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Popular Culture’s Effect on Personal Identification

Pop culture is everywhere around us. It is apparent in fashion, sports, television, radio, gastronomy, books, and so many other aspects of our everyday lives. Since popular culture is such a large presence in peoples’ lives, it becomes important to determine its effect on people especially in the sense of how it impacts their identity and how they define themselves. While popular culture is not the only factor determining someone’s personal identity, an examination of popular culture’s potential to inspire people in their educational and career pursuits and the unique experience that each work of popular culture has on a person will effectively show that popular culture does play an influential part in defining a person.

Popular culture’s role in self-definition is most obvious in scholars and fanatics. Someone who spends years studying or obsessing over a certain work in popular culture will probably define themselves predominantly in terms of that particular work of popular culture. These cases demonstrate how big of an influence popular culture can potentially have on a person’s identity. An example of one of these extreme cases of a fanatic of a work of popular culture is exemplified by Janet Esteves who attracts media attention because she holds the world record for owning the most Mickey Mouse paraphernalia. Gary Westfahl points out the implications of this media attention to fanatics of popular cultural works in his article, “Ways of Defining Personal Identity, and Popular Culture: Two (Largely) Unrelated Subjects”*,* when he states, “The very fact that people such as Esteves garner media attention indicates that they represent a very small minority of the total population of popular culture consumers”. Westfahl argues that since fanatics and scholars constitute a small group in relation to the population, their cases of popular culture influencing their personal identity is not representative of most people. While Westfahl is correct in his argument that most people do not fall into the category of being a scholar or a fanatic of a popular culture work, his follow-up assumption that this means most people are not defined by popular culture fails to consider the complexity of personal definition. People are constantly being redefined through their experiences, and their identities are always evolving and incorporating new ideas and thoughts that they come across in their everyday lives. Popular culture plays a large role in peoples’ lives whether or not they want it to because it constitutes so many different aspects of society whether in television, sports, books, and movies. These popular culture works contain thoughts, ideologies, and themes that cause reflection and contemplation, which can result in defining moments. Since there are so many factors that go into defining a person and popular culture is so apparent in society and everyday life, it is very likely that even if a person does not obsess as a scholar or a fanatic over a particular work of popular culture, popular culture has still played a role in their self-identification.

Another way in which popular culture’s role in personal-definition can be viewed is through examining instances in which people attempt to define themselves or a loved one, such as a first conversation with another person or in a resume. These are two instances where people try to articulate the things that they find important about themselves and what makes them unique, so in essence they are attempting to define themselves. These instances of personal identification usually focus on things that the person has done in terms of work, field of study, and relationships. Westfahl makes the point that since what people like in terms of popular culture is usually excluded from this list, popular culture must not be a way in which people are defined. However, what Westfahl excludes to mention is how what that person liked in life influenced these bigger more “life-defining moments” of education, work, and relationships. Popular culture has the potential to dramatically shape people subtly because popular culture can inspire people and motivate them to pursue what they are interested in. This motivation and inspiration of people can drive them towards studying certain fields or pursuing certain career paths. Furthermore, popular culture can lead to connections between people in terms of similar interests in certain popular culture works. These connections between people can forge relationships, which is another way in which people are defined according to Westfahl. Therefore, even if people don’t explicitly define themselves in regards to popular culture, the ways in which they define themselves to others could have been influenced by popular culture.

The concept of a “collective identity” formed between people that follow similar fads or lifestyles that revolve around a certain kind of popular culture demonstrates further how popular culture can influence personal identity. Popular culture has led to the rise of fads like straightedge, which emphasizes certain beliefs and lifestyle choices. The effect on people of being a part of a popular culture group like this with a “collective identity” is emphasized by Brian Cogan in his essay “Pop Culture and Individual Identity” when he states, “…the shared belief systems and rituals do not simply provide escape, they provide a sense of meaning and a way of making sense of existence, functioning the same way as religion or ideology” (Cogan). The implication of this argument is that not only does popular culture influence people’s identity, but also it can even give them meaning in their life and a sort of template for which they can live by. These subcultures that arise within popular culture are demonstrative of how popular culture can be a source for ideas and reflections. However, the term “collective identity” gives the impression that everyone who follows that group has the exact same ideas and impressions on what it means to be a part of the group when really it is all the same ideas that are interpreted in different ways. Cogan recounts a time that Ian MacKaye, the musician credited with starting the straightedge movement, was rebuffed by a fan for going against the straightedge motto by drinking caffeine. This seemingly insignificant incident demonstrates that even in groups of popular culture where there is a relatively structured set of guidelines for meaning and behavior, these guidelines and meanings are all interpreted differently by their audience. These group identity dynamics illustrates how people are influenced differently by popular culture, and even if they appear to have the same beliefs and ideas from the same product of popular culture, they have different interpretations of these ideas.

