Applying Popular Culture in Creative Activities for Young People

Introduction

Both art educators and art therapists have reported the challenge of capturing adolescents' interest in art sessions. When children get older, they seem to lose their passion for creating (Toku, 2001). However, is this true? Do young people really stop creating or they simply dislike the formal art sessions provided by organisations?

During the first quarter of 2020, I volunteered as a creative assistant to work with a group of teenagers who, for a variety of reasons, were excluded from mainstream school. While working with these young students, I found it difficult to spark their interest or keep their attention. Interestingly, despite them often complaining and easily feeling bored, they got excited and energetic when someone in the classroom started a conversation about a pop star or comic hero. In fact, some of the students took their favourite pop character as reference for their creation. Based on this observation, my team and I designed a creative puppet play workshop adopting the idea of tracing pop characters. We believed that introducing pop culture would increase young people's willingness to participate (Hsieh, 2020).

In this essay, I would like to further explore the phenomenon of fan-based creation prevalence among adolescents and evaluate both the benefits and potential risks of applying popular culture in a creative context.

Popular culture and young people

Normally, people's interest in popular culture starts from puberty (Manifold, 2009). This interest sometimes becomes a strong motivation for creation. From my own experience, I was obsessed with creating comic fan-art in my teenage years. And almost each of my friends had at least one or two pop icons that they were enthusiastic about, no matter if it was a comic book, novel or pop star. Some of my friends even wrote their own stories of their favourite characters. This interest belies the claim that children become less willing to create when they grow up.

The reason why popular culture is so influential among the young generation could be seen through the lens of developmental socialisation. The prime mission of growth for adolescents is to establish their self-identities, which is a sense of uniqueness and independence (Raviv et al., 1996; Moon, 1998; Riley, 2003; Phillips, 2003). The adolescent years are a period filled with ambivalence. On one hand, teenagers seek independence. They are eager to leave their parents and make their own mark on the world. However, on the other hand, they are reluctant to depart and are longing to connect. This causes a certain amount of insecurity. The object of their demand for attachment will transition from parents to their peer group (Riviere, 2008; Moon, 1998; Riley, 2003). Indulging in popular culture meets adolescents' need for both being unique and being involved (Raviv et al., 1996). For instance, pop groups are the particularly attractive category within the pop industry among the young generation, especially in collective cultures such as Korea or Japan. Usually,

each young person will pick one member in the group as his or her "true love". And they share this newfound love with like-minded peer groups. The community of sharing the same interest could be found in friends nearby, or someone remotely connected by the internet (Manifold, 2009).

Apart from seeking attachment relationships, adolescents look for role models who differ from their immediate families. In many cases, they turn to pop stars, who are well-packaged to capture the attention of impressionable youth. Because of unavailability, there is no disillusion (Raviv et al., 1996). This is also related to sexual identity and the development of puberty, and studies have shown some gender differences within idolisation. According to Raviv and colleagues' research, generally, young girls would start admiring female figures and gradually redirect their attention to male figures who can fulfill their love fantasies. By contrast, boys tend to worship a male persona who is regarded as masculine (aggressive or sexually expressive) (Raviv et al., 1996).

At the same time, some scholars have strong critiques of popular culture. They have declared that the culture industry delivers unrealistic fantasies as a way of convincing them that consuming and participating in mass culture enhances individuality (Tilsen & Nylund, 2016). Indeed, this statement reveals some truth of popular culture. Yet, if we adults take those critiques to press or inhibit young people's passion, we probably misunderstand the rebel nature of adolescents, and it will be such a pity to lose the opportunity to get close to the inner world of our next generation.

The benefits and risks

Tons of studies have focused on the negative impact of popular culture upon youth (Potash, 2009), but relatively fewer studies were about the positive side. Usually, traditional education environments see pop culture as irrelevant or even harmful to academic performance (Duncan-Andrade, 2004). About fifteen years ago, when I was a high school student, most products of pop culture were defined as "contraband" at almost every school in Taiwan. However, attitudes toward pop culture have changed over time and as technology has advanced, more researchers and educators have started to view pop culture as an effective tool for youth's wellbeing.

Applying popular culture could help adolescents in several ways: a) it increases young people's willingness for participation (Riley, 2003); b) applying popular culture in activities for teens equals giving a certain amount of authority back to the youth; c) it builds up their capacity for creation (artmaking or writing skills) indirectly; d) young people can learn social phenomenon (Duncan-Andrade, 2004) and recognise their own life struggles (Potash, 2009) via pop sources; e) it helps the development of teenage identity.

- **Increasing adolescents' willingness for participation**

  In Handbook of Art therapy published in 2003, Shirley Riley suggested art therapists let teenagers bring their own interests into therapy sessions (Riley, 2003). Resistance is a common phenomenon which could be seen in almost every therapeu-

tic occasion for young people (Emunah, 1994; Moon, 1998; Riley, 2003). However, compared to conventional psychotherapy, young people are more willing to engage in art therapy sessions, though they often refuse to create at the beginning (Moon, 1998). If the patient were able to take part in the treatment for a long time, it would be fine to patiently wait for them to gradually open up. Yet, in the majority of cases, the time for treatment is limited. Therapists can provide more help by shortening the resistant period at the beginning of treatment.

