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# **MEDIA CULTURE IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSFORMATION OF CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUAL VALUES AND SPIRITUALITY**

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## **Abstract**

The study reflects the problems of media culture in the context of its ability to create, transform and regulate spiritual values and mental perception processes that are typical for recipients of media products. It is based on the assumption that mediated forms of transmitting spiritual values and creating ideational communities as well as postmodern forms of spirituality can bring their recipients symbolic culture, evoke various kinds of emotions, offer them pleasure, gratification and opportunity to fill their free time. The authors examine the determinants of relationships between media culture and spiritual values with respect to such phenomena as media liberalization, communicating messages through audiovisual production and metamorphosis of Christian values by means of heterogeneously-structured media representations.

*Keywords:* Media culture, mass communication, spiritual values, symbolic experience, secularization

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## **1. Introduction**

Many authors who examine traditional forms of religion, spirituality and symbolic culture claim that these phenomena - despite their undeniable social and cultural importance - are gradually losing their original function. Experts therefore pay special attention to their decreasing ability to interpret the liberalized world and reflect dynamic social, cultural, economic and political changes related to the new cultural situation of postmodernism, technological development and improvement in mass media communication.

Academic debates about religious life and spiritual values in the cultural situation at the turn of the century are based on both extension and critical re-evaluation of previous knowledge of Sociology, Anthropology and Theology. A dominant paradigmatic basis for these reflections is provided by different kinds and forms of secularization theories. One of the most obvious consequences of the changing social and cultural status of institutionalized religion and traditional

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spirituality has been a gradual transfer of explicit (and formerly public) expressions of faith and practice of religious rites into the sphere of privacy. Many experts believed that wealthy, well-educated and prosperous Western society would completely turn away from 'superstitions' towards rationality, assuming that those were the most substantial consequences. However, secularization of Western societies, apart from its significant influence on cultural policy, ritualized forms of communication, and organization of everyday life, also has an economic and material impact - it is currently considered to be an effective means of economic development in societies freed from moral inhibitions of faith and sense of spiritual values [1].

The aim of our study is to reflect the current understanding of the links between symbolic, ideological, and commercial nature of the so-called 'media culture' and 'media-driven transformation of spiritual values' offered by this type of culture to its audiences. In this context, media culture is understood as a process through which producers in the media industry consistently, professionally and systematically offer their products to media audiences. The term 'media culture' is abstractly-constructed, and semantically more neutral than concepts of mass and popular culture which are often confused with this term and sometimes even incorrectly identified with it. This term applies to various cultural artefacts communicated by mass media - electronic media, newspapers, Internet. As a result, media culture can be mass or popular; low, but sometimes also high. Therefore its study requires the mastery of a wide range of topics and problems that interfere with virtually all spheres of social and cultural life.

Contemporary relations between society and culture are extremely difficult to study, because nowadays some social and cultural phenomena are almost semantically identical. Moreover, the role of culture and its importance in society have undergone significant changes [2]. We also need to realize that media research and modern trends in media education interact with many areas and topics which people consider as their privileged, private space and therefore application of critical and analytical approach to media content is required [3]. Thus, we work with an assumption that the presumed transformation of spiritual values through products of media culture affects not only the public character of mass communication, but also the largely private sphere of everyday receptive activities of its audiences.

In accordance with this premise, we focus on mutual relations between the current transformation of spiritual values and the influence of media culture artefacts on the organization of everyday life and symbolic experiences acquired by media audiences (from the perspective of an individual as well as formation and development of the so-called 'interpretative and symbolic communities'). On the other hand, we study the broader socio-cultural and economic context of selected topics which is directly connected with the global flow of capital and information.

## **2. Media culture and spirituality in terms of everyday life**

The concept of media culture and its currently crucial influence on the recipients of mass communication and their everyday lives significantly changes the original, more traditional understanding of the importance of religion and spirituality. Religious cultures originally functioned as structures of ideas and meanings associated with 'the nature' or the processes of forming and developing of both human life and spiritual values that are generally accepted and communicated. Due to the necessity of coexistence with current forms of media culture (particularly with entertaining media contents that usually have explicitly secular character), the position of spiritual culture and religion is dramatically changing and consequently it is re-evaluated.

The coherence of religious cultures and subcultures is currently undergoing changes and re-evaluation not only from the viewpoint of academic experts and theorists, but also in terms of common practices related to physical and mental activities that take place in the private sphere of everyday life. This coherence between spiritual life and religious beliefs is strongly affected by communication and cultural factors as well as material values and political interests pursued by society. The understanding of media communication as a culture also underlines the necessity to rethink and eventually change our opinions on religion and its social status and inherent nature associated with an 'authorized expression' in the institutional hierarchy [4].

