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# **The Role of Popular Culture in the Identity Crisis Experienced in Puberty**

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## **Abstract**

*This study investigates the relationships between popular culture and the identity crisis of youth between the ages of 14 and 20. The distinctive feature of the market economy is the presence of commodity. This produces meaning and identity structures, as well as economic prosperity and it is used by consumers to form the meanings of self, social identity and social relations. It is observed that youth who are experiencing the transition between childhood and adulthood are trying hard to answer the question ‘who am I?’ Youth magazines published in Turkey are analysed using content analysis.*

## **Introduction**

We will work with three concepts in our study: Puberty, identity crisis and popular culture. The basic problem to study is what kind of a relationship there is between the identity crisis of the youth (ages between 14- 20) and the popular culture. In this connection, the first thing we will touch upon is the characteristic features of puberty.

## **Puberty and Identity Crisis**

Puberty, which is a transition period from childhood to adulthood, is a process of change in body and soul. With a more detailed definition; ‘A development period in human beings beginning at a time when an individual thinks that he is not given some privileges peculiar to an adult and ending at a time when the same individual is given all the power and social position of the adult by society. (Gander and Gardier, 1995, p 404)

What is difficult about puberty period is that the youth has to reorganize the values he mastered in childhood in accordance with his new and contradictory statute. In this stage, there is a high probability of a conflict between the youth and his parents. Just at this point, it is best to remember some comedy films asserting that it is equally important to meet these needs for both parts. We can give examples for those films which use ‘exchange of bodies’ script in order to realize exchange of roles: *Freaky Friday* (1976, 2003) and *Like Father, Like Son* (1987). In both films;

Having suddenly gone up to a level of having all the privileges of adulthood from a level of second class citizenship, children experience a sense of freedom and emancipation... Finally, parents and the child take the places of others and taking lessons, they have to get back to their first situation. They both acquire a sense of respect for each other’s efforts. (Indick, 2007, p 23)

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These movies function under the assumption that parents and the youth are unable to feel empathy for each other. Although it is possible to tell the end of these films beforehand, they are extremely popular because of their legitimization of both parts' revolt. Certainly, our focus in this study is the youth experiencing a conflict and identity symbols which they have chosen in order to demonstrate their revolt. At this point we should clarify the concept of identity:

As G. Marshall explains, debates on identity basically assume two forms: Psychodynamic and sociological. One of the basic ideas of both traditions is to oppose severely essentialist understandings associated with the term concept. In essentialist views, we take it for granted that identity is a unique kernel which remains consistent and more or less the same through out life time. On the other hand, both sociological and psychoanalytical theories emphasize the created and constructed nature of identity. (Marshall, 1999, p 405)

Identity concept has various uses such as cultural, national and ego identities. References to different aspects of individual's sense of identity is in question. Variety of these references underlines the fact that we can not fix identity: 'Identity and development are two inseparable concepts. Sequence of events in life determines and influences identity.' (Çelen, 2007, p 89)

Thinking that such concepts as identity and identity crisis take their places in literature through Eriksson's work, we have to accept his conceptualization of identity as a process established in individual's own communal cultural kernel as well as in his kernel. This conceptualization follows a connection between community and individual made by Erikson.

Referring to some patients, during the Second World War, who had lost the sense of 'personal sameness and historical continuity', developed the identity crisis term which he generalized in such a way as to include all life time as a part of the life period model consisting of human's eight life periods. (Marshall, 1999, p 406)

Identity crisis is represented in the fifth stage of Eriksson's theory. According to Erikson, identity is the individual's attempt at adaptation to inner and outer changes and therefore, it is connected with all stages in human being's life time. Ego's function is to combine and balance properly the newly added 'identity elements' in every stage of life with those already present. When this process is not fulfilled, identity crisis is experienced. In order to resolve an identity crisis, how can one make a discrimination between better identity choices and the less promising ones? This is an important question to which Waterman is trying to find an answer in his article 'Finding Someone to Be: Studies on the Role of Intrinsic Motivation in Identity Formation'. According to Waterman;

In the process of identity's formation, any goal, value and belief which are actively considered are 'potential identity elements'. Identity formation function involves the processes below whereby some goals, values and beliefs are defined: Soma is the biological nature of man, ethos is the cultural context and

the psyche is the unique psychological contributions of the individual. (Waterman, 2004)

According to Erikson, individual's identity development is the product of these three process's interaction. In the structuring of ego identity, healthy development is the differentiation of personality parts which make progress in time. In this connection, puberty expresses 'confusion of role' against identity. On the other hand, young adulthood expresses isolation against intimacy.

