

Adolescents and the New Media Environment: Knowledge and Influences of Other Cultures

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Abstract — Today's society is characterized by sophisticated information technology and communication. Communication through media, especially the electronic media, has become the main link in a world of fast innovation changes. The contemporary media has gained a manifold role: to inform the young audience, to educate them about the meaning and importance of facts, and create new values. Only those young people who critically approach information will be able to experience intrapersonal metamorphosis which connects members of different cultures and participates in fostering of desirable values and orientations. Aiming at flexible forms of learning and learning how to learn will enable a humane enrichment through diversity. The new media are today inseparable from upbringing and education, and have an important role in the presentation and exchange of information on local and global levels.

Our study includes a short empirical research conducted on a sample of adolescents from various high schools. The methods of gaining information on the lifestyles of children and adolescents in different countries and cultures, and their impact on the young audience were examined. In addition, the opinion of the adolescents on the differences and similarities between various cultures was questioned.

Keywords-component: adolescents, critical approach, learning, meeting of cultures, new media environment.

I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary society offers immense possibilities of effective cooperation, availability to information, for expansion of intercultural dialogue among cultures, for lifelong education, etc. Communication through media has become the main link of the world dominated by rapid changes and innovations in various spheres of social and individual life. The media are a corrective of social events and transmitter of different information. Alternative models of communication, including the so-called innovative media, achieve more powerful effects in various spheres of human communication.

Young people easily accept the new technologies. Moreover, numerous programs and inventions in the Internet world of communication reveal a far more distinguished involvement of young generations in the creation of new

media and life [15, 16]. Numerous novelties from these spheres influence the concept of socialization of young generations more and more. A problem for the young population is the fact they have to orientate themselves to the ever more complex social relations and prevail them, while on the other hand they are provided with more abundant possibilities for information, communication, social mobility, etc., than earlier generations. From this aspect the role of new media in the contemporary concept of interculturality is understood as a free possibility for the meeting of cultures.

II. THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN THE MEETING OF CULTURES

The media have a great role in the establishment and preservation of communication between different cultures. The main role is to bring the „unknown” closer to the known. As an example - with the help of the theory of cultural relativism [15], the new media reveals the specificities of different customs, traditions, beliefs, etc., to the young audience: the aim is to elevate the conscience to comprehend the need of cultural coexistence. They create intercultural communication which assumes the development of interpersonal communication. We can say that the media have a dominant role in the processes of informing and forming the awareness and behavior of the young generation especially adolescents.

The stronger the awareness of the tolerance of other cultures, the stronger is the chance for achieving intercultural dialogue. Contact and dialogue should be an aid for the cultures to realize, understand and respect each other. Dialogue is based on the assumption that a self-willed interest exists for someone else, because only then understanding and communication are possible. At the same time, the media create and develop intercultural dialogue. The aim of intercultural dialogue is mutual understanding and improving the quality of coexistence [16].

The development of media education upgrades the development of communication. It provides new concepts and forms innovate methods so that the young generation can use the media adequately. It connects diverse scientific views with

models of behavior. Media education gives importance to media in the process of development of intercultural communication among the young generations [1].

German authors [1, 15, 16, 7], who systematically work on media education, mainly emphasize that the media should contribute to the development of the process of intercultural communication, but also that media do not offer the methods for its realization. They demonstrate that there are three levels of media involvement in intercultural integration:

1. on the national level (i.e. the right to vote, national politics),
2. on a social level (i.e. the right for education, social welfare),
3. on a cultural level (i.e. the right for cultural diversity).

The listed levels are analyzed through two aspects: structural aspect (What should the media inform us about?) and the aspect that refers to the manner of gaining information (how?).

When one clearly defines interculturalism, it actually means a unity of diversities. In the tone of this definition, the media have become bridges between various cultures, which are one of the basic roles of media education.

