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## **NEW ROLE MODELS FOR SLOVAK YOUTH IN THE CONTEXT OF MEDIA COMMUNICATION**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents the most interesting results of the research that was aimed at answering the question what value groups are dominant with the youth in connection with perception of individual and group role model incentives. Our objective was to analyze the formation of adolescents` role models and patterns within as compact picture as possible, taking into consideration developmental specifics as well as current social developments and the latest trends of youth socialization. Formation of the specific youth attributes picture covers a wide spectrum of knowledge from the fields of social and developmental psychology, Sociology, Media studies, as well as other Social sciences.

*Keywords:* communication, media influence, role models, Slovak youth

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### **1. Introduction**

The habits and life style of the youth of today are more and more influenced by information, trends, value patterns and role model incentives presented by media, as well as via individuals with whom the youth come into contact. In a media saturated environment, youth identity is formed (in addition to other effects) also in a form of acceptance of and identification with different role models well-known to the public. These models are mediated to the youth primarily via media presentation, but also in a form of public and private discourse related to such a presentation.

For young people, however, in addition to media-famous and media-created social elite, also “non-media categories of role models” can be attractive. We have in mind mainly parents, grandparents, relatives, teachers and other groups of persons who have an influence on the youth’s identification or rejection of role model incentives. “Man lives in the world and his/her personality development is dependent on his/her environment. The extent of this dependence is determined by the kinds of education we were provided with, by the educational system and legal milieu.” [1]

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## 2. Research strategy

The main objective of this research project was a detailed analysis of the structure and processes influencing the formation of personal role models in the youth of today's life. Its intention was to identify the youth's new role models, categorize them, to examine links and points of contacts between role model incentives and the forms of their presentation in media.

The specific research objectives are:

- Establishing what types of persons are considered to be the youth's personal role models, as well as the reasons why it is so.
- Defining the effect of mass culture spread by media on the transformation of the way how traditional authorities (family, teachers, and others) are perceived.
- Finding out to what extent media reality and on-line communication influence selection and reflection of authorities, role-models and value orientation.
- On the basis of obtained data, to implement a complex categorization of the results and classification of identified role-models, ideals, values and attitudes into thematic groups.

Within the framework of the research, qualitative research strategies were used. Practical realization of collecting and analyzing research data was done by the so-called gradual data collection technology. Research methods were aimed for data qualitative survey in accordance with procedures and technologies of the stipulated theory method [2].

The research study covered the following ranges of youth's models:

1. *Career models.* Which professions do they trust and which professions are viewed with distrust? In which of the professional groups are they able to identify their personal role models? To what extent are the professions presented by media preferred by the youth?
2. *Models from family surroundings.* Are there role models for the youth which can be identified in immediate or extended family surroundings? What value orientations are perceived or valued in these persons? How do young people identify the types of family models presented in media?
3. *Models from the other people's surroundings.* Are there role models identified by the youth within educators, youth workers, volunteers, coaches, leaders of interest groups, animators and other adults? What value orientations are perceived and valued in these people? How are the types of role models, identified by the youth, presented in media?
4. *Models from media environment.* What personal role models are identified by the youth in the environment of people well known from media (e.g. music, sport, entertainment, culture, politics, science, business, and the like)? What value orientations are perceived and valued in these people? How are the types of role models, identified by the youth, presented in media?

In the process of data collection, due to the relatively extensive scope of the research project and with the aim to secure the complexity of research findings, different technologies were used. The practical tools for data collection can be briefly summed up in the following way:

