

Formation of Global Identities through Mediated Images: the Indian Case

Vaijayanti Bezbaruah

PhD Scholar, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Email: vaijayanti.bezbaruah@gmail.com

Abstract:

In this paper an attempt has been made to explore the question of identity and how it is formed among the youth through the influence of the media. Popular culture which is often expressed through the media is important because of its mass appeal and its impact. It affects the identities of millions and also shapes self-identification and perceptions of the 'body' as well as the ways in which the 'self' and the 'other' look at each other. The challenges that the youth often face and the dualities of their own 'selves' are areas which needs to be sociologically understood. Amidst the expectations of the society, wherein one has an undefined pressure of image maintenance, in terms of taste of fashion, music, language, food which is often informed by the effects of globalization does ones actual identity gets lost? This paper therefore also looks at the blending of identities in the backdrop of globalization. To understand this process of identity formation the Goffmanian understanding of the "presentation of the self in everyday life" will be useful.

Keywords: Identity, globalization, media, youth

INTRODUCTION:

In the society today, the construction of a personal identity can be seen to be somewhat problematic and difficult. Young people are surrounded by influential imagery, especially that of the popular media. Identity is no longer constructed within closed circles of family and small communities alone, but has the influences of the larger society as a whole, which not only consists of the immediate surrounding but also a larger socio-cultural global milieu. In the current scenario, arguably everything concerning our lives is seen to be 'media-saturated'. Therefore, it is understandable that in constructing an identity young people would make use of imagery derived from the popular media. For example, it is becoming increasingly common for young children to have their own television and music systems in their bedrooms whilst having easy and frequent access to magazines especially aimed at the developing child and teenager. Such young people would also have a way of accessing the internet whether it is at school or sometimes at home. However, it is fair to say that in some instances the freedom of exploring the web could be limited depending on the choice of the parents or teachers. So if young people have such frequent access and an interest in the media, it is obvious that their perceptions of their 'self' will be influenced to some degree by what they see, read, hear or discover for themselves. Such an influence may inspire a particular body language, fashion,

choice of music, choice of lifestyle. Besides another important factor in shaping an identity also depends on the kind of images one often visualizes.

It is significant to look at the history of the globalization of the world of media and in turn how it became the carrier of global images. The 1980s saw major changes in terms of new communication technologies, digitalization of information and increase in deregulations and privatization in different sectors, including media. Privatization mostly got its roots from the United States of America which brought a direct impact upon the degree of exclusivity of the markets, allowing other players to improve their own standards and overall 'stamp' economically (Morley & Robins, 1995). Privatization and ongoing competition in satellites caused the domination of few nations within the market. USA and Britain being main controllers even of Intelsat which is an intergovernmental association providing international broadcast system created in order to run a global satellite system offering satellite capacity on a non-discriminatory basis (Morley & Robins, 1995). Once again, this proved that the countries with advanced technology have the ability to set and implement the policy agenda.

As the global carriers enlarged in number, the United States run operators had to privatize their own satellite systems in order to make the market for satellite services more commercial. These changes made the Transnational Companies (TNC) the highest beneficiaries what resulted in drastic changes in the shape of the new world economy. As expected the biggest world media conglomerates started planning on how to get the highest profit which as a consequence, inspired debate about the deterioration of media plurality and democracy (Thussu, 2006).

As a result of these changes a global media sector was formed which made individuals all over the world aware and able to gain knowledge about other countries. Media became a key and for many the only one medium to discover the world. This also led to another process—'homogenization of culture'. This discourse presents globalization as "synchronization to the demands of a standardized consumer culture, making everywhere seem more or less the same" (Tomlinson, 1999: 6). This view sees the impact of global media in the cultural sphere in a very pessimistic manner. Although globalization tends to bring in a harmony within the different cultures of the world, by creating similarities and familiarities, it at the same time creates a disconnect as in the process it is diminishing the uniqueness of a particular cultural identity.