III. LEARNING AND CRITICAL APPROACH

According to some researchers [10, 8, 14, 9] learning presents a permanent formative process with the aim of building up an individual's personality, which takes place as long as they live. Its outcome is extremely individual, as it is formed in dependence with the individual's personal experiences and psycho-physiological characteristics. Learning depends on environmental factors to a great extent, and can be motivated by them. Because of that the school and the teacher play an essential role.

Contemporary media (particularly electronically) multiply the amount of available information and accelerate the speed of transmission, but guarantee neither efficiency nor logicity. Information can represent units of unclear facts. It is essential to develop cognitive and critical thinking skills to reach genuine knowledge, i.e. a system of logically structured facts and abstractions, among all the piled up information [17]. Otherwise, one can find oneself in a situation, in which a person is not controlling the information, but the opposite, the information is controlling him [3].

As extraordinary rapid scientific and technological progress leads to outdated competencies, the necessity for acquiring flexible forms of learning in all spheres of science is stressed. Thus, learning how to learn involves the formation of critical approach towards information. This approach is based on learning how to think, doubt, reexamine and on fast adaptation capabilities [3]. However, the media do not provide an upbringing. Direct human contact is necessary for this primary human formation process.

From the perspective of classroom activity, or from the perspective of didactics, the teacher, besides the textbook, is the most important media and source of information. Although media means transfer of information, nowadays the role of the teacher in the educational process has significantly altered and expanded. Besides from providing information to the students, the teacher organizes classroom activity, encourages and motivates them to learning, creates a pleasant and stimulative atmosphere, in which the students gain new knowledge and acquire new skills in their activities [8, 14, 9].

Challenging cognitive activities involve learning in higher levels. This type of learning is achieved by solving problems, making decisions and by critical and creative thinking activities. When the student is not passive, but actively involved in learning can develop critical thinking. In these types of learning situations the students are responsible to a high degree and are involved in the preparation, performance and solving of the assigned problems [10, 8, 14, 9]. Mistakes that appear have a constructive characteristics and their function is further learning, a more qualitative knowledge construction and deeper understanding [2, 5, 11].

Besides the requirement of developed critical opinion, which enables successful orientation among the contemporary media environment, another feature of the modern era (also related to the current globalization processes) is its direction and characteristic sensibility towards human rights. Some examples are: cultural identity right, right for participation in cultural life, right for education, right for freedom, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of information and media pluralism [12].

UNESCO has determined three general tasks in education:

1. The reinforcement of human dignity which is the fundament of human behavior,
2. The development of cultural diversity awareness and the need for respecting other cultures, which is the presumption for mutual prosperity,
3. The encouragement of the feeling of equality, freedom, justice and mutual responsibility among people [12].

The opinion of the International Committee for Education Development in the 21st century is that education, as a persistent process of advancement of knowledge and skills, most of all, is an extremely important method of achieving personal and social development and establishing a relationship between the individual, group and nation [4].

The contemporary media, which are nowadays inseparable from education, play an essential role in releasing and transferring information on a local, but also global level. Still, only those people or communities whose approach towards information is based on critical thinking and reconsideration will actually be able to experience inner metamorphosis which processes the specified tasks. The focus on acquiring flexible forms of learning and learning how to

learn will enable a humane enrichment through diversities [12, 3].

IV. THE METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

A. Aim of Research

The aim of the empirical research, conducted on a group of high school students, was to affirm in which manner the young generations attain information of the lifestyle of children and young people in other countries and cultures and how it influences them. It was also necessary for them to define which cultures they find to be the most similar and most different to our culture – according from the perspective of the lifestyles of young foreign people, and how the similarities and differences are manifested.

Importantly, this is a part of data obtained in the wider studies conducted on the same group of respondents. Except this objective, the study included the testing the use of various information resources for teaching and learning, and parental involvement in using computers and the Internet by their children. That part of research has been already posted [17].

B. The Group of Examinees

The study was conducted in three high schools (1 grammar school and 2 vocational high schools) in Zadar (Republic of Croatia), on a group of third grade high school students. The study involves 104 examinees. As it refers to an only small sample of high school students, it cannot be considered as representative and all of the results will be commented as relevant for the questioned sample, without any generalizations connected to the whole high school student population.