1. Structured essays, in which young respondents should express in their own words the opinion on the assigned thematic areas. The process of writing the structured essays, covering individual areas of model stimuli, was realized in 27 high schools within individual counties in Slovakia, by the end of 2011. In that phase of our research, 241 essays of high school students from all over Slovakia were obtained and analyzed. Most of the essay writers were from 15 to 19 years old.
2. On the basis of analysis and categorization of authentic, written respondents' testimonies, as mentioned in point (1), a series of 37 focus groups, presented by trained moderators according to a manual prepared in advance, was realized. In total, there were 112 young people (from 15 to 20 years old) working in these focus groups. Most of the participants were high school students, in rare cases (less than 5%) there were also college freshmen.
3. All focus groups discussions were recorded on video camera or audio recorder, and subsequently transcribed word by word. In total, in the process of data collection, there were 18 hours and 53 minutes of video or audio recordings of focus groups discussions which were subsequently transcribed in text form. The objective of each discussion (between a moderator and a group) was to reveal a deeper context, uncover innermost motivations of role model selection, the extent of identification with a role model, the reasons for role model selection, identification stability, and the like. In the following part of the research, the text transcriptions of the focus groups discussion recordings as well as the text of structured essays were qualitatively analyzed in-depth for their content.
4. At the beginning of 2012, a questionnaire survey of our target group media preferences was realized. It was carried out by means of Internet and 275 high school respondents from all over Slovakia took part in it. The survey's objective was to find out what concrete media content was watched and used by the young people.
5. As a complementary method, a detailed content analysis of selected domestic and foreign TV series and films was done. In addition to that, a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of public and commercial TV coverage was done, as well as the content analysis of magazines and printed media which, according to the questionnaire survey results, are popular with the targeted group of young people.
6. On the basis of the obtained data and concurrently processed in the above mentioned research phases, the evaluation and interpretation of the research results were realized according to the method of the stipulated theory.

### 3. Results

All obtained data have been processed, and on the basis of these results we can present several significant conclusions and links related to the new role models for the youth.

#### ***3.1. Intervening professional role model incentives***

Young people, who were a part of our research target group, have most confidence in the intervening professional models incentives. Their most fitting attribute is helping professions; they were predominantly physicians, firemen, rescuers and policemen. This fact is confirmed also by the findings of Jürgen Zinnecker who is presenting the results of a series of representative research surveys realized with more than ten thousand children and young people [3]. By means of structured questionnaires and standardized individual conversations, which were realized from 2001 until 2002, it was established that for young Germans the most credible professions were those of physician and policeman. From the fifties till the eighties last century, helping professions gradually lost their popularity and credibility among the youth. A turn was made only in the nineties, and Zinneker explains it in the following way: "In the unrestrained, global modern age at the turn of the century, order and security are in short supply. For planning and managing their life and future, the youth need some reliable order and orientation they can trust in." [3, p. 8] Role model incentives from the intervening professions do not usually occur after some personal experience of a respondent. The strongest effect of model incentives was identified in a media environment. In addition to respondents' testimonies we rely on the data from the content analysis of professions in reporting and other media formats, which show a high frequency of professions like: rescuer, policeman, fireman and a physician. Media discourse on physicians, policemen, firemen and other helping professions is overwhelmingly positive. On the basis of the obtained data and results on the created paradigmatic model, we can observe that media play the role of catalyst and key intermediary for indirectly reconstructed professional role models.

#### ***3.2. Indirectly reconstructed activity patterns with strongly negative social evaluation***

Young people mostly distrust those professional role model incentives, which have predominantly negative evaluation within social discourse. Their most accurate characteristic is an absolute distrust in representatives of political life. This distrust is combined with disappointment, and in some cases also dislike and rejection of everything that is related to public affairs administration. We have found out that in most cases these negative attitudes do not result from immediate and personal negative experience with politics, state or public administration. In overwhelming majority it is the case of mediated

reconstructed role models; thus the subjects with whom young people do not come in contact, subsequently they do not have any immediate personal experience with them. Findings and conclusions, processed on the basis of the focus groups records transcriptions as well as on structured essays, indicate that mass media significantly contribute to the formation of the youth aversion against politics. In particular, it is a critical media discourse that creates for the youth a picture of political events and public life. In Slovakia, like in other countries too, we can observe that "... any kind of ideological entrenchment of adolescents is decreasing; it is mainly their pragmatic life position that is increasing" [4]. We believe that another powerful factor, predominantly influencing the critical attitudes of young people toward politics, could be the private opinions on politicians and political situation with which the respondents come into contact not only within their family, but also in other environments. This is clearly the case of indirectly reconstructed activity role models which have predominantly a negative charge; at the same time they reflect media discourse on the given themes. Youth, in spite of their seemingly oblivious attitude to the politics, is a very sensitive group, clearly influenced by "the rules of social maturing in relation to its social field and ongoing social processes; young people also respond to social changes and changing social conditions in the most sensitive way" [5].