According to G. Lynch, P. Luckmann was one of the first sociologists to point out the ongoing replacement of specialized, institutional forms of religion by new kinds of 'social religion' that are based on the need for self-realization and expression of autonomous 'Self' [5]. Accelerating modernization of social life and communication leads to the growing influence of secular social institutions (such as educational system, health care, mainstream media) which restrict epistemological and social functions of religious authorities. However, this social process has also a psychological equivalent which is closely connected with individual structures of knowledge and inner feelings - religion and spiritual values are almost exclusively expressed in privacy. Religion is understood as a certain worldview and its transfer into the sphere of private and ordinary life is seen as an inevitable change of symbolic experiences rather than slow extinction. As a result, we get more objective views on spiritual values held by people who do not formally identify themselves with any kind of specific religion [5].

In connection with the shifts in traditional meaning of religion, it is necessary to realize increasing conflicts between our understanding of the sacred and the secular. According to G. Laderman and L. León, E. Durkheim, the founder of the sociology of religion, defined religion as a system of values and practices associated with sacred rituals which unite believers in communities [6]. This initial definition clearly separates religion and spirituality from normal, everyday aspects of human life experience. However, media culture, unlike traditional religion or spirituality, circulates its meanings and messages almost

solely in the boundaries of ordinary, everyday life and can be defined as a set of production-consumption activities. Thus, the most fundamental problem associated with the study of the relation between media and religious cultures is to find the links between everyday life and mediated symbolic, even though consumed experiences that offer a temporary escape from our day-to-day life.

In order to examine everyday aspects of spirituality and its development, it is necessary to define basic principles of human spiritual development. Despite a large number of relevant definitions, we draw our attention mainly to those aspects that are present in each of them - spirituality is transcendence which reflects our awareness of a wider existential paradigm of understanding human existence and its essence. It also includes our individual consciousness and combines the elements of human emotional experience of creating a 'unitive harmony' [7]. Spiritual development therefore can be defined as an attempt to embrace the essential aspects of our existence - the nature, purpose and meaning of life and the construction of individual relations through symbolic experiences which we consider to be sacred.

The current cultural situation of postmodernism explains the relationship between individual personality and possibilities of self-expression and self-realization through the aspect of a lifestyle. A lifestyle always represents a certain set of values we respect - for example, our approach to interpersonal relationships, health, housing, education, career, clothes and, undoubtedly, the ways we spend our free time, often being entertained by consuming various cultural artefacts communicated through mass media. A lifestyle is a matter of self-expression which can be understood as a new form of spiritual life directly connected with the values we hold and foster in order to set our life priorities.

A lifestyle can also be understood in the plural. According to K. Cobb, J. Twitchell defines 'lifestyles' as systems of consumption, calling them 'secular religions', the coherent structures of material things and their value. In the context of social interactions between individuals, it is very important to realize that formation of any community is nowadays based on sharing similar or identical lifestyle-related preferences [8].

In the given social situation, media culture functions as a kind of unifying factor, a forum for discussing such issues as separating church from state, the impact of secularization on cultural and national identity of individuals as well as a forum for expressing private, personal spiritual values publicly. Media products, either strictly informative, educational, promotional or simply amusing, define the nature of individual and collective experiences shared by their audiences. Multimedia communication enables us to smoothly and continuously evaluate our own spiritual values.

Each type of media text communicates a set of meanings through their internal and external characteristics. Among the most significant ones are the chosen sorts of narratives, anticipated preferences of media audiences and ways of constructing and sharing the contents. In case of communicating symbolic, non-material experiences through media culture, there is a reciprocal connection between mediated experiences and spiritual values. Media culture is based on

the continuous production of information, entertainment and popular pleasures, while spiritual and religious culture relies on values associated with traditions, rituals, authority and authenticity. Their mutual relationship becomes deeper and more complicated mainly due to the diversity of media culture and its ability to communicate spiritual values and answers to questions about human existence through entertainment products. On the other hand, religious culture uses media technologies to mediate its own implicit and explicit messages to all kinds of media audiences, both believers and non-believers [9].

A key factor in the success of any media content is gaining popularity. Popularity is an indicator of its potential, the proof that a product meets all versatile expectations of its audiences. In order to win popularity, a media text must saturate diverse needs and interests of the people to whom it is addressed. Moreover, a media text needs to be able to bring its recipients desired forms of symbolic experiences and enough mental space to improve their abstract thinking and imagination [10]. This means that artefacts of popular culture spread by mass media are able to acquire a convenient status of highly influential bearers of spiritual ideas and religious motifs.

Products of media culture can also be seen as tools of dispersing religious sensibility into a wide range of different cultural and communication forms. Authentic responses to current issues associated with spirituality and religion thus form a vital part in the cultural and semantic value of media products which seemingly act as completely secular, commoditized forms of communication. Some experts claim that popular products of media culture may enable their audiences an access to more authentic expressions of spiritual values than any official religious systems [11].