In the stage of identity acquisition and role complex, struggle is conducted in various ways by individuals. Individual, prolonging the active research stage before identity acquisition, leads a life with successful and unsuccessful identities, in the form of a constant delay (moratorium). (Çelen, 2007)

Here, the question is the importance of youth's 'making choice' from among dizzying alternatives in social world, as to how to live and what to do. The fact of choosing, the only condition of having self consciousness, refers to experience and the reality of roles. 'The difference between role rehearsals in youth and children's games is that the youth has to make a choice between roles that he has experienced and to prepare plans for the future.' (Kocacik, 2003, p 2)

The fact that makes a mark on puberty period is the behaviour of choosing.

The difficulty inherent in the process of choosing who one is to be arises from the unavailability of any sources or grounds for choice outside of the individual. To rely on received knowledge from others or to endeavour to fulfil the expectations of others or the conditions of worth they impose is, to use Sartre's phrase, to live in 'bad faith' (1956). Heidegger (1927/1962) referred to this as being lost in the 'they'. (Waterman, 2004, p 210)

As an example to this, we can give the character Malcolm in the film Malcolm X:

The important element in Eriksson's model is 'preferring in advance'. This means a danger of deciding on an identity provided by others, instead of an identity personally meaningful which he gains by means of very early ending of search and self discovery... Malcolm surrenders him completely to Islam community. (Indick, 2007, p 91)

The conflict that arises here refers to the identity crisis that he experiences when he realizes that he has an identity coming from outside. This kind of living is an escape from freedom. This escape occurs as a result of a fear of undertaking moral responsibility belonging to 'choices related to identity'. In this connection we can say that choice and fear are key concepts especially for understanding identity organization in the period of puberty. Youth is afraid of not being himself as well as being himself. We can not avoid this fear because people have to organize life in the infinite learning process called socialization and in a pattern of punishment and prohibitions. As Nuri Bilgin says;

Identity is both an evaluation mechanism, an improvisation and a system of negotiation. We try to accommodate the choices presented by the social system to our needs. Since most of the norms and values imposed on us are open to interpretation, we can hold them in a relative position, adapting ourselves to social change. (Bilgin, 1994)

It is useful here to make a classification of identities: Social and ego: 'Social identity is those characteristics which are attributed to an individual by others. But ego identity qualifies us as separate individuals.' (Giddens, 2005) Thus, we can express identity's consisting of two processes not contradicting but completing each other: Differentiation and identification. What is important at this stage of our study, is to determine what the youth wish to choose in order to differentiate themselves from others, who they try to identify with and with what kinds of messages from popular culture their wishes are satisfied.

### ***Popular Culture, Identity and Youth Magazines***

Nowadays, identity problem is discussed in the frame of globalisation and differentiation concepts. The subtext of globalisation concept refers to the idea of the culture's spreading to the whole world and its becoming uniform - the culture that is shaped by Western type free market economy and democracy. (İmançer, 2003)

But according to the approach in which Birmingham Cultural Studies School in England leads, it is expressed that it is impossible for the audience to give uniform answers to messages. 'According to Hall, popular culture and mass culture should be used in order to express different cultural formations. Because, popular culture concept adopts as an assumption that there is a living culture other than that broadcasted by mass communication media.' (Özbek, 2002) John Fiske also puts forward a similar view: 'It is people who produce popular culture, not the culture industry. The only thing that culture industries can do is to produce texts or cultural sources reservoir which various classes of population can use or reject in the process of creation of their own popular cultures.' (Fiske, 1999, p 36)

