Research Report.

The power of perceptions

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Hanne Op de Beeck

Children's Rights Knowledge Centre (KeKi)

Secretariat

Children's Rights Knowledge Centre (KeKi, Kenniscentrum Kinderrechten vzw)
Kortrijksesteenweg 14
Gelijkvloerse verdieping lokaal 0.11
9000 Gent – Belgium

Phone: +32 (0)9 243 24 70
info@keki.be– www.keki.be

Registered Seat

Kenniscentrum Kinderrechten vzw
Lange Steenstraat 31
9000 Gent - Belgium

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Abstract

Based on the cultivation theory, the current exploratory study examines how media images about youth can affect youth's self-esteem. Since adolescents find themselves in a crucial phase of identity development, it is hypothesized that they may be vulnerable to the effects of imaging processes brought about by the traditional and digital media. Which images do youth most often see about themselves? Do the images they witness relate to the frequency of their (digital) media use? And, do these images affect their self-esteem? These questions take a central place in the current article.

Key words: self-esteem, media images, youth, imaging, cultivation theory

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In their struggle for the reader's, viewer's or listener's attention and their pursuit for the highest sales figures, traditional (e.g. newspapers, radio) as well as digital (e.g. internet) media may at times revert to the most sensational and intriguing stories. As a consequence, images presented by the media do not always correspond with the reality. However, an increase in sensational stories can spur an expansion of stereotypes about certain social groups, such as women, immigrants… but also youth. The social consequences of this tendency have been extensively investigated and reported about in international literature. A significant part of this literature is based on the cultivation theory, which explains how individuals extrapolate the images they perceive through the media to the 'real world': one believes that certain events, social relations and current behavior displayed on, for example, television, similarly manifest themselves in reality. An excess of stereotypical images can consequently lead to an integration of these images in the cognitions of media consumers. It will be argued in this article that, if these images relate to the social group to which the media user belongs himself, this integration can affect his self-image and self-esteem.

1. Media influences on individual cognitions

Imaging or image formation is a process through which a first impression is drafted and ideas about certain individuals, events and/or processes are developed. This automatic process is necessary for structuring, transforming and dealing with information one is daily confronted with (Cornelissen, 2000). *While the outside world 'in reality' is generally characterized by balanced scales, our brains attempt to divide these into distinctive categories, or even in clear dichotomies"* (Van Ginneken, 1996:165, author's translation). Such categorizing is necessary to organize information that is continuously captured at a fast speed.

Through imaging processes, youth are assigned certain qualities or characteristics based on the age group they belong to. These processes do not bring difficulties if they develop in a qualified way. However, if imaging processes are characterized by distortions, inaccuracies and/or stereotypes, they can influence youth's daily reality. Young people can be affected in a positive way – if the imaging processes focus on positive characteristics – or in a negative way, if negative characteristics dominate the processes.

The relation between imaging processes and the daily reality takes a central place in this article. In the first place, the extent to which imaging processes are influenced by media images, is scrutinized. Secondly, the relation between media images about youth and their daily reality is investigated, with specific focus on the youth's self-esteem.

2.1 The cultivation theory

Over the last decade, a clear, international research tradition about the relation between media images and imaging processes strongly extended. This tradition is heavily inspired by the 'cultivation theory' which underlines that a higher media consumption increases the chances of developing a world view that corresponds with the images that are distributed by the media (Gerbner, 1998). The images one perceives in the media are 'extrapolated' or 'cultivated' to the 'real' world.

Korać & Vranješević (2008) refer to this tendency in terms of the power that is accredited to the media to create and control 'truth regimes' which determine who has the authority to speak and which messages can be communicated. These 'truth regimes' are designed by networks of social and political control and dictate definitions of 'good', 'bad', 'normal' and 'abnormal' to the consumer, according to Korać & Vranješević (2008). This directive is of such a strong nature that the prescribed definitions are easily internalized. Doing so, the 'truth regimes' become part of what is considered to be 'common sense' (Korać & Vranješević, 2008).[1]

Nonetheless, the link between media and cognitions does not follow just one direction. On the contrary, Joye (2012) and van Ginneken (1996) underline that complex interactions between media images and personal characteristics develop. Individuals holding positive ideas about youth, will 'filter' the media images they are confronted with through a positive framework, and vice versa (Joye, 2012; van Ginneken, 1996).

2.2 Link with daily reality

The earlier discussed insights ascribe a large importance to the way youth are portrayed in the media. First of all, media images may influence the youth themselves (Clark, Ghosh, Green & Shariff, 2008; Lindekens, 2009). Media constitute an important resource for behavioral modeling: new behavior is learned by watching others perform this behavior (Huntemann & Morgan, 2001; Heintz-Knowles, 2001). Young people use the media for information to base their current and future social roles on (Arikoglu & Scheepers, 2013; Bauwens, 2009; Heintz-Knowles, 2001). *"Every exposure to every media model provides a potential guide to behavior or attitude, a potential source of identification, a human exemplar we may use […] to define and construct our identities"* (Huntemann & Morgan, 2001: 310). Consequently, the way young people are portrayed in the media can influence their behavior. Clark et al. (2008) argue that the communication of stereotypes through the media makes young people reflect on the way they dress, the way they present themselves, where they go with their friends. Luyten (2005) explains in this case that the media function as an alternative socializing institute, specifically influencing the identity construction of young adolescents. At a very young age, parents are the most important actors in their children's lives. Young adolescents, on the other hand, start to look for mode independency; their parents' influence declines. This is why young adolescents are more impressionable for external influences to shape their identity; therefore they are understood to be more vulnerable to the impact of media images (Huntemann & Morgan, 2001; Luyten, 2005; Op de Beeck, 2010).

In line with these observations, academics as well as civil society members discuss how media images affect the self-esteem and general well-being of young people (Clark et al., 2008; De Kinderrechtencoalitie vzw, 2009). Clark et al. (2008) find through their study that the communication of stereotypes about youth is related to a lower self-esteem among youth (also see Heintz-Knowles, 2001; Lindekens, 2009). The reverse, however, is also true: positive media images about the social group one belongs to are related to a higher self-esteem (Luyten, 2005).

Furthermore, media images about youth can influence decision-makers – parents as well as policy makers – in society (Korać & Vranješević, 2008). For adults, media are an important – and for some of

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[1] Interesting examples of this tendency in Flemish research address the influence of news stories, documentaries, reality shows and fiction on cognitions and opinions about the police. Dirikx (2012) found in her doctoral study that media images about the police can influence young people's attitudes towards the police. Joye (2012) argues that imaging processes about the police are characterized by stereotyping – certain aspects about the police are enlarged whereas others are neglected – which can influence expectations from the police and generate critique when they cannot fulfill the 'ideal image' the media created.

them, even the exclusive – source of information on youth (Amundson, Lichter & Lichter, 2005; Heintz-Knowles, 2001; Korać & Vranješević, 2003; 2008). In line with this idea, Heintz-Knowles (2001) wonders – based on her findings that in popular American entertainment series youth are often portrayed as self-directed individuals who do not need the support of parents or external institutions – what impact media images of youth have on the broader community. She underlines that the way young people are portrayed in entertainment series could possibly limit the commitment to organize official support for youth (Heintz-Knowles, 2001). Similarly, Lippman, Anderson, Moore & McIntosch (2009, in Op de Beeck, Vandenhole & Desmet, 2012)) argue that putting focus on negative images in the media cannot only cause the willingness of the community to invest in better conditions for young people to decline; it can also undermine individual initiatives to contribute to the realization of children's rights (for example, through volunteer work). Thus, young people's well-being is understood to be influenced directly (through identification) and indirectly (through an impact on services and support from parents and other (official) institutions) by media images.

Nonetheless, media images can also generate positive effects for young people's daily reality. Through media reports, more attention can be created for (new) difficulties youth are confronted with (such as cyber bullying). In this case, media fulfill an important signaling function and stimulate the development of creative initiatives to address these phenomena. Furthermore, Mares & Woodward (2001) investigate the prosocial potential of media images by testing whether prosocial behavioral models – such as sharing – are taken over by children who are exposed to these images. In addition, Luyten (2005) argues that positive representation of youth culture in the media can bring positive effects that are similar to the results of direct contact with this culture: *"getting to know the home situation of a member of another culture involves getting acquainted with different rules, values and behavioral patterns. This familiarity can be experienced through media as well"* (Luyten, 2005:62, author's translation).

In that regard, media play a crucial role in raising attention for child-related issues, according to Kunkel & Smith (1999). The media function as 'gatekeeper' for the public opinion about young people's conditions in society (Kunkel & Smith, 1999). In line with this argument, the Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) claims that the media constitute a powerful tool to sensitize the public about progress and remaining challenges in the field of children's rights.[2]

2. Media images about youth

Because of the potential impact of media, different studies aimed to map existing media images about youth. Most of these studies are based on content analyses of news stories in newspapers, on the radio or on television (e.g. Adriaenssen & De Cock, 2011; Amundson et al., 2005; Children's Express, 1999; Clark et al., 2008; Korać & Vranješević, 2003; Kunkel & Smith, 1999) and of popular (entertainment) television series (e.g. Gerbner, 1999; Heintz-Knowles, 2001).[3] These projects more specifically uncover two dualities in the way children and youth are being portrayed: (1) a duality between young people as offenders and as victims of crime (Bauwens, 2009) and (2) a duality

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[2] Even though the role of the media cannot be overestimated either. After all, the capacity to urge policy makers to action can also result in a fast or badly prepared policy that does not bring much improvement for youth (CRAE, 2009).

[3] These are almost all Anglosaxon projects. Even though it might be argued that the commercialized Anglosaxon media cannot be compared to countries using public media channels, van Ginneken (1996) argues that the strong expansion of commercial television in Europe and the gradual adaptation of public information channels to the commercial format may render such potential critique irrelevant. Furthermore, many Anglosaxon, and specifically American (television) programs are also aired in (other) European countries. Nonetheless, this critique is to be taken into account when reading the literature on this topic.

between a strong interest for youth for commercial motives on the one hand, and a lack of interest for their daily reality, problems and desires, on the other (Bauwens, 2009; CRAE, 2009; Lindekens, 2009).

3.1 Young people as victims and offenders

Different authors claim that most of the news stories involving youth are stories about crime and violence (see for example Amundson et al., 2005; Chandiramani, 2007; Children's Express, 1999; Cornelissen, 2000; Korać & Vranješević, 2003; Kunkel & Smith, 1999). In this case, a remarkable duality can be observed. On the one hand, children and youth are portrayed as victims. According to Vanobbergen (2009), it could be the idea of the 'innocent child', an inheritance from Romanticism, that lies behind this image. In this era, the young people were perceived as an innocent and 'pure' beings that should be protected against the dangers of life (Bauwens, 2009). This idea is in line with Korać & Vranješević' (2003) finding that the most prevalent child image in the Serbian media is the image of the *passive* child: the child is portrayed as the object of adults' protection. This image strongly contrasts with that of the *active* child, which is less prevalent and limited to entertainment programs, and with the image of the *proactive* child which is completely absent in the Serbian media, according to Korać & Vranješević (2003). The 'proactive' child is conceptualized by Korać & Vranješević (2003) as an autonomous player who, in accordance with his developmental and individual capacities, takes responsible decisions, initiates action and brings this action to a good end.

On the other hand, a large part of analyzed news stories in the literature appears to portray young people as *offenders.* Adriaenssen & De Cock (2011) find through a content analysis of Flemish news stories that, in comparison with the official criminality figures, youth delinquency is not only disproportionately often reported about in the newspaper; articles about juvenile delinquency also tend to take a more prominent place in news stories. As well, according to their investigation, newspapers disproportionately often report on youth violence: as an example, the percentage of murders committed by youth that is reported about in the newspapers they analyzed is 75 times larger than the actual percentage of murders committed by youth (Adriaenssen & De Cock, 2011). Clark et al. (2008) argue that teenagers are more often portrayed as victims than as offenders (also see Cornelissen, 2000). Children's Express (1999: 127) describes these stories as "*[…] the stories of the evil child, the bad children of bad parents, the young hooligans today",* which are explained by Bauwens (2009) through the hypothesis that twenty years of children's rights activism resulted in a new child image –'the competent child' – to appear next to the already existing image of the 'vulnerable child'. This new image resulted in the child not only being depicted as a victim anymore, but also as an offender, according to Bauwens (2009).

Amundson et al. (2005) refer in this case to an imbalance between 'traditional frames' which focus on crime and victimization and 'alternative frames' that bring more constructive stories and/or provide contextual information to the story. van der Hof (2013) argues in her inaugural speech that this imbalance results from a combination of (1) the rising 'culture of fear' (in which the vulnerability of young people is strongly emphasized) which, according to her, dominates social life today and (2) the fact that, in adolescence, young people experiment through risk behavior (which is why problem behavior is emphasized). Together with the earlier discussed impact of media on child images, as well as the argument of Korać & Vranješević (2003) that public opinions and attitudes towards children and youth are shaped by the images, ideas and values that are socially ascribed to children and childhood, the question arises to what extent this observed duality in child images brought out by the media can influence youth policies.

3.2 Commercial interests vs. interest in the youth's daily experiences and conditions

The strong media focus on crime and violence does not only consider young people. Different authors situate crime-related stories in the broader *'good news is no news'* logic that, according to them, more generally drives the media (see for example Bauwens, 2009; Clark et al., 2008; Voets, 2009). Voets (2009) underlines that other social groups and minorities, such as women or immigrants, regularly find themselves confronted with stereotypical media reporting as well. Additionally, Voets (2009) explains how it is not unusual for the media to focus on spectacular stories, but that these stories should be combined with broader background information outlining the exact context of the story and inspiring a balanced debate regarding the involved issues. Similarly, Adriaenssen & De Cock (2011) recommend to hold short educational press conferences, in which adequate background information is provided for the journalists to feed their story. Furthermore, they suggest the creation of think thanks involving journalists, editors, experts and interest groups to come to practical guidelines for qualitative reporting (Adriaenssen & De Cock, 2011). The current climate of competition and commercialization, however, appears to stand in the way of such a general approach (Voets, 2009; also see Amundson et al., 2005).

The impact of commercialization is also discussed by Clark et al. (2008), CRAE (1999), Children's Express (1999) and Lindekens (2009). Clark et al. (2008: 17) state in their research report that *"one journalist described young people as being like play toys, as they are an easy target for negative reporting and can be used by the media to sell its products"*, an idea that is not appreciated by children (Jempson, 1999). Jempson's (1999) research more specifically uncovers that children do not approve of serious comments of children being used to make adults laugh, of 'cute' children being brought forward to charm, or of pictures or descriptions of children in negative situations being capitalized to stir up emotions. These practices fit the commercial intentions of (some of) the media, but do not add to young people's self-esteem, nor to the respect of the broader society (Jempson, 1999). Clark et al. (2008) discuss how the journalists they interviewed acknowledged this problem. Yet, they cannot or do not wish to break the status quo; they rather conform to what is considered to be the 'common practice' (Clark et al., 2008). This attitude could possibly be explained by the stressful working conditions journalists operate in. De Keyser (2012) argues that the commercial intentions of media institutes in combination with a large workload for the journalist increases the need for ready information. As a result, the autonomous position of the journalist can (indirectly) become pressured.

The commercial attention youth receive from the media strongly contrasts with the low concern media show for their position as young citizens, as participants to society (Bauwens, 2009). Young people direct what is 'in' and what is 'out'; they influence fashion and lifestyle and create new trends, which is why they are an important target for advertisers (Jempson, 1999) and get continuous attention from the marketing world (Lindekens, 1999). This attention contradicts with the limited interest the media show for the youth's daily life, problems, desires and aspirations (Bauwens, 2009; Jempson, 1999; Lindekens, 2009).

3. Youth's self-esteem

In the cultivation theory, it is argued that images communicated through the media are extrapolated to 'the real world' by media consumers. Based on this idea, it was discussed earlier in this article that media images can have a direct and an indirect effect on young people's self-esteem. The direct effect is established through identification processes: especially during adolescence, young people mirror themselves against the outside world for their identity construction. In this sense, the media can function as an alternative socializing institution (next to, a.o. family, friends and other role models). The indirect effect relates to the media's influence on parents or other decision makers: media can affect their motivation and commitment to provide services and support for youth.

More general research into self-esteem uncovers that young people's self-esteem is predominantly influenced by two main groups of variables: (1) experiences of failure and success, and (2) the quality of relations with significant others (including parents or other family members, teachers and friends) (De Boeck, 2014; Op de Beeck, 2009; Op de Beeck, 2011). The main question in this case is to what extent these media images – that are claimed to influence youth's self-esteem *as well* – can be of additional explanatory value.

Regarding the role of the media in the construction of self-esteem, most of the existing empirical research focuses on the influence of beauty standards. In these studies, a higher exposure to unrealistic beauty standards through the media is investigated in relation to a lowered self-esteem (see for instance Calado, Lameiras, Sepulveda, Rodriguez & Carrerra, 2011; Derenne & Beresin, 2006; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006a; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006b; Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kliewer & Kilmartin, 2001). As well, Bai (2013), who specifically investigated the link between media use and self-esteem – and who found a significant lower self-esteem among youth who more often watch television – connects his results to a higher exposure to unrealistic beauty and wealth standards. Furthermore, the longitudinal investigation of Primack, Swanier, Greargipoulos, Land & Fine (2009) who followed 4142 adolescents over a period of seven years, is interesting in this regard. They find that watching more television during adolescence is connected to a higher chance of depression in young adulthood. These researchers too link their findings to the prevalence of unrealistic commercial ads on television, as well as the content of television messages.

Regarding the relation between the earlier mentioned dual media images and youth's self-esteem, however, the literature that was consulted for this article displayed no empirical evidence. Thus, the goal of this article is to realize an exploratory test of this relation in a sample of Flemish (Belgium) youth. Based on the cultivation theory, it is specifically expected that a higher exposure to media images that put focus on constructive characteristics of youth, will correlate with a higher self-esteem. A higher exposure to media images that highlight negative characteristics is expected to be related to lower self-esteem. These hypotheses correspond with the mechanisms that have been put forward by a.o. Luyten (2005) regarding the way media provide direction for young people to evaluate the world around them and their own place in it.

4. Research questions

First of all, the – predominantly – Anglosaxon