

Young People, Identity and the Media:
A Study of Conceptions of Self-Identity Among
Youth in Southern England

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to investigate young people's perceptions of their own identities and how the media is used to shape their conceptions of self, with specific focus on the understandings held by young people themselves.

The relationship between media and identity is explored through an examination of previous work on ethnic minority representation in the media, and considered in relation to how representations impact upon audience members' formulations of identities and their social worlds. Conceptualisations of the audience, and approaches employed within audience research are critically evaluated, with particular reference to individuals' media consumption in the context of lived experience.

A discussion of creative and visual methods within social research introduces the methodology undertaken as part of this study. Young people aged 13 to 14, of contrasting class and ethnic backgrounds, drawn from schools across Dorset, Hampshire and London were invited to create identity collages using media materials that expressed 'how I see myself' and 'how I think other people see me', and provided their own interpretations of this work within unstructured interviews. The 111 identity collages produced and accompanying reflective commentaries formed a body of data upon which the findings of this thesis are based.

The analysis reveals that young people view their identities as complex, contradictory and diverse, and demonstrate a reflexive awareness of their own sense of self as a phenomenon which is personally constructed, continually revised and displayed to others. The study highlights the importance of role models, and how individuals understand their own identities, more strongly than previous studies of young people and the media. It suggests that the media functions as a resource young people use to conceptualise and formulate their present identities, as well as articulate possible future selves.

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