Members of contemporary postmodern society need to preserve some forms of spiritual experience, mainly to legitimize their own individual preferences and lifestyle-driven choices based on material and non-material cultural experiences, but, for various historical and psychological reasons, they are not willing to accept them in their traditional, institutional forms [12]. Secularization therefore acts as an anti-religious phenomenon which is in direct confrontation with both economic and psychological forms of liberalism and a traditional form of religion is seen as an outdated and oppressive cultural system.

G. Lipovetsky reacts to this issue by saying that the current 'planetary' (globalized) period is characterized by a 'return to sanctity' - the success of oriental wisdom and religion, esotericism, meditation and a growing number of sects are all postmodern phenomena that stand in sharp contrast to the cult of reason and progress. The author defines the true nature of the current interest in mysticism and spirituality as a sign of deepening individualization of everyday life. People are still believers, but their faith is based on individual choices and a combination of various elements of many religions and spiritual systems. The attraction of sacred experiences is related to personalization and fundamentally is not different from interests (often temporary) in sports, diets, fashion trends or specific types of media products [13].

Transformation of traditional forms of religious and spiritual discourse through production and reception of media culture is mainly caused by frequent occurrence of spirituality and religious themes in movies, music, television shows and other media texts constructed for entertainment purposes. This production mechanism is a clear expression of discontinuity between traditional religion and variable forms of depicting religious values selected by producers in the media industry. Their aim is to ensure that the final product will achieve popularity and profitability by successfully gratifying the individual needs for maintaining a certain level of spiritual life sought by the audience members.

In regard to Christian religion, one of the most mediated religious (biblical) motifs is the Apocalypse, which is, thanks to its own commercial potential, a significant part of the movie and television production. Fictional audiovisual contents, especially the dystopian Hollywood-produced blockbusters, that often depict the end of the world are, in general, thematically based on the very human subconscious fear of alien invasion, mutated plants or animals, results of genetic engineering, synthetic viruses, chemical or biological weapons, robots or cyborgs, rebellious armies, religious extremists, 'revenge' of constantly polluted nature (epidemic, infertility), natural disasters (extra-terrestrial objects falling to the Earth, earthquakes, new 'ice age'). Media narratives associated with picturing the secular apocalypse work with the concept of the battle between good and evil and provide their explicit and exaggerated confrontation. The plots of such media products generally work with the assumption that positive heroes, along with the rest of the civilization, will eventually survive the 'end of the world', despite catastrophic consequences. The secularized themes of the Apocalypse in media culture also represent the contrast between specific human failures (sins) which result in catastrophic situations and inner (spiritual) qualities thanks to which a part of the civilization is lucky to survive [8, p. 266-267].

Representation of religious themes in media culture is not just the domain of secular and commercially-oriented media (there are, of course, many media products working with openly religious themes), but secular, commercial and fictional images of religious motifs largely contribute to creating and changing the public awareness of other religions. These portrayals can be explicit or implicit. Explicit images include media stories about priests, monks, nuns, saints and prophets, spiritual teachers or sect leaders. Parts of the narratives and plot twists of these stories are inspired by religious literature, tradition, myths and legends. However, according to many experts, the implicitly-mediated display of religious themes is more frequent - sin, sacrifice for the greater good, salvation and redemption [6, p. 437].

According to B. Meyer, the spiritual function of media culture and fictional media depictions of religious themes directly relate to Baudrillard's poststructuralist understanding of images as aspects of mediated hyper-reality. Partially shifting away from the thoughts about hyper-reality as a substitute for any objective reality, we can discuss the issue in terms of the so-called 'figurative sociology' proposed by M. Maffesoli. The focus of this approach is

the study of the links between mediated images of reality and society in the contemporary 'imaginal world'. An imaginal world provides connections between individual personalities and organizes them into communities on the basis of shared sentiment, moods, and sense of belonging. According to the author, media culture provides mass-produced images that often gain the status of idols and icons and, as a result, recipients are able to build new, 'cultic' communities around them [14]. This fascination is strongly manifested in admiration for famous people (celebrities) through whom the imaginary relationship between a recipient and a media text gains a highly personal character.

In many cases, formation of new forms of iconic communities depends on the existence of media or advertising products that are extremely popular among audience and thus acquire the status of 'timelessness'. Many audiovisual media contents (such as Star Wars, Star Trek) are closely associated with the so-called 'fan' community, and interactions between the works of fiction and real people are based on the creation of myths, rituals, and languages and the arrangement of regular meetings. The same applies to promotional products that are not 'sacred' stories, but 'sacred' objects (prestigious fashion brands, perfumes).