C. The Instrument of Research

The original questionnaire used for the purpose of the research consists of 14 questions (4 closed-ended questions with multiple-choice answers, 6 closed-ended questions with one possible replay from the offered answers, 1 Likert-scale question and 3 open-ended questions). The first three questions refer to independent sociodemographic variables: sex, type of high school and residence (village, city), while the remaining questions refer to dependent variables.

V. THE ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

The study involves 104 examinees – high school students. The group of examinees consists of 52% of young men and 48% of young girls; 55% live in the city, while 45% in villages. 60% of the examinees are pupils from vocational high schools (Technical and Trades High Schools), and 40% of them from Grammar High Schools (general-program

grammar school and lingual-program grammar school). The group of examinees may be regarded as balanced when referring to followed independent variables.

A. The Sources of Information on Diverse Cultures and the Lifestyles of the Young Generation and its Influence on High School Students

The students had to select 3 out of 7 available answers referring to the sources of information that influence the forming of the students' opinion on meeting other cultures and lifestyles of young generations in various countries. They had to select which of them they consider the most influential to formation their opinions (regardless of the frequency of use these sources of information and possible overlap of content between them. It is the perception of high school students about significance of individual sources of information in forming their opinions of other cultures and lifestyles of the young.). On the basis of the selection the following scale of sources of information has been formed (hierarchically listed):

1. Television programs (91%),
2. Topics on the Internet, CD-ROMs (67%),
3. Articles in daily/weekly newspapers (61%),
4. Articles in magazines for young people (25%),
5. Contents of specific school subjects (20%) – mostly frequently listed subjects are: sociology, geography, Croatian and English language and literature,
6. Compulsory and non-compulsory literature – i.g. literary works, novels, travel writings, poems (15%) and
7. Radio programs (9%).

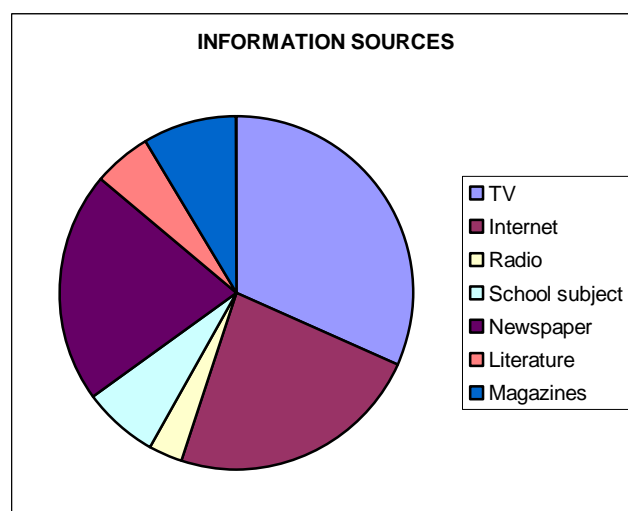


Figure 1. The general distribution of information sources – the reciprocal relation in regards with the frequency of selection

As assumable, the students have selected electronic media (TV and Internet) and printed media (newspapers and magazines for young people) as the most influential information sources. It is significant to mention that 1/5 of the

students selected their school subject as one of the most influential factors in developing their opinion on various cultures, and 15% of them different types of literary works.

The distinctions between genders have been confirmed: in the selection of the most influential information sources on other cultures and lifestyles of the young generation in different countries. Boys (78%) cite the Internet as a significant information source more frequently than girls (56%), while girls are directed towards textual information sources. The distinction is particularly evident when magazines for the young generation and literary works are concerned. We can consider these gender differences as usual, as numerous studies have confirmed that boys use the computer more often, while the girls possess more developed reading habits [i.e. 6, 17, 13].

