

## Representation of Juvenile Delinquency in the Media

Name:

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### Representation of Juvenile Delinquency in the Media

Juvenile delinquency is a topic that has been portrayed by the media for many years. A delinquent juvenile is a youth who commits criminal or unacceptable acts. Juveniles are young people; they lack the life experience and emotional maturity to be considered an adult. The 2006 film *Kidulthood* will be the focus of this paper as we consider how the media in the UK portrays juvenile delinquency. This paper will explore how the media is representing young people as criminals and a problem to society. Sociological and criminology theories will then be discussed in order to decipher why juveniles commit such delinquent behaviour. This paper will seek to explain why the juveniles in *Kidulthood* express such deviant tendencies and will present a number of approaches that could be used to solve juvenile delinquency in line with the theories discussed.

### Synopsis

The media that this paper will focus on is the British film *Kidulthood*. *Kidulthood* is a gritty film which focuses on the lives of a group of youths; whilst there are adults within the film, they play a peripheral role. This particular film is an amalgamation of many problems that youth face and reflects the current news that other forms of media are reporting. The film has a harrowing beginning in which Katie, after having suffered bullying from her fellow students, commits suicide. Following the opening scenes, the film then focuses on the following day in which the 15-year-old students are told that Katie has killed herself and are given the day off to mourn. Instead of mourning Katie's death, the students become involved in drugs, violence, and theft. There are also references to teenage pregnancy, as one of the characters discovers she is pregnant. The film ends with one of the youths violently murdering another.

### Substance Abuse

There is a sociological theory called cumulative protection, which suggests that early intervention in the form of support from family and education may assist in preventing juvenile delinquency (Yoshikawa, 1994). However, *Kidulthood* demonstrates that a lack of early intervention, especially from a supportive family, can have an adverse effect. Jay brings drugs to Trevor and explains that he got them from his mother. The example being set by Jay's mother is that substance abuse is normal. The lack of support and cumulative protection sees Jay commit more offenses – this will be considered later in this paper.

Throughout the film, there are numerous more references to drugs and alcohol. Becky and Alisa go to buy drugs from a man named Rupert. Rupert agrees to provide the girls with drugs in return for sexual favours. Alisa, who has recently discovered she is pregnant, returns home and takes the drugs with Becky. The media is portraying juveniles as being drug obsessed, with no boundaries as to what lengths they will go to in order to obtain the substances. Other news articles further support this view from the media. *The Daily Mail* published an article, which referred to a survey carried out by the *European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs*, which concluded that '40% of teenagers in the UK said they had tried substances...' (*Daily Mail*). However, it is important to differentiate between experimenting with substances and substance abuse. It must be considered why juveniles turn to substance abuse.

Whilst the media focuses on the fact that juveniles use substances, they often do not explore why they feel the need to. *Kidulthood* touches on the reasons behind the juvenile's substance abuse and establishes that both learned behaviour and peer pressure are causes. Whilst this is an underlying theme throughout the film, it is not properly addressed. Therefore, from a sociological viewpoint, it must be considered why juveniles turn to substances.

Drug use and underage drinking are illegal and therefore the juveniles are partaking in delinquent behaviour. The labelling theory created by Howard Becker (Bernburg 2009) may be relevant as to why the juveniles within this film abuse substances. There are expectations placed on them to behave in a certain way because of the environment that they are living in. The juveniles in the film live on council estates in West London, an area that is associated with low-income families and crime. Therefore, according to the labelling theory, the juveniles have been labelled as criminals since birth and are therefore fulfilling the identity given to them. *Kidulthood* is certified 15, which heightens the problem with the labelling theory. Their target audience is in similar situations, as the juveniles may believe that this is how they are expected to behave.

### Violence

The film begins with a number of students at school bullying a girl named Katie, including violently attacking her in class. Katie is presented as being from a middle-class family. The juveniles are represented as being from a working-class background and are violent bullies with no care for anyone but themselves and their accomplishments. However, accomplishments for these juveniles are based on violence and general bullish behaviour. The delinquent juveniles threaten to kill Katie if she tells anyone about how they have been bullying her. The media emphasises the violent nature of the juveniles as the victim, Katie, kills herself. Albert Cohen's Status Frustration theory (Roach & Gursslin, 1965) can be used to explain why the youths are bullying Katie. Cohen's theory suggests that delinquency in working-class men is a reaction against middle-class success. This theory presents juveniles as being ruthless. They do not care about the individual but rather their class standing and they judge them based on this.

It is important to note that bullying is not exclusive to juveniles and is something that adults experience too. The NHS has recently been hit by claims of bullying. ‘Almost 30 per cent of NHS said they had been bullied by patients or their families in the past year, with 25 per cent reporting abuse by other workers’ (Merrick 2018). This demonstrates that bullying is not limited to juveniles. However, bullying amongst adults does not tend to escalate into violence, nor does it based upon Cohen’s theory (Roach & Gursslin, 1965). The extremely violent nature of the bullying being portrayed by the media presents juveniles as delinquents, searching for violence and trouble.

Whilst the film does present juveniles as delinquents, their role models have to be considered. Katie’s parents are too focused on their own lives to see the bullying she is being subjected to. Meanwhile, Trevor’s uncle is a drug dealer who even holds a gun to him. John Locke put forward the philosophy of tabula rasa in 1689. Locke believes that children are born as a blank slate and their experiences shape who they are (Locke 2017). By applying this theory, we can consider the fact that Jay obtained the drugs from his mother. If he has grown up watching her abuse substances, then he is likely to do the same. However, the media prefer to focus on the delinquent behaviour of juveniles rather than the causes behind it and to educate society to take steps to prevent it.