### ***3.3. Acceptance of innovative professional strategies and self-made success***

Present day society confronts youth with all kinds of risk, and threat of different forms of social exclusion; on the other hand it is characteristic to have a large quantity of new and attractive opportunities. We have come to the conclusion that a part of our research respondents have very positive feelings about successful individuals whose business or work position was self-made, due to their skills, hard work, purposefulness, and personal efforts. In this context we can see a very high rate of identification with professional role models from the fields of modern information technologies, internet and mobile communication [6]. In addition to the pragmatic aspect of entrepreneurship, connected with financial stimuli, respondents also appreciate the possibility to experiment and innovate, trying out their own strategies and creative solutions [7]. At a certain number of respondents we have identified a trend connected with scepticism – not only related to entrepreneurship, but often to any kind of activities that have something to do with finances and economy. This particular group rather appreciates stability of employment, which is in their understanding connected with regular income and a lower risk of its loss. That implies they appreciate more "...the system of a reliable carrier way in which they can observe a visible progress based on their own endeavours" [3, p. 14].

### ***3.4. Expertly pragmatic patterns of professional model incentives***

A number of the respondents participating in the research declared that they trusted all professions connected with the concept of expertise; primarily all special aspects, related to individual professions were evaluated in a very positive way. All types of expert role model incentives were accepted, for the most part of the ones connected with specific knowledge and education. Although in this pattern of a professional role model incentives are included also assisting professions (e.g. physician, psychologist, pharmacist and the like), the effect of these examples does not have much in common with the fact that the representatives of these professions help other people. Neither is appreciated a self-made success in entrepreneurship. Young people's attitude to these professions is predominantly practical. The predominantly pragmatic value orientation is appreciated by this group of young people. Even if they perceive helping professions (e.g. physician, psychologist and the like) in a very positive way, the respondents put more emphasis on cognitive factors. Media discourse, related to a large quantity of specialized professions is positive, or as the case may be, neutral; what's more, it can be found in media contents very frequently.

### ***3.5. Pragmatic rational strategy of selecting axiological incentives from family background***

Some young people focus their motivating value incentives selection on job performance, work efforts and professional aspects in reaching given objectives. According to the respondents, it is important that the role model parent's incentives are targeted. As far as mother and father are concerned, they should not be led by individualist, or egotistic motives. In their case, job performance and ambition are often connected with the concept of family care – in form of sacrificing their time and their own interests, suppressing their individualistic inclinations to the benefit of a good solution (mainly materialistic) for the needs of other family members [1]. In a group of siblings, the most appreciated value incentives are successful social interaction and ability to reach individual objectives. Appreciated are also the values focused on the performance, work efforts and professional aspects of reaching set objectives. In case of other relatives (e.g. grandparents), it is their success, achieved during their active life, that is evaluated in a positive way. As far as more distant relatives (e.g. uncle and aunt and the like) are concerned, within this strategy of role model incentives solution, entrepreneurial spirit, hard work and resourcefulness are the most appreciated values.

### ***3.6. Emphatic emotional strategy of selecting axiological incentives from family background***

Other young people, while accepting axiological aspects of their parents' role models, prefer the values focused on understanding feelings, motives of

action and attitudes of a close person, the ability to understand and feel the empathy with his/her emotional spectrum. For a typical representative of this strategy, different aspects of a positive interaction between parents and children play a very important role. From a list of value incentives, the affective and emphatic factors are preferred. Emotional and emphatic incentives are connected with concepts like kindness, benevolence, amiability, self-sacrifice, care, willingness to help and give advice (especially related to emotional problems).

