

The Anatomy of Teenage Cliques: Communication Behavior at the 2008 Kansas State Fair and in Popular Media

Chigozirim Utah*

Elliott School of Communication

Abstract: Assumptions are often made about teenagers, and how they interact with one another within groups. These stereotypes are influenced largely by how teenagers are portrayed in the media and popular culture, and are indicative of how teenagers are viewed and characterized by society [1]. This paper reports on a grounded observational study conducted at the 2008 Kansas State Fair. The researcher observed verbal and nonverbal teen relationship behavior within the self-contained, unrestricted context of the Freak Out ride, where there was minimal presence of parents, teachers, and older authority figures. This context was chosen because it was designed to appeal to teenage participants through the use of popular music, young, attractive carnival workers, targeted games, and daring rides. Comparisons and contrasts will be made between the teenage clique and group relationships observed at the Kansas State Fair, and teenage clique representations in popular media, specifically TV shows and movies. Findings from this study will also be applied to academic research on teenage friendships, clique behaviors and stereotypes.

1. Introduction

The hypodermic needle theory characterized humans as media customers, who passively received, accepted and acted upon messages disseminated through an omnipotent media. The theory has long since been disproven and is now considered obsolete, due in part to the work of Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) [2] who advanced a reciprocal influence between media and society. Gerbner (1967) [3] concluded that there is no doubt that the media exerts great influence on society; however, society's effect on the media is just as powerful. Utilizing ethnographic research findings from the observation of teenage cliques at the Kansas State Fair, this study attempts to demonstrate the reciprocal influence of society and media, specifically social behavior displayed by teens at the Kansas State Fair, and popular TV shows and movies.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

This research project was a grounded qualitative study, utilizing the tool of unobtrusive observation [4] for field research and content analysis for TV and movie assessments.

Experiment

Unobtrusive observation was the most appropriate method of data collection because if teen subjects had been aware that an older person was observing them, their behavior could have been altered [4]. Secondly, the goal was to observe verbal and nonverbal dynamics of teenage group behavior. As a result, while physical proximity to subjects was critical, it was not necessary for the researcher to engage as a participant observer. Upon arrival at the research site (the Kansas State Fair) the framework and site best suited to the research topic were selected. An hour and a half was spent selecting the most naturalistic context possible. Observational data was gathered in the vicinity of a ride called Freak Out, including the areas and walkways surrounding it. The observation site was chosen due to the high proportion of teenagers in the area, relative to adults. There was also a constant flow of teenagers passing through the area. A variety of events were observed. Even though the Freak Out ride contained the highest concentration of teenagers, the surrounding areas such as the Tilt-a-Whirl ride, and the food stands were also observed. These areas also contained teenage groups who were either passing through or lingering in the area. Ethnographic data was collected over a period of five hours. Special attention was made to collect data in as much detail as possible. It was important to preserve the context of the teen's verbal and nonverbal interactions in order to yield accurate analysis.

Results

A thematic analysis to uncover patterns in the ethnographic data was conducted. Observations were not guided by pre-established categories, but these categories were inductively generated.

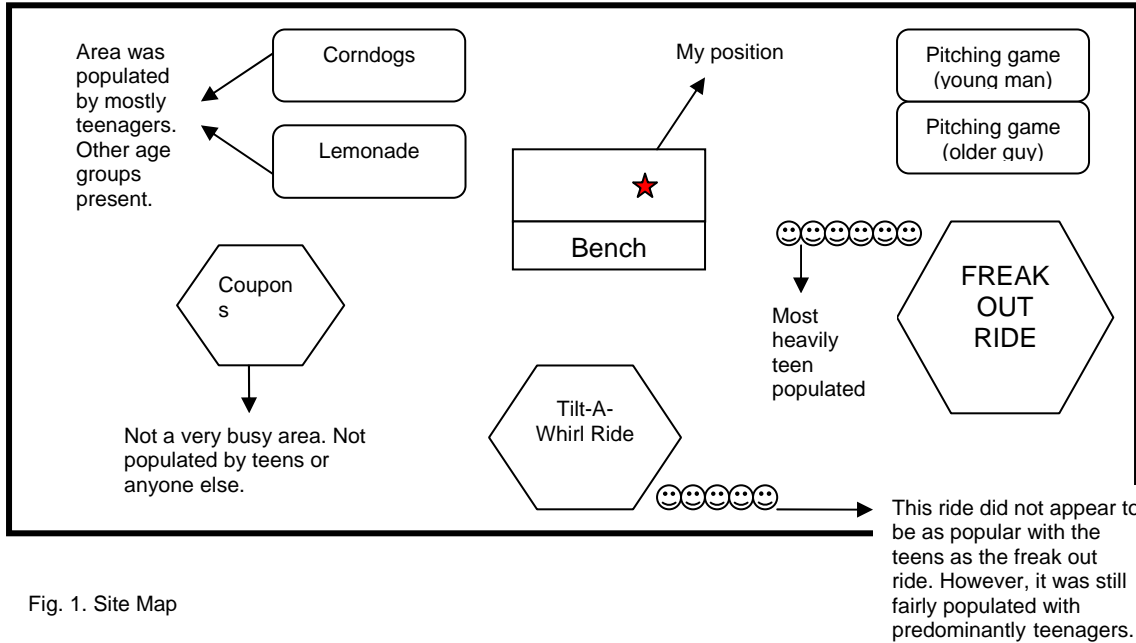


Fig. 1. Site Map

A content analysis of teen TV shows and movies like Gossip Girl and Mean Girls, selected post hoc, was conducted to uncover patterns in teenage group representation. The teen TV shows and movies selected for content analysis are widely known, and highly rated, with large teenage and non-teenage followings. The patterns uncovered from both the thematic and content analysis allowed for response to the research question, “What roles do the media and society play in the enactment of teen group and clique behavior?”

3. Conclusions

The predominant theme that emerged from both Kansas State Fair and media analyses was “group homogeneity.” All groups observed at the Kansas State Fair and portrayed in the TV shows and movies examined exhibited high levels of homogeneity in three major areas:

- Teenage groups are predominantly racially homogenous.
- Each teenage group and clique was dressed in similar brands and styles of clothing.
- Each teenage group and clique was homogenous with respect to communication style.

Due to the above observations, stereotypical images of highly homogenous teenage groups on TV and in movies seem to be reflections of actual teen group and clique behavior that occur in naturalistic settings.

4. Acknowledgements

I would like to give special thanks to Dr. Deborah Ballard-Reisch for supervising this whole project, and my colleague, Jeffery Preston. I would also like to thank my classmates for their academic support and input.

[1] Nichols, S.L., & Good, T.L. (2004). *American Teenagers-Myths and Realities: Media Images, Schooling, and the Social Costs of Careless Indifference*. New York: Routledge.
 [2] Lazarsfeld, P., B. Berelson and H. Gaudet (1944). *The People's Choice*. New York: Columbia University Press
 [3] Gerbner, G. (1986) “Living with Television: The dynamics of the Cultivation Process”, in *Perspectives on Media Effects*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
 [4] E. J. Webb, D. T. Campbell, R. D. Schwartz, & L. Sechrest (2000). *Unobtrusive Measures: Non-Reactive Research in Social Sciences*. Chicago: Rand McNally