Examining whether or not people being involved in the same genre of popular culture have similar views and beliefs also sheds light on how popular culture is just one of the ways that a person is defined and popular culture works have a unique effect on each consumer. Intuitively, it would seem that if popular culture does have an effect in personal identification, people who take part in the same kinds of popular culture would have similar views and beliefs. However, studies have shown that even when people are interested in the same things, there still lacks a large consensus on their views on major issues (Westfahl). One of the ways in which this trend was tested was through a survey given to various science fiction writers and editors regarding whether or not they supported the participation of the United States in the Vietnam War. Even though all these people were linked by a common interest in the science fiction genre, they showed considerable disunity in their opinions in the war with forty-seven percent voting in support of the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War and fifty-three percent voting against it. Westfahl articulates one of the implications from this lack of consensus when he says, “…visible diversity in devotees of certain forms of popular culture would suggest that popular culture contributes little if anything to their overall identities” (Westfahl). Westfahl argues that since there was such disharmony in their political beliefs despite their shared connection in science fiction, popular culture does not define people and what people like does not affect their views and beliefs on important topics. While Westfahl may have effectively shown through his examples that common interest does not guarantee unity in thought on certain contemporary issues, this does not necessarily mean that popular culture does not have an effect on peoples’ viewpoints. He uses science fiction as one example to show lack of consensus within this genre’s followers towards involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War. However, what Westfahl fails to include is the vast multiplicity of the science fiction genre. This genre includes thousands of books, television shows, and movies. While these science fiction mediums may have a common thread, they represent many different ideas and themes. Therefore, people who enjoy science fiction and are fans of this genre have probably had different experiences with the genre and haven’t explored all the exact same texts. Every consumer of these mediums also has a different experience with them and takes away different things, so even if two science fiction junkies are watching the same movie, they are not going to have the same exact experience because ultimately people are unique. Furthermore, even if someone is a fan of science fiction, this isn’t the only form of popular culture that may be a part of his or her life. They could be involved in multiple facets of popular culture and draw certain defining characteristics from a vast array of places. People are defined from a wide array of experiences and they can pull fragments of ideas and themes from a huge resource of popular culture in order to piece together their identity. This means that even if people are involved and interested in a certain genre of popular culture, this group isn’t going to be necessarily similar in view points because people are uniquely defined by pop culture, and they draw their personal identities from multiple sources; not from just that one genre.

The question about whether or not popular culture defines a person is invalid because popular culture is too much a part of everyday life to not have some kind of effect on a person’s self-definition. Therefore, the question should really be about how much of an influence popular culture has on a person’s identity and how popular culture causes this influence. Popular culture is exemplified in millions of various ways, and everyone takes out something different from their experiences with pop culture. Therefore, while some people may in fact spend more time with a certain medium of popular culture, that does not mean that this certain medium is the only one that impacts and shapes this person. There are so many factors and experiences that shape a person that there cannot be one thing that can be pinpointed as the definition of a person. Rather, a person is defined through various experiences some of which are related to popular culture, and all of these experiences, beliefs, and ideologies come together to shape that person. This accumulation of experiences, beliefs, and ideologies into a person’s self-definition happens continuously in thousands of everyday moments. These self-defining moments happen both unconsciously without the person even aware that they are being defined and in moments of reflection. Both of these kinds of moments of identity-formation can be through popular culture whether someone is actively being shaped through reflection on a work of popular culture or their mere immersion in popular culture and everyday life shapes them without them even realizing it.

Works Cited

Cogan, Brian. "Pop Culture and Individual Identity." *Pop Culture Universe: Icons, Idols, Ideas*. ABC-CLIO, 2014. Web. 20 Apr. 2014.

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