### ***3.7. Mixed strategy of selecting axiological incentives from family background***

For the young people who are using this set of strategies the preference of a parental role model seems to be a combination of pragmatic and cognitive parts of axiological incentive spectrum with the incentives of an emphatically emotional nature. The values focused on the performance, work efforts and professional aspects are not the priority, although they are perceived as a positive role model incentive. The effort to solve the problems of personal and work life is also appreciated, as well as a potential transfer of parental experience, especially if it is connected with the willingness to help and give the advice. In case of role models and examples from a close family background, this strategy is characterized by the combination of successful socialization admiration with the willingness to share value frameworks of emphatically emotional nature.

### ***3.8. Strategy of selecting axiological incentives from other adult environment (teachers, educators, coaches and the like)***

For some young people, the role models from teachers', educators', or coaches' environment are relatively strong impulses. Especially appreciated is the responsive approach, as well as a willingness to help and give advice. In the case of formal as well as informal education, a very important role is played by the ability to motivate for action and better performance. There is a group of respondents who have a rather negative emotional attitude, or better to say antipathy towards role model incentives from the educational environment. The teachers are especially viewed as individuals who professionally failed and often do their work out of necessity and lack of other more suitable opportunities. The third group perceives the educators as bearers of professionalism and facilitators of transferring knowledge, findings, alternatively skills and experience. This group, however, has a mixed attitude to these people's social status. The teachers are especially appreciated for their useful and important job, even though they have problems to secure adequate financial remuneration and more relevant society leverage.

### ***3.9. Distrust of the family image, indirectly exposed by media***

The theme of family and family life is considerably deformed by the process of media communication. This applies especially to commercial electronic media, mainly television, but also printed periodicals of tabloid nature. This trend was noticed also by a number of our research respondents. It is their opinion that the image of family and family life, as presented by media, is often contrary not only to the respondents' personal experience, but also to the experience of many of their acquaintances. Some research participants believe that these media presentations could be to some degree co-responsible for the destruction of values in present day society [8].

### ***3.10. Perception of media as a tool of superficial and to-profit oriented saturation of entertainment as well as audience relaxation***

A great number of our survey participants are rather clearly aware of the fact that a priority news value of the current media (primarily commercial ones) is the emphasis on negative information, mudslinging, infantilism and mixing news coverage with elements of emotions and entertainment. This integration of news data and entertainment elements into one whole, which on top of that gives a quite natural and attractive impression, can be difficult to decipher at the first sight. Predominance of negative, at first sight, socially important news, adds a mark of credibility to these formats. Nevertheless, it appears that a number of high school respondents are able to identify these persuasive strategies of commercial media and rather precisely specify the causes and connections. It is interesting that a number of our research respondents are aware of the fact that media intentionally present and stage-manage topical news in such a way that the audience is shocked and the viewer's attention is held as long as possible; subsequently they will do their best to monetize it by selling the time for advertisements. This phenomenon is an interesting finding since this competence is considered to be connected with a relatively high level of media literacy which we obviously could not find in all young people.

### ***3.11. Media as bearers of mediated role models which do not offer suitable motivation incentives to the public***

Some young people are aware of the fact that media intentionally, and in the most intensive form, stimulate the public with different affective incentives. It is primarily the case of a wide spectrum of emotional stimuli not only in TV series or films, but also in their ever growing extent in the news coverage, journalism and last, but not least in the so-called reality shows. A good number of our respondents viewed this phenomenon rather critically. The debate strongly resonated with the reality show issues. These programs are perceived with mostly negative feelings. At the same time, young people understand the intention of media creators, whose priority intention is to relate stories, all kinds

of banalities and details from other people's lives. The fact that media, for profit reasons, take advantage of some people at different levels of mental deviation and abuse, was perceived very negatively. At the same time, the respondents identified a hidden intention of media organizations which are doing their best to put this kind of programs on the screen. It is interesting that "while in the sixties, the vocabulary and professionalism of TV news coverage and journalism created an obstacle for less educated lower class, at present time it is the other end of an educational scale that has the same problem. The absence of content, as well as the 'information malnutrition' of news and journalistic programs, gradually pushes more educated people away from watching these programs." [4, p. 207] Research results indicate that this trend does not have to apply only to a more educated class, but also to a relatively large number of the youth. More and more trivial programs, saturated with irrelevant informational incentives may be one of the reasons of the ever growing lack of interest in this type of programs and gradual attention transfer to new media.