In regards with the independent variables *residence* the results are considerably evenly distributed. It is perceivable that young people from rural settlements cite electronic information sources more often than their peers from the city. In comparison with the young generation in rural settlements, the young population in the urban centre chooses printed information sources more often. A significant difference exists in the selection of literary writings: young people from the city (21%) tend to choose literary works as one of three most important factors in creating their opinion on other cultures and lifestyles of young people from various countries, more frequently than their peers from rural settlements (9%).

Differences among examinees have been confirmed regarding the variable *types of high schools*. Students from vocational high schools emphasize the importance of Internet as a valuable information source for creating their opinion to a greater extent than students from grammar high schools (56%). Contents of certain school subjects were selected as significant: over two times more frequently by students from grammar high schools (32%), than in comparison with students from vocational high schools (13%).

In the following question that referred to the manner the information about other cultures and lifestyles influenced the students the examinees had to select 3 out of 6 listed answers. On the basis of the students' answers the following scale has been created:

1. I feel that young people, wherever they may come from, think and behave in a similar way (81%),
2. I feel closer to the world, i.e. to young people in foreign countries (55%),
3. I feel that my country and culture are a valuable part of the world's diversities – cultural heritage (54%),
4. I feel considerably different from young people from foreign countries (37%),
5. Despite the fact I have not visited many foreign countries, I feel like I know them (29%),
6. I feel my country and culture is insignificant in comparison with some other foreign countries and cultures (22%).

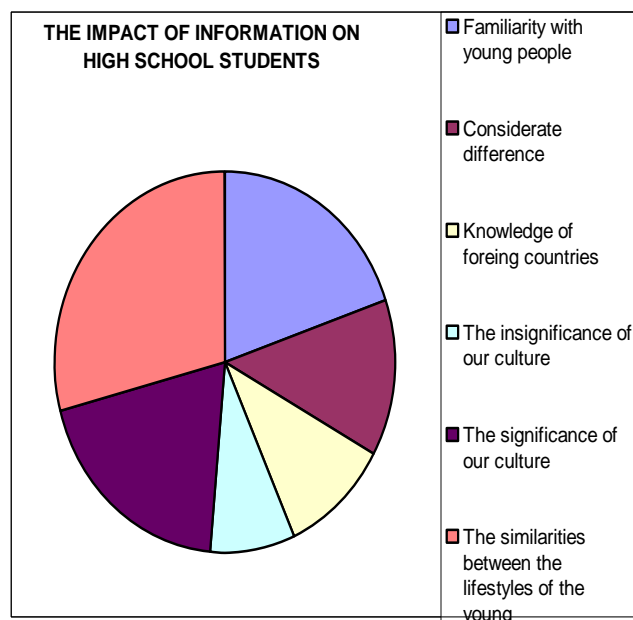


Figure 2. The general distribution of information sources on high school students – the reciprocal relation

High school students, as observable, mostly express an affirmative attitude towards the relation between foreign cultures and lifestyles and their own culture and lifestyle. They feel that young people from different countries and cultures share an identical lifestyle, immanent in every young person's life; they feel connected to the young population despite cultural differences. They experience their own culture as a valuable part of the world's diversities. Still, it is worth mentioning that 37% of the examinees feel different from their peers from foreign countries.

In spite of the fact that the specified distribution generally suits the distribution of answers regarding the followed independent variables, there are still certain prominent differences. Regarding *gender groups*: boys (61%) more often than girls (48%) feel closer to the world and young people from foreign countries. Also, boys (43%) feel considerably different from young people from foreign countries more often than girls (30%). In regards with *residence*: high school students from the city (46%) feel considerably different to young people from foreign countries more often than their peers from villages (26%). The young population from rural environments (43%) feels that they know foreign countries even though they haven't visited many more often than their colleagues from the city (18%). According to the *type of high school*: students of vocational high schools (60%) more often than the students from grammar high school (44%) feel that their country and culture are a valuable part of cultural heritage. A specific amount of criticism is a visible feature of the young urban population and of students from grammar schools.