In the context of the current paper, the study is based on secondary sources which are based on certain content analysis of media contents such as web series and Western programmes apart from Indian television series and its contribution in creating a global youth culture which in turn creates a unique youth identity. This paper also tries to analyze the performance of identity, through the Sociological theory of Dramaturgy.

UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF IDENTITY

When we refer to identity, it is important to establish what constitutes an identity, especially in young people's life. The dictionary meaning states the following:

State of being a specified person or thing: individuality or personality (Collins Gem English Dictionary, 1991)

In psychology and sociology, identity is a person's conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations such as national identity and cultural identity. The concept is given a great deal of attention in social psychology. Identity may be defined as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual or shared by all members of a particular social group or category. The term comes from the French word *identite*, which finds its linguistic roots in the Latin noun *identitas*, -tatis, itself a derivation of the Latin adjective *idem* meaning "the same". The term is thus essentially comparative in nature, as it emphasizes the sharing of a degree of sameness or oneness with others in a particular area or on a given point. Identity may be differentiated from identification; the former is a label, whereas the latter refers to the classifying act itself. Identity is thus best interpreted as being both relational and contextual, while the act of identification is best viewed as inherently processual.

However, the formation of one's identity occurs through one's identifications with significant others primarily with parents and other individuals during one's biographical experiences, and also with 'groups' as they are perceived. These others may be benign such that one aspires to their characteristics, values and beliefs, a process of idealistic identification, or malign when one wishes to dissociate from their characteristics. This is a process of defensive contra-identification (Weinreich & Saunderson, 2003).

A psychological identity relates to self-image a person's mental model of himself or herself, self-esteem, and individuality. An important part of identity in psychology is gender identity, as this dictates to a significant degree how an individual views himself/herself both as a person and in relation to other people, ideas and nature. While sociology places some explanatory weight on the concept of role-behaviour, the notion of identity negotiation may arise from the learning of social roles through personal experience. Identity negotiation is a process in which a person negotiates with society at large regarding the meaning of his/her identity.

However, it is important to note that identity is something that is constructed over a period of time and can constantly be updated or changed completely. Young people can be seen to change their identities throughout puberty and often have different identities at the age of 11-13 to when they proceed towards their mid-teens to their early 20s. Throughout this period they will be in contact with many different influences ranging from siblings, for people in school to popular imagery derived from the media such as the "in colour" of the season.

ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES

The importance of the media influencing the construction of identity is reflected in the young people quite often with the exposure they have towards mass media since they are convenient source of cultural options. This means that young people will actively make use of imagery available to them when they are constructing their identities. Constructing an identity in today's media-saturated world is a process in itself which has its own complexities and contradictions. With the multiple examples of identities found in the mass media it is clear that some people may have difficulty distinguishing between sorts. Society also adds an undefined weight upon people in general and the youth in particular, when constructing identities. Youth is a category in itself which has the presence of impressionable minds, as a result of which they

often get entangled within the webs of social expectations as well as the trends of modernity. They also inhibit an unintended belief so as to 'live up to', as to what is not just an acceptable identity but also that which leaves an impressionable image in the mind. Although it is important to understand that identity is not a fixed thing and it is just as difficult maintaining one as it is constructing one in the first place.

The mass-media provides a wide-ranging source of cultural opinions and standards to young people as well as differing examples of identity. This is also showcased as choice, which gives one a power to choose what one wants to be, and decide which aspect is desirable and aspirational in order to imitate it. The meanings that are gathered from the media do not have to be an ultimate reality, but are open to reshaping and refashioning to suit an individual's personal needs and consequently an identity that one acquires. It is believed that the young people often cater to the media images and the cultural insights provided by them to visualize both, 'who they might be' and how the others have constructed or reconstructed themselves. Individual adolescents sometimes struggle with the dilemma of living out all the "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986) that they can imagine of.