### ***3.12. Celebrities and sportsmen as bearers of authentic role model incentives in media***

The research results show that one of the few relevant role model incentives that young people apprehend in media environment are professional sportsmen. In particular, this is due to modesty in combination with generosity, the sportsman's willingness to help with different charity projects and initiatives, with organizing collections, helping young sport talents and the like. We believe that such a positive perception of professional sportsmen is (besides other factors) also a consequence of the predominantly positive discourse that is presented in the media. Although the tabloids like to publish information from their private life, the journalists' approach to sportsmen is much more discreet than in case of politicians, artists and other publicly well known personalities [9]. Role models from show business and media are viewed by young people as attractive, but they are only selectively preferred. This interest covers a very wide spectrum and includes different musicians, but also representatives of the domestic media. As far as the role model inspirations are concerned, philanthropic and charity activities of celebrities are most highly appreciated.

## **4. Conclusions**

The selected processes of Slovak youth' socialization, presented in this paper, enables us to offer several recommendations for the social practice and work with young people.

### ***4.1. Promotion of new engagement models and youth's active participation in society's life***

The research results pointed at the extremely high level of youth's distrust related to the politics. State and public institutions as well as their

representatives are the source of scepticism, contempt and incredulity. They are considered to be the initiators and main representatives of corruption, old school tie manners and cynical behaviour, motivated by profit-seeking motives [10]. Universal scepticism is one of the reasons of inadequate social engagement and lack of young people's interest in public affairs. In this connection, any change paradigm seems to be unrealistic – negativism is one of the key values, appreciated mainly in the news coverage, but also other media formats [11]. The experience from Slovakia, as well as from abroad, indicate that primarily social networks play key role in an extremely fast and effective activation of young people. The forms of engagement and active participation of young people in public life should be also backed by measures in the area of youth policy and working with young people.

#### ***4.2. Promotion of innovative educational, professional and career building strategies***

Role model incentives of professional orientation are extremely important for young people. They crop up from different sources and are perceived and processed in different individual and social contexts [12]. Due to the limited possibilities of immediate personal experience in the world of work, the indirect incentives seem to be the key ones. They come mainly from the close, but also extended family, other adults, people of the same age or school environment [13]. Mass media also present role model incentives, and the most prominent are the so-called helping professions (physicians, policemen, firemen and the like). The media presents to a much lesser extent new forms of professional and career strategies which could inspire the young people, especially if they were presented in the context of popular culture. In spite of that, a number of young people perceive as motivating the role models and examples of the people who succeeded in the area of innovations and new forms of entrepreneurship connected primarily with the realm of information and communication technologies. We suggest that public as well as private financial sources be aimed at the development of new forms of young people's entrepreneurship (start-up centres, co-working, support of independent micro entrepreneurs – freelancers, etc.). For the young people's successful adaptation in the market, it is crucial to gradually implement a wide scale of more flexible ways on how the work life can be organized; they should be in agreement with current challenges and global trends of the information society.

#### ***4.3. Media and information education as innovative elements of education***

For a successful integration of young people into the society life and development of their key competences, it is extremely important to integrate innovative strategies into the education. Media and information education should become a significant component in this process, since they create suitable prerequisites for young people to cope with the information overload,

trivialization, infantilism and the absence of values in public discourse which is predominantly under the influence of the commercial media. Accordingly, we recommend the support all forms of media education as well as the information literacy development.

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