with a safe and non-judgemental sphere for interaction. The proliferation of online pro-anorexic websites is a case-in-point. Gailey (2009) observes that involvement in these "pro-ana" websites, blogs and social networking sites reflect a conscious attempt to create or seek community. For anorexics, the Internet alleviates feelings of alienation and stigma by providing common spaces to "share ideas, feelings, art, poems, support and friendships" (Gailey, 2009, p. 94). Blogs and websites are places where anorexics contribute to and affirm shared ideologies, while dispensing dieting tips and success stories to motivate others. They are also spaces where members of the subculture stay accountable to each other.

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Confessions of overeating or the public display of an individual's diet plan for the week are common sightings on personal or community blogs. Unbounded by geographical and cultural constraints, the Internet facilitates an engagement in a community of kindred souls (Polak, 2007). Another group of youths that has found solace online is that of homosexual youths. While they may reject the 'subculture' label, this is in effect a marginalized group that has yet to receive mainstream acceptance in many societies (Arnett, 2010). In this regard, the Internet has been a boon to young people who are unsure of their sexuality, and doubtful about whom they should turn to for advice on coming to terms with their sexual orientation (Silberman, 2001). Whereas homosexual teens were previously reticent about seeking advice, a plethora of online resources has emerged to provide guidance and safe avenues for them to form online communities of support and advocacy. Again, the discreetness of Internet mediated communication enables these otherwise ostracized youth to seek acceptance from empathetic individuals, in a manner that is unlikely to be matched in face-to-face interaction.

Conclusion

The media constitutes a cornerstone of youths' peer culture that is at once alluring and difficult for youths to disengage from. Be it mainstream youths or youth subcultures, young people today are avidly appropriating media content and channels to interact with their peers, in the process fostering norms, conventions, shared practices and collective identities within their peer groups. Yet, as the penetration of Internet-ready smartphones rises and technological convergence gains pace, so too will the convergence of young people's face-to-face, mobile and online interactions. With the seamless connection of young people's offline and online interactions, there will be greater opportunity for peer cultures to be invigorated, asserted and shared across multiple realms, both mediated and face-to-face. But will such seamlessness

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intensify “context collapse” (Wesch, 2009) where people from different realms of one’s life converge, further challenging young people’s ability to negotiate the competing social expectations imposed by different peer groups? Being constantly connected to their peers both online and off, will young people find the pressure of adhering to peer norms overwhelming and deindividuating? Where and how will young people carve out a personal space for themselves to resist the influences of media-centered and media-facilitated peer culture? It is imperative that future research considers these questions as it tracks the evolving position of media in young people’s peer culture.

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