Considering how much time adolescents are in contact with the popular media, whether it is through the television, magazines, advertising, music, the internet and recently the smartphone, it is increasingly becoming evident that there is an inevitable influence of the same upon the receiver of the imageries. This is especially the case when the medium itself is concerned with the idea of identity and the self in terms of self-preservation, self-understanding and self-celebration. Although the relationship between media exposure and risk behaviour among the youth is established at a population level, the specific psychological and social mechanisms mediating the adverse effects of media on youth needs to be further researched upon. One recent example in view of risk and media in the light of youth culture is the infamous internet game "**the blue whale game**" which is a social network phenomenon that is claimed to exist in several countries, including India, and began in the year 2016. The game according to reports consists of series of tasks assigned to players by administrators over a period of 50 days, with the final challenge requiring the player to commit suicide. This game targeted the teenagers, who could not differentiate between virtual and real situations and this resulted into a wave of moral panic across the world. A recent case in India, (although an official case has not been registered) led the government of India to request all the major internet companies (Google, Facebook, Yahoo) to remove all links that direct the users to the game.

However, it is essential to note that popular media has experienced a great deal of technological expansion the last century, which in turn has had an immense impact on the construction of identity. As Debra Grodin and Thomas R. Lindof state "with a simple flip of the television channel or radio station, or a turn of the newspaper or magazine page, we have at our disposal an enormous array of possible identity models" (1996).

Exposure to media imagery is known to affect adolescents and young adults profoundly; indeed, this principle is the foundation for billions of dollars investment in marketing products to these demographic groups part of the success of marketing to youth lies in stimulating a desire to develop –and project—a particular identity. A remunerative strategy for marketing

health, beauty and fashion products for example, is to create an awareness of a 'gap' between the consumer and the ideal, and then to promise the solution in a product. This strategy has become especially powerful against the backdrop of the Indian ethos and predilection for reshaping and cultivating the body. Whereas the producers of such media imageries and messages have argued that their products are meant as 'entertainment', vulnerable individuals clearly incur unintended serious adverse consequences through exposure to these images. Examples of this include the routine depiction in film, television, and music and their amply documented effects on the youth.

In addition, a growing literature suggests that media exposure has adverse effects on body image for some young women. Consumer culture and media imagery have a pervasive and powerful influence on young girls, at a critical developmental stage. Indian girls are often socialized to cement and signal identity through visual symbols that include visible consumption of prestige goods or a particular body presentation that conforms to cultural aesthetic ideals. The concept of identity used here is not a developmental one, but rather follows the social constructionist conceptualization of identity being "something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens, 1991). To put it another way, identity in this sense is "co-constructed" by the local social world in such a way that individuals draw heavily on cultural resources and symbols to construct, understand and represent who they are. There are several reasons to believe that adolescence places girls at particular risk as participants in consumer culture. For instance, many have suggested that adolescence is a time when girls are challenged by simultaneous conflicting cultural demands to maintain both a trajectory of achievement and the requirements of female roles, such as conflict, if severe and unresolved, may manifest in a variety of difficulties including eating disorders. When girls of this age experience the prevailing cultural pressure to be of a certain image, they look to the media images which are embodied to a global appearance often Western in outlook. The receiver of these global images, often perform an act in everyday life by trying to be that image that they give importance to. Although within the Indian society status is overtly ascribed, there is often seen a desire among the youth to create or remake themselves. And globalization has been able to provide that agency of choice to pick from global images and be what one desires to be although that image could be a contradiction to the image expected within the society one is socialized in.

ROLE OF GLOBALIZATION IN CREATING A YOUTH CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN INDIA

The Generation of Music Television

Young adults like other members of the population, need to find and experience authentic connection in everyday lives. The media industries have capitalized on this desire for connection for a long time, as books, films and television programs, and more recently mobile technologies and social network sites, enable young adults to communicate who they are and what they care about through the common language of the media and of the popular culture.