B. The Similarities and Differences in the Lifestyles of Children and Young People, Members of Various Cultures

In the following segment of research, the countries and cultures where children and young people have the most similar lifestyle to the one existing in their culture, according to the opinion of the high school students, were specified.

The examinees were to select 3 out of 8 listed answers. According to the resulting facts the following scale has been formed, a scale of countries and cultures with the greatest similarities in the lifestyles of children and young people (while other countries and cultures students referred far rarer), in comparison with the Republic of Croatia:

1. The countries of Eastern Europe, i.e. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Poland, The Czech Republic, Macedonia, Ukraine, etc. (89%),
2. The countries of Western and Northern Europe, i.e. Italy, Germany, Great Britain, Sweden, Belgium, etc. (75%),
3. The countries of North America – USA and Canada (40%) and
4. Australia and New Zealand (38%).

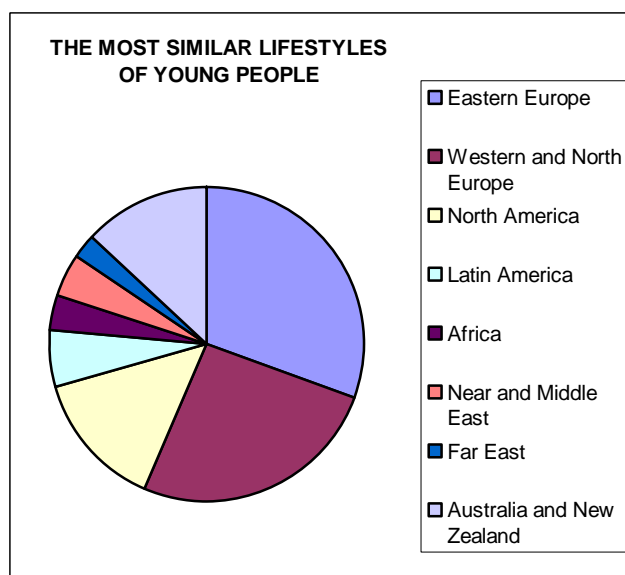


Figure 3. The general distribution of countries with the most similar lifestyles of young people in comparison with the young population from The Republic of Croatia

We can see that high school students mostly select European countries (the countries of Eastern, Western and Northern Europe, but chiefly the countries of Eastern Europe), the countries of North America, Australia and New Zealand. When asked to comment their selection the examinees highlighted these similarities in lifestyle: cultural tradition and customs, system of education, political and social systems, history, standard of living, similarities in the ways young people spend their free time (clothing, music, going outs, computers and Internet, sport etc.), their relationship with

parents, religion and similar civilization levels. They emphasize the influence of numerous Croatian immigrants when USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are in question. Besides, the lifestyle of these mentioned countries have been determined by immigrants from different European countries to a great extent.

On the basis of the followed independent variables no remarkable differences among the examinees have been specified, except that Australia and New Zealand have mostly been selected by students from rural settlements and by students from vocational high schools more frequently.

Furthermore, the examinees were to state in which countries and cultures the young people have the most different lifestyle, in comparison with the young population in the Republic of Croatia, according to their opinion. Also, they had to choose 3 out of 8 listed answers. Thus, the following scale has been formed – a scale of countries and cultures with the most different lifestyles of children and young people in comparison with Croatia:

1. African countries (73%),
2. The countries of the Near East and Middle East, i.e. Israel, Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, etc. (69%),
3. The countries of the Far East, i.e. Japan, China, Vietnam, Korea, etc. (63%),
4. North American countries – USA and Canada (34%).