- **Returning authority back to the youth**

The anti-pop culture sentiment I felt in high school is replicated around the world. The answers to why pop culture is loathed by school authorities could be numerous. Among those reasons, one could be attributed to the nature of teachers. Teachers usually present themselves under the aura of the authority of "creation, interpretation, legitimation, and dissemination of knowledge" (Duncan-Andrade, 2004, p.315). Teachers and therapists often know less about popular culture than their students and patients (Duncan-Andrade, 2004), who are experts in their favourite pop elements. By introducing their interests to the authority (teachers and therapist), adolescents can regain a sense of control and confidence. If the adults knew a bit about the objects of their fascinations, that would be even better (Phillips, 2003) because it forms the feeling of an alliance, which is vital for therapeutic situations (Wang, 2017).

- **Improving skills**

As mentioned, a teen's motivation for creation based on their favourite popular culture is powerful. Marjorie C. Manifold did a questionnaire investigating a group of young fan-artists and cosplayers. She reported that about one-third of the young fan-artists and three-fourth of the cosplayers claimed that they taught themselves artmaking skills. Some students absorbed techniques from formal art lessons and subsequently applied the skills to fan-based artwork (Manifold, 2009). In the case of literacy, Duncan-Andrade found that some students applied certain academic literacy skills such as critique, analysis, memorisation, recitation, oral presentation to the writing inspired by pop products (Duncan-Andrade, 2004). One example of the positive correlation between fan-based creation and drawing competence could be seen in the prevalence of fanart in Japan. Compared to students in the United States, artwork produced by Japanese students seems more mature and advanced (Potash, 2009).

- **Learning social phenomenon and recognising life struggles**

Popular culture provides rich and vivid sources for young people to engage in society. Duncan-Andrade believed that pop culture could connect young people to broader social knowledge (Duncan-Andrade, 2004). Some adolescents explored different topics within the pop product and found different potential career possibilities. (Manifold, 2009). Some uncovered their own life struggle by reading or watching mass media narratives (Potash, 2009; Manifold, 2009). For example, young people may realise that they or others are encountering unjust behaviours, such as bullying or sexual harassment. In Maniford's questionnaire (2009), a teen reported that he gained insight into bullies through fanart and cosplay. In fact, pop characters have been often used as case studies for clinical training (Schwitzer et al., 2008).

- **Developing self identity**

  There is no doubt that human identity is influenced by culture. The connection between popular culture and adolescent identity is especially strong (Tilsen & Nylund, 2016). Young people can gain a sense of identity via fantasy narratives (Manifold, 2009) or celebrity persona (Lacasa et al., 2017). As Manifold said, "Powerful recognition of self in an artifact of the popular environment may trigger the youth's desire to create art that connects the phenomenon and self. (2009, p. 260)" Internally, they may resonate with the characters or stories. From the aspect of self as a creator, young people may also validate their endeavours through their fan work. Externally, they receive recognition from others for building up skills. This external identity could be internalised (Manifold, 2009), and eventually, an adolescent would recognise herself as a capable person, artist or writer.

In spite of the seemingly beneficial factors, there are a few risks of applying popular culture in creative activities for adolescents. Many researchers have devoted themselves to the field of studying the correlation between popular culture and adolescents' negative social behaviour, including violence, sex, and substance abuse (Potash, 2009). However, adults shouldn't be intimidated by the images inspired by those elements. Drawing violence doesn't predict committing violence (Phillips, 2003). Sometimes, it represents the inner anger or unease of the young person. It is a wonderful chance for educators and therapists to elicit the topic.

Moreover, some scholars have advocated their concern about the negative effect of popular culture on youth's ability to think creatively, to imagine, and to freely express because it constrains their willingness to create meaningful images about themselves (Potash, 2009). From the Marxist point of view, "people are rendered as passive consumers of mass meaning, not as active producers of fluid, diverse meaning" (Tilsen & Nylund, 2016, p.229). Yet, what if we could divert this energy into a more productive pursuit and support young people side-by-side through the creating process instead of dismissing it? Popular culture is such a double-edged sword. It could productively improve the wellbeing of youth, however, if used carelessly, it would cause harm.

Conclusion

No one can deny the importance of popular culture for young people. Obsessing over popular culture to create something around the topic is a unique phenomenon in teens. It represents a transition from childhood to adulthood. As Joan Phillips said in Handbook of Art Therapy, "Popular culture is important to teens and also influences their art expressions. In every generation and culture there are seminal works that inform the imagination, fantasy life, and fears of those reaching into adulthood" (2003, p.230).

In sum, the advantages of applying popular culture in creative activities include encouraging participation; returning power to youth; upskilling; understanding social knowledge and self-struggles, and developing identity. Although there are still a few

potential negative effects, the benefits are patently obvious and it is regrettable if the authorities continue to view it as a beast which needs to be inhibited.

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