In the Indian case, **MTV** and **Channel [V]** are considered to be popular youth channels. MTV is often associated with concerns about global cultural homogenization and the spread of a

rebellious youth culture. The advent of satellite television in India since 1991 in the context of economic liberalization and the attendant proliferation of consumer culture raises numerous questions about the place of youth cultures in relation to the broader social and cultural implications of globalization. The post liberalization era in India has been marked not only by the rise of a qualified form of youth culture in the context of music television broadcasters such as MTV and Channel [V] but also by a broader shift in television content that journalist Amrita Shah (1997:254) characterized as a move from “worshipping senility” to “worshipping juvenility”. This criticism highlights in one hand, what used to be common urban middle-class complaint about the national television network **Doordarshan’s** seeming obsession with covering daily routines of ‘senile’ politicians within the logic of the development paradigm of broadcasting. However, the critique of the present-day commercialized television as ‘juvenile’ is not exactly well known but is nonetheless loaded with significance.

The supposed juvenilization of television in India is fraught with cultural tensions inflected along lines of generation, class, nationality and globalism. It represents a particular historical articulation of economy and culture in which a new charge of foreign and domestic investment in youth markets seek to secure a youth identity premised on the equation of consumption with the national interest and the global imperative. In other words, being young is not only a metaphor for the message of commercial television but a particular moment or opportunity being delivered to certain television audiences in India to self-identity, through the new representations on television, with emerging notions of being oneself, as a youth, a student, a son or a daughter, a fan of music and popular culture, and as an Indian in a visibly global context.

Given these twin developments in terms of the creation of youth markets as well as the proliferation of discourses about youth in Indian television, is also somewhere to put it blatantly an influence of the American youth culture. A very popular youth show “**MTV Roadies**” could be a good example to illustrate the significance of youth culture and identity through music channels. MTV Roadies is a youth-based popular reality television show on MTV India. It is an Indian version of the original show, Road Rules which started in 1995. The participants take a great pride to be called a “Roadie” and the show itself claims the elements of travel, adventure, drama and a touch of voyeurism. The selected Roadies are provided with Hero Karizma Bikes to travel on a pre-decided route. Each episode features a vote-out at the end in which the Roadies eliminate one of their fellow Roadies by an anonymous vote, thereby decreasing the number of Roadies carrying on with the journey. However, there are some episodes in which the Roadies can get immunity and hence cannot be voted out. Each episode consists number of tasks or challenges which the Roadies have to perform. These can be either “Money Tasks” or “Immunity Tasks”. By successfully completing the “Money Tasks”, the Roadies add cash to their account while in “Immunity Tasks”, the team or Roadie who wins gets immunity. Such a team or Roadie is safe from vote-out i.e. its members cannot be voted-out in that particular episode. The tasks are either team-based or individual-based. The Roadie who survives till the end is declared the winner and walks away with the total cash accumulated by performing the money tasks.

MTV Roadies has been taken as an example to understand the kind of shows which the youth associate with, the content of which is always energy, rebellion within the group, rebellion with

oneself and a constant feeling of insecurity. These attributes which the youth in general face in their own lives as well because it is a competitive life today. Since, there is also a sense of the 'survival of the fittest' in the society today the youth identify with the representation of vigour to this particular show.

MTV and Channel [V] being music channels also have the concept of VJs or Video Jockeys which again holds an attraction to the youth. There is a great admiration seen among school and college youths towards the VJ, how they dress up, talk in a 'cool' often American accent, the way they carry themselves off. There have been some youth oriented serials in the television which portrayed the youth like the "**Hip Hip Hurray**" and "**Left Right Left**" which leaves a mark in the minds of the viewer.

Creating an Identity through Fashion Magazines

Is fashion important to the youth? The answer to this question is positive. Yes fashion is important to the youth because fashion is first and foremost a social statement. It is an outward means of expression to their peers and the rest of the world. Fashion also provides the youth a sense of identity by signaling which 'grouping' they belong to ('Prep', 'Punk', 'Goth' etc.). It may also signal a more independent or inclusive personality. Moreover, fashion magazines can be seen to have a great influence on the formation of identity, not just in young people but with adults as well. For example there are constant criticisms made about the portrayal of thin models in fashion magazines that apparently encourage young women to desire the image of a thin woman as the fashion models they see in such magazines. Advertisements seen in magazines, on bill boards, on television or even the internet and the imagery such advertising campaigns put forward can also be seen to influence a young person constructing their identity.