Hall's making discrimination between these two concepts (mass culture and popular culture) is reasonable. However, given the example of Turkey, it is impossible to agree entirely with Fiske's explanation: Especially negative and painful experiences of the period before twelfth of September 1980 have established themselves firmly in social memory, therefore today's youth culture is purified of ideologies and equipped with an unstable content directed by consumption culture. Late modern period's identity concept, determined in the frame of consumption, sex and youth, has reached the clearest appearance today. As Neyzi has observed, the youth describe themselves as the citizens of the world. Besides youth present themselves before us as a point of intersection between the bodies of local culture in global city life and ultra national culture. (Neyzi, 2004) In some, youth is certainly a factor which activates daily life forms, the elements of identity that he chooses in order to achieve this activation, however, are influenced largely by the reflections of popular culture.

Popular products function on three levels in daily life; the first level consists of original cultural commodities like pop stars. On the second level, we find the secondary texts which are composed of advertisements and criticisms. On the third level we see some patterns which can be exemplified in the form of discussion on a popular film or an actor/actress. (Şahin, 2005)

According to this approach, our object of analysis is the second level and the analysis of popular cultural products reading the target mass directly through advertisement. In this connection, we will study Blue Jean, Billboard and Dream magazines. (We do not add Rolling Stones to these music magazines in which boys and girls form the target mass together; its target mass is 30 years of age and above, for that reason it is outside our study.) Studied all March numbers and considering the category of these advertisements' products, the first is mass consumption media, second food and drink brands, the third cloth brand and fourth cellphone brands. In this connection, we find it convenient to analyse the advertisements which we come across in the three magazines by means of semiological approach. These are Converse shoes, Nokia and Samsung cellphones and Doritos potato crisps.

### **Semiological Analysis of the Advertisements in Music Magazines**

We are the creatures who have to live using signs. Besides all human life and cultural reading of universe are built upon signs and sign systems for that reason; 'semiology, enables us to understand what signs are and what laws they are related to; it is concerned with the problem of how the meaning is conveyed. It is important how the image in our brain is conveyed to us by others.' (Altan, 2006, p 189)

When seeking the answer to the question 'how?', our main focus is popular culture codes. Looking at these codes, we observe that they function in two ways: In accordance with norms and deviation from norms. Advertisers build the thought or the emotion that the brand intends to foreground upon one of these two forms. The brand will surely attract the youth either a need for similarity or difference. Now we can analyse our advertisements:

Signifiers on the page become signs when we start to read them, that is, when we bring them together with signifiers. Reading this photo, we use those concepts which we have on cellphones, earphones and music. These signified are the results of our cultural experiences. Nokia 5310 means ipod + cellphone. The cellphone gives music outside by mini speakers. For that reason, the earphone is shown at least five times bigger than the product itself. Looking at the round parts of the earphone, we observe that left wing has a form of a giant speaker and the right wing consists of a record which gives the impression of turning. The speaker exhibits the functions of hearing and announcing in a visual way. Here we see a use of metaphor whereby the unknown is compared to the features of something that is known. Likewise, the emphasis put on the record refers to DJ's. The meaning of this is that the earphone has as good and professional quality as those belonging to DJ's. The relationship between the product and music is emphasized. In our opinion, the basic message here reveals itself with the slogan: 'Let the music express you'. The youth has the power of giving his own party, independently of time

and space, with this cellphone. The fact that he prefers to listen to which music with those others, will reveal his identity.

**Nokia cellphone (5310)**



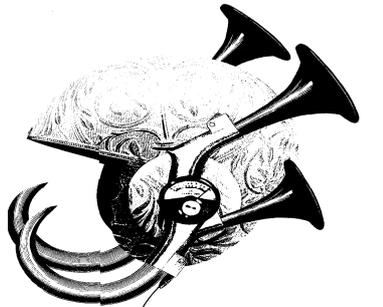
Müzik seni anlatsın



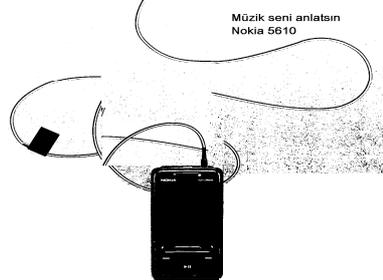
Nokia 5310  
XpressMusic

(Based on ad. of Nokia in music magazine Blue Jean, March 2008, front cover)