M. Hills sees the connotation of this 'cult' in the consumption of media texts. According to the author, media entertainment is widely accepted as a secularized ritual. Despite this fact the word 'cult' still partly carries its original meaning and some sociologists and religionists openly think about the 'reconstruction' of religion in a new, social context. Moreover, 'fan cults' appear in special kinds of neo-religious forms and create commercially-oriented, privatized, and individualized space designed to adapt 'sacred' themes, stories, and ideas [15].

On the basis of this assumption we can say that admirers of 'cult' media texts or figures represent the postmodern tendency towards the substitution of religious idols by media fictions, without any need for creating a religion in its traditional sense. A significant difference between religious cults and fan cults lies primarily in the way fans communicate and express themselves, whereas similarity manifests itself in the way of obtaining social and cultural experiences and abstract ideas related to collective symbolism [16].

Each media product is, to some extent, a story and many of them - despite their seemingly secular nature - contain sets of implicit meanings that refer to spirituality, elements of religious traditions and the desire to answer key questions about our human existence and meaning of life. Commercial media culture is, in many cases, able to bring recipients who have no conventional religious beliefs into confrontation with traditional religious culture by showing deeper cultural values that would normally be rejected by these audiences as incomprehensible or simply too different from their own worldview.

However, the problem is not only psychological, but also sociological. This new 'social' form of religion defined by Luckmann and other sociologists is characterized by a low level of transcendence - it focuses mainly on the development of an autonomous personality, individuality and neglects the

importance of supernatural phenomena that cannot be rationally explained. Thus 'Social religion' does not connect individual personalities through a formal system of doctrines and unambiguous, authoritative structure of life, but offers a wider range of different ways of developing a certain kind of spirituality in accordance with their own life conditions and preferences [5].

Media culture has the ability to replace traditional forms of myths with media myths which manifest themselves in live-broadcasted events or prestigious ceremonies. The 'vitality' of modern myths and rituals can be strongly felt in situations when audiovisual media products present both fictional and real heroes, who entertain audiences, inspire them, appeal to their common daily routines. Sports or political events are often mediated as rituals, especially when they are live broadcasted. Live broadcasting is free of restrictions of spatial distance and has the ability to turn individual feelings into collective experiences [17].

Neoliberal economic and political environment directly affects the nature and purpose of media culture by adapting its features to the growing need for commercial profitability through creating non-fictional and fictional stories based on conflicts, sensations and scandals. Commercial imperatives lay emphasis on 'light' entertainment, distraction, surprise and maintaining the attention of recipients. On the other hand, religious themes are among the most controversial social topics. When informing about religious conflicts, mainstream media production tends to either provide a one-sided view of a complex problem, or pays insufficient attention to it. Religious themes therefore often become objects of strong prejudice, but at the same time they are processed into media products that are able to generate profit [18].

Severity of this problem is strengthened by the fact that media culture tends to reinforce and deepen already existing bias which is then projected not only into an individual behaviour of media recipients, but also into foreign policy. A good example is representation of Islam in the mainstream Western world media [19]. Another related factor is the complexity and dynamics of relations between the spheres of intimacy, privacy, and public life. Commercial media production increasingly (and publicly) presents topics that belong to the sphere of intimacy (for example, through television entertainment, reality-shows, or tabloid journalism) and also directly contributes to the deepening privatization of public communication [20].

### **3. Conclusions**

Media culture as a set of processes based on production and reception of communication contents that are transmitted through mass media is currently one of the most crucial factors affecting individual and collective opinions on religious values and spirituality. Mass media produce attractive, funny, and relaxing narratives that often contain religious or spiritual themes expressed both implicitly and explicitly. These ideas and values are substantially reflected in everyday lives of media audiences and they can also affect current understanding

of the symbolic construction of community and social organization. Mythological potential of media production and the use of more and more persuasive visual iconography are often key factors that divert audiences from low quality level of specific media products. Nowadays spirituality is a matter of individual lifestyles and social trends. The above-mentioned tendencies are reproduced, transmitted and popularized by media production, whose practices are affected by the overall characteristics of specific economic, social, and political factors of the globalized world [21].

On the basis of these findings we conclude that media culture is able to act upon individual mental experiences of its recipients and therefore is a crucial part of dynamic postmodern society that reflects political, economic and cultural changes caused by deepening globalization. Regarding this fact, media communication has to be understood as the creation and also circulation of messages, the construction and reconstruction of cultural systems, individual human relationships and conventional as well as alternative approaches to religious rites. Both spirituality and media culture are currently undergoing dynamic transformation which is directly reflected in the character of their coexistence. Current practices and rituals associated with spiritual life and religion are strongly individualized, commoditized, and implemented in the spheres of intimacy, privacy, and public life. From this perspective, religion and media culture can be seen as inseparable and significantly tied to social factors that contribute to individual and collectively-shared experiences within the symbolic space of everyday life.

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