Young people choose to read fashion magazines for a variety of reasons. Not only do the magazines reflect the interests of a certain age group but they are also a form of leisure. They contain varied topics, which interest young people as the articles written on their level and such articles can be used for light reading and can be read over and over. Magazines are unlike newspapers in that young people regard them as interesting as they are written on a somewhat one to one basis, and a person can exercise control over the magazines in what they choose to read. The fact that magazines are often kept and referred back to is also important in the construction of identity, especially when a young person may be looking to the magazines for advice.

When we say fashionable we mean the popular notion of the fashionable which is mainly the slim body with the right curves, the glossy hair and the ever radiant skin. Then the most prominent images in popular fashion magazines, especially those aimed at girls is the image of the model. This in turn is linked to which clothes are fashionable at a particular time and what is deemed to be 'cool' to wear. A great many young girls would look at these images as a source of inspiration as what to wear and would think that they were inadequate to some extent if they could not wear those clothes or did not look like the models featured. Meenakshi Thapan () had also analyzed images in the fashion magazine Femina wherein she found that the identity of the 'new' Indian woman in the rapidly altering cultural and social imaginary of India is constructed, shaped and redefined in the everyday experiences of women as they both contest and submit to the images and constructs that impinge on their senses, emotions, and material

and social conditions. In this context, Thapan examined samples of advertisements, fashion photography and selected textual material from the Indian women's magazine *Femina* to understand how body images serve to construct embodiment and womanhood through the medium of visual representation and textual discourse. The focus was on the desirability of woman's body, not only as a glamorous, well-groomed product, but also as a commercialised product for consumption in an international marketplace, thus affirming that India has arrived in the world of beauty and glamour, and legitimizing the recolonisation of Indian woman's embodiment in the global economy.

Thus, by closely studying any other fashion magazine like the *Vogue* or *Cosmopolitan* we may come across models who are smiling in every picture, looking radiant celebrating their bodies which tends to suggest to a reader that by wearing a particular type of clothing, a particular colour or even by maintaining a particular body shape they could be happy and content. Young people could look at these images and wish to be more like the model pictured. By doing this, a young woman would be constructing her identity from the imagery derived from a popular media. This is performance of desire. If we look at this practice through the prism of Goffman's idea of the *presentation of the self in everyday life*, the primary premise of the theory is about performing social expectations in the everydayness of life, in order to experience acceptance by the ones we aim to get the reception from. Choice of fashion, television shows, internet, music etc. are mediums through which one performs their identity, especially the youth.

Moreover, the taglines of these fashion magazines many a times use words like **"Fat – Are you at RISK"**, which also tend to suggest that all young girls should have a perfect body which is primarily a thin body, like the models in the magazines. There are also the usual star sign features, real life articles and posters of popular teenage male icons. Even a young person's choice of whose picture they put on their bedroom walls reflect the popular media being utilized in the construction of their identities. Their personal preference for one famous person over another reflects what the owner of the poster looks for in a relationship. If they chose a film actor, the individual may be admiring the personality presented by that character in their particular film. Posters are not just a means for making a bedroom a personal space, but is a space which reflects the owners personality or desires.

"Pop stars are, to some extent, symbolic vehicles with which young women understand themselves fully, even if, by doing so, they partly shape their personalities to fit the stars' alleged preferences"(Willis 1990:57).

Consequently it becomes clear that when popular fashion magazines are read, young people often make use of the symbolic resources on offer to them in the construction of their identities. These images that are often portrayed have influences of global aspects, often Western looking and also uses the Western ideals like boldness with sexuality. Also a global beauty ideal often gets set along these mediums, because of the continued appearance of the ideal. Although, the Indian and Western ideals do have variations, the market sets the trend of the American ideals also labeling it global. This in itself is a contradiction as, global means inclusive of every society of the globe, but images often portray a particular ideal underlined by its 'American-ness'.