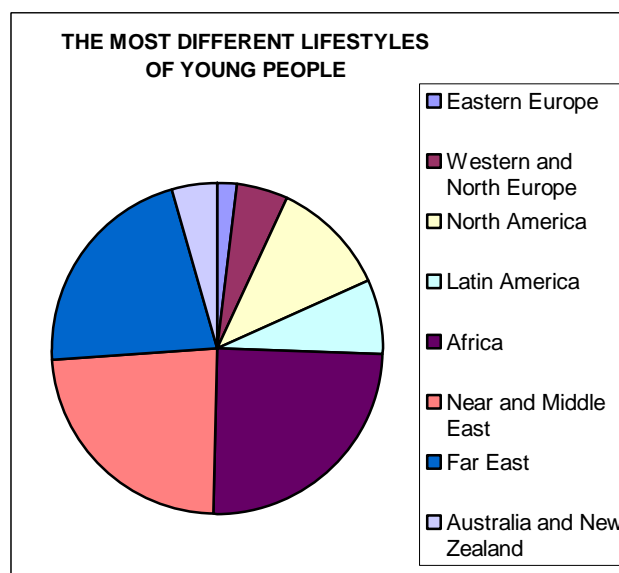


Figure 4. The general distribution of countries with the most different lifestyles of children and young people in comparison with the young population from The Republic of Croatia

The most different lifestyles of children and adolescence are in African countries, the Near East, the Middle East and the Far East. The examinees interpret these diversities due to differences in: culture and tradition, lower level of education of the young population, the necessity for children and young people to work and earn money, poorer materialistic life standard, religious differences, political and social systems,

traditional upbringing and more respect towards adults. It is an interesting fact that the USA and Canada (particularly when male examinees are in concern) appear among the answers, as in the earlier distribution. Chiefly, this occurs for the reason that high school student's estimate that the life standard of the young population in these mentioned countries is much better than in Croatia. This situation offers greater possibilities for activities, more qualitative educational and free time opportunities.

Just as in the previous case other considerable differences in the examinees' answers have not been specified on the basis of the followed independent variables. This points to the conclusion that high school students, regardless of sex differences, differences in place of residence and type of secondary school they attend, have harmonized opinions when it comes to similarities and differences in the lifestyles of children and young people of different cultures.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the attempts to describe the contemporary media environment it is noticeable that new media (as transmitters) have a significant role in the forming of interculturalism. By joining each media, a message appears which states that new media (i.g. electronic) have become a new challenge of media education. Media education offers new concepts and develops innovative methods so that young people, in particular, could adequately use media. It links different scientific views and behaviour models (directed towards young people, teachers and parents), whose aim is to strengthen the attachment to an individual group in society, to stimulate intercultural dialogue, active participation through mutual respect towards diversities, coexistence and solidarity, in other words – a unity of diversities.

For growing up in a modern era adolescents have to possess a developed critical and creative opinion. Their development is stimulated by using flexible forms of learning based on critical attitude towards information, on activities of solving problems, on work on projects and on making decisions independently. Education directed towards learning how to learn is the precondition to personal and social development and the establishment of compatible relationships between various social groups, children and adolescents – members of different cultures.

In a short empirical study on a group of high school students, this fact was defined: they based their opinions of other cultures and lifestyles of young in foreign countries, mostly form the information gathered through electronic (TV, Internet) and print media (newspapers and magazines for young people).

It is an interesting fact that 20% of them selected their school subject, and 15% of them various literary works as the most influential sources to form their opinions. Adolescents mainly express an affirmative attitude towards the relation between foreign cultures and lifestyles and their own. They feel that young people from different cultures and countries

share the same lifestyle, typical to all young people. They find their own culture an important part of the world's diversities despite any cultural differences. Our adolescents feel the greatest connection with young people from European countries and cultures and with young people from North American countries. The most prominent similarities are reflected in identical cultural traditions, customs, education, social systems, relations with parents, religion, the way free time is spent, etc. They feel different from the children and adolescents in African countries and from countries of the Middle and Far East the most (differences are: culture and tradition, lower education level of the young population, poorer material life conditions, social systems, traditional upbringing, greater respect towards adults, etc.).

At the end we note that it is undisputed importance of learning and education. Also, the function of linking members of different cultures and traditions in the contemporary media environment is identically emphasized.

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