Throughout the film, there are numerous fight scenes, some of which involve weapons. The media presents these violent scenes as normal behaviour for these youths. Hence, why many of them are prepared and armed. Some of the violence in the film is portrayed as revenge. The film ends with Trevor being violently murdered by Sam with a baseball bat in front of all the students at a party; this is an act of vengeful violence. Katie’s brother then arrives at the party with a gun, looking for Sam after Katie’s suicide letter mentions the bullying she has suffered from him. Katie’s brother shoots at Sam but misses

and quickly leaves the party as the ambulance and police arrive. The youths stand back and watch the events, suggesting that this type of behaviour is customary to them. The Subcultural Theory (Cohen, 1955) provides an explanation for the violent events in the film. The Subcultural Theory suggests that there is a group of people whose values differ from those of the mainstream culture. The juveniles in *Kidulthood*, therefore, represent a subculture in which vengeful violence is accepted. Where a pro-revenge attitude exists within a subculture there will be higher levels of revenge delinquency (Kivivuori, Savolainen & Aaltonen, 2016). Cohen further suggests that Status Frustration leads towards deviant subcultures (Roach & Gursslin, 1965). Furthermore, subcultures allow juveniles to establish social identity (Tajfel 2010). Thus, the juveniles are committing violent acts in order to obtain status and respect within their subcultures. This would explain why the working-class juveniles within *Kidulthood* behave in such deviant ways and commit crimes.

The prevalence of vengeful violence within the film suggests that society is in a state of anomie. There has been a break down of common values and common meaning (Durkeim, 1897). There are no expectations on how the juveniles should behave and as a result, they are turning towards violence and revenge. This is demonstrated in the media as the juveniles act against all common values and meaning.

#### Theft

Further juvenile delinquent behaviour is portrayed in *Kidulthood* as Jay attempts to purchase alcohol. The shop refuses to serve him, as he is underage. Jay steals the alcohol. Studies have shown a link between substance abuse and committing crime (Pierce, Hayhurst, Bird, Hickman, Seddon, Dunn and Millar, 2017). Therefore, juveniles who use substances are more likely to partake in delinquent behaviour. Furthermore, as discussed earlier in this paper, the lack of support from his family means that Jay is continuing to commit offences

and thus fulfilling the definition of a juvenile delinquent. According to Yoshikawa's (1994) sociological theory, such delinquent behaviour could be avoided if Jay had grown up with a supportive family and had embraced education. Whilst this sociological theory is somewhat helpful, unfortunately not all youths have a supportive family, nor do they all embrace education.

Merton expanded the Anomie Theory (1938). He suggests that a strain is put on society in order to achieve a goal, which in turn leads people to turn to deviance. Jay could not obtain the alcohol and therefore turned to deviant behaviour in order to achieve his goal. The juveniles in *Kidulthood* have role models that come from the same subculture as themselves and thus they aspire to achieve the same lifestyle by committing crimes in order to make quick money.

#### How to Solve the Problems

As established by the Subculture Theory (Cohen, 1955) juveniles commit delinquency due to the values and morals within their own culture. This culture is created by 'lower-class youths, thrown together in high density urban neighbourhoods and saddled with a common problem' (Lilly, Cullen and Ball, 2002). The youths then 'find a common solution in embracing values that provide both the chance to gain status and the psychic satisfaction of rejecting respectable values that lie beyond their reach' (Lilly, Cullen and Ball, 2002). This suggests that in order to solve the problem of juvenile delinquency, changes must be made to society.

There must be a change to the environments that youths are living in, such as the ones in *Kidulthood*. They are labelled as criminals from birth (Howard Becker, 1963). Therefore they are only fulfilling the label given to them. Juvenile delinquency is caused by the anomie that society is suffering (Durkeim, 1893). The breakdown of society has led to

clashes between classes and subcultures have thus formed, forcing juveniles to turn to delinquent behaviour. Society must unite with the common goal to improve juvenile behaviour and prevent youths from turning to substance abuse, violence, and theft.

### Conclusion

*Kidulthood* manipulates both the mentality of the youths, their language (Hall, 1997) and their actions to demonstrate their criminal tendencies. Moral panic was described as the public's reaction to "mods and rockers". Back in the 1960s "mods and rockers" were a subculture, unknown to the public and because of this, they feared them (Cohen 1972). *Kidulthood* is contributing towards the moral panic in regards to the subculture of juvenile delinquency in the way that it is presenting the youths (Cohen, 1972). Whilst *Kidulthood* has aimed at teenagers, moral panic is still in existence. The teenagers watching the film will continue to regard juveniles in this way as they grow into adults — in the same way that adults view juveniles as delinquents because of their experiences with "mods and rockers". Because of this, there is heightened concern in regards to juvenile behavior, which is resulting in hostility towards them caused by a consensus that they are a real threat to society and further create a class divide.

Representation of juvenile delinquency in the media is not concerned with the reasons why a proportion of youths succumb to delinquent behaviour. The media must adapt and consider the reasons why youths behave in such a way. If the media were to do this, then it could assist society rather than its current stance of switching between normalising and penalising juvenile delinquency. As this paper has concluded, society must change in order to solve the problems of juvenile delinquency and media can assist this. If films like *Kidulthood* also focused on the reasons why juveniles are expressing delinquent behaviour, then changes could be made.



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