SOCIAL NETWORKING AS SOCIAL IDENTITY

Internet is an especially interesting global medium for young people to use in order to construct identities. Not only can they make use of imagery derived from the internet, but also it provides a perfect backdrop for the *presentation of the self*, notably with personal home pages. By surfing the World Wide Web adolescents are able to gain information from the limitless sites which may interest them but they can also create sites for themselves, such as blogs. Also constructing accounts like **Facebook** and **Instagram**, enables someone to present to the world an identity of their choice. The constructing and shaping of this identity gives on a space of expression, although there are times when extreme expression comes under socio-political surveillance. Nevertheless, communication through these computer-mediated networks has encouraged people to connect with others in spite of the tyranny of distances. The analysis of identity and its construction plays an important role when we investigate these virtual communities. Moreover, social networking sites such as the ones mentioned here, promotes connection between people that are already acquaintances in their offline life. Having this dense, intertwined network of 'friends' plays a large role in the way users wish to represent themselves online. The pages shared and liked as well as the online communities joined within **Facebook**, gives an idea of the identity one associates with. Today it has rather become necessary to have such a profile not just to keep in touch with friends but also as professional requirements. These sites are a product of modernity and globalization that aimed connecting the world through one common thread, however it also leads to confusions of identities in the sense, and the uniqueness often gets lost amidst the plethora of commonalities.

POPULAR GLOBAL MUSIC

Just like the images offered in the magazines and internet are open to wide interpretation, similar is the case for popular music. Music has always been seen as a kind of relationality to people's lives in general and the youth in particular. Music has the power to often take one directly back to the moment one attributes to. Popular music also has the capacity to recreate a particular generation. What I mean to say is, every popular music speaks of a particular time in history when it was trendy, in taste and was known to all. Examples like music of Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson, Brian Adam, Pink Floyd in the recent times Ed Shereen sets a trend not just in a country but world over. And often youngsters attach their personalities and identities with a particular genre of global popular music. The importance of this point is reflected in the following:

"Popular music is always listened to within specific social settings and locations, and used as a background to any number of activities from courting and sexual encounters, dancing in clubs, to surviving in work, or defeating boredom in the home"(Willis, 1990:71).

Therefore, it can be said that music can be seen to be permeated in everything we do either during our youth or when we grow older. Music is also a means of communication for some young people, which also goes towards the construction of an identity. For example, if adolescents are able to talk passionately about their favorite genre of music, they are able to

share their own thoughts and feelings, which in turn also reflect their personality type. Young people also tend to show a lot of interest in the lyrics of certain songs. Sometimes a phrase or even a few words in a song can sum up completely how one feels at that particular time, which can also associate an identity formation towards that particular song. Music in general can be said to chronicle the feelings and experiences of a great deal of young people, which also develops a bond over how people in general think about something, even if it is across nations. The songs of John Lennon for that matter talks about a philosophy that a person sitting in India could be relating to. Therefore, a connection gets created between all those out there who relate to John Lennon's music as well.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion it can be seen that through the processes of globalization the popular media has been able to permeate into the everydayness of lives. Consequently, the images in it are bound to infiltrate into the young people's lives. This is especially the case when they are in the process of constructing identities. Through television, magazines, advertising, music and the internet adolescents have a lot of global images available to them in order for them to choose how they would like to present their 'selves'. However, just as the images are constantly seen to be 'under construction', so can be the identities of young people. These change as their tastes in media change and develop. There is no such thing as a 'fixed identity', it is negotiable and is sometimes possible to have 'multiple identities'. The self we present our friends and family could be somewhat different from the self we would present on the internet. By using certain imagery portrayed in the media, be it slim fashion models, a character in a television drama, or lyrics from a popular song one builds an identity. This identity allows them to fit in with the expectations of the social circle they are in, yet allow them to still be fundamentally different from the next person. Amidst these creations of identity, it is worth a thought if one loses out on the one unique identity that makes one truly stand out. This can be a *paradox of globalization*.

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