**Nokia cellphone (5610)**



Müzik seni anlatsın  
Nokia 5610



(Based on ad. of Nokia in music magazine Blue Jean, March 2008, front cover)

Nokia 5610 emphasizes a different image with the same slogan: Helmet. This image is a typical example of creating a visual metaphor as a symbol of durability. Considering the product characteristics under the slogan, we infer from this that durability is used for the power of battery life and memory capacity. Besides, the distinctive characteristic of this model is that it offers possibilities of video watching in DVD quality and downloading films from internet. Examining the helmet closely as the main signifier, we see that it contains some other signifiers: The earphones in the form of trumpets which refer to louder voice, the extensions similar to ivory, decibel meter which indicates the highest voice position and on the helmet patterned texture. When we consider all these signifiers on the syntagmatic axis, it is possible to deduce a sub-slogan 'we are strong but loveable'. Visualness here serves the myth that the youth will have fully equipped power both visually and aurally by using this cellphone.

#### Samsung cellphone (i450, F250, F210)



A detail of a wing icon.

(Based on ad. of Samsung in music magazine Billboard, March 2008, p 5)

Looking at the visual signifiers in these advertisements, we see three different models of cellphones and the panel on which these telephones are placed in the centres of different icons. Each model has an icon of its own: Electronic guitar, star and wings. We see that these icons are composed of tens of small icons. In all of them there is a girl and a boy in different colours and forms who communicate with each other. We can enumerate as other important icons earphone, microphone, records, organ, DJ, guitar, sport shoes, speakers, youth in the party and music notes flying in the air. All these signs indicate the togetherness of the youth in the form of 'musical living style'. Connotative uses in the advertisement correspond more to metonymy. Besides, selection of the road behind the panel provides the source of modern metropole image. The slogan 'Fervour of musical telephones in your dreams / your music is calling you' is fraught with personalness in opposition to Nokia's message of call to socialization. Rather than being similar, an image based on different is in question.

What presents the basic message in the advertisement is 'each music tastes different' sentence. As this sentence explains, crisp packages are separated into different music

groups. In the same way the sub writing of each package has the colour peculiar to that group. Here the basic message is that both music types such as pop, rock and R&B and types of crisps have different tastes in themselves. The striking fact is that there are such images on the packages as bring to our mind each music style in the shortest and the most familiar way. Pop is equalized with bright globe reminding us of discos, rock with electronic guitar, R&B with portable music set since blacks' music is tough and in accordance with 'music on the street' image.

#### Doritos Potato Crisps



A detail of crisps package

(Based on ad. of Doritos in music magazine Billboard, March 2008, p 7)

With the same organization principle, images of pepper, hot pepper and steak are chosen. The youth illustrated as dark shadows refers to 'night and the party' pair as we have noticed in other advertisements we have studied before. In this advertisement there is a call for being different and making choice required by pleasure. Thus crisp function as a symbol of identity.

#### Converse Shoes



(Based on ad. of Converse in music magazine Billboard, March 2008, p 1)

Looking at the expressions on the faces of these people who have created their own styles, we clearly see an emotion of revolt. Here the Converse image is emphasized which foregrounds the richness of being different from others. Looking at the converse brand in its web site, we see art and sport are praised as two rich ways of youths' expressing themselves. It is possible to understand especially the centrality of basketball image in the brand messages, by looking at a very old target mass of Converse: Black Fives (African-American Basketball Teams). This brand for that reason refers to a hundred year old love of basketball. Sport and music are still popular as occupations achieving social integration while glorifying differences. It is not surprising that the youth chooses identity elements mainly from these two fields. 'Parkin (1972) claims that individuals have three basic systems of meaning so as to respond to or interpret perceptions of their positions in society. These are primary, secondary and radical systems... decoder in opposition is aware of the preferred reading but he thinks it is wrong.' (Fiske, 1996, p 147 -148) What is interesting for us here is the emphasis put on radical systems. Because Converse brand uses 'make Converse your own' slogan by organizing artistic campaigns meant for the expansion of youths' freedom of choice. (<http://www.converse.com>) This campaign is a call for the youth to present his personality and it meets the need to express himself in a revolt.

### Conclusion

Analysis of our advertisements has demonstrated that popular culture products are encoded in order to satisfy the needs of 'being loved', 'being approved' in either directly or indirectly. 'Because loving a person or appreciating him is a response to a personality which is united and complete.' (Lynch, 1997, p 63) Especially in the age of puberty, the youth believes in the primary cultural myth that they will feel 'united' by using these products. 'When learning a language, we also learn both the rules we have to obey and to wish to turn them upside down... Wishing to violate the rules direct us to the wish of putting new ones.' (Marar, 2004, p 57) For that reason we are creating new values with new technologies, with new images that come to our lives with each passing day and it is always youth that makes these values visible with their bodies and styles.

The scene that we have presented coincides with the results of the research 'the youth profile' which AC Nielsen market research company conducted all over Turkey in 2005:

According to the information obtained here, it is the family that determines the choice of a brand for the first time in 12-18 age group. Other determinants are friend groups and advertisements respectively. This order becomes the reverse in 19 -22 age group: Advice of a friend and advertisement come before the influence of the family. (<http://www2.acnielsen.com>)

According to this research, Turkish youth has cellphone in a ratio of 76 %. Here another important data is that when buying a cellphone, the first thing that youth looks for is 'shape and appearance'. It is obvious that cellphone is popular as an identity element. According to the research that Kocacik has made in Cumhuriyet University, it was found that;

Identity conflict is still continuing in 63 % of Turkish students. Besides, the 53 % of them has forced identities peculiar to traditional societies and it was also found that in the 62 % there is a case of indiscrimination of roles. These results are interpreted as our inability to pass from traditional society to the modern one in a complete manner in the research. It is suggested that NGO's should be functionalized as a solution to widespread crisis of identity. (Kocacık, 2003)

This conclusion is quite reasonable. Because the large part of the Turkish population is living according to oral cultural codes depending on traditions. Besides, it is under the influence of mass communication media forcing secondary oral culture codes before it has completed written culture experience. This is a fact reinforcing identity crisis that the youth has necessarily experienced in a process. But NGO's are far from being a solution according to the data of the research below: According to the report in 2006 titled 'Istanbul Youth - Does NGO Membership Make Any Difference?' (İstanbul Bilgi University Youth Studies Unit), NGO membership and the willingness to be a member in Turkey is low (11.7 % of youth is the member of sport clubs, 13.8 % to organizations. On the other hand, 74.5 % has no membership) (<http://genclik.bilgi.edu.tr/docs/genclikstk.pdf>).

All these data indicate that socio-economic position is the first determinant of youth's choices. Youth's completing a healthy process of identity acquisition is only possible if they have a democratic family, economic independence and equality of opportunities in education, which are the basic parameters. In spite of the scarcity or absence of these, the youth nevertheless follow the popular culture. This proves how vital an action it is to give orientation to the youth and to influence them. As a result, it is expressed in the report that the largest age group in Turkey's population is 15-19, Turkey has a higher ratio than all EC countries as far as Turkey's 15-25 age group ratio to total population is concerned and according to 2025 population projection in view of the fact that Turkey will have the largest young population ratio, the negative economic position of the youth should be the focal point of Turkey's agenda. Considering these results together with our study's data, it is realized that Turkish youth, with large potentialities, is experiencing an identity crisis and at the same time is open to the influences of a global consumption culture. Today's youth, as compared with that of 1980, is less happy, concerned with more individual needs, preferring money to the value of love, interested in 'looking' instead of being (self-realization), listening the music at his leisure. Finally, we can say that popular culture answers the question of youth 'Who should I be?' as 'you can have whatever you want' in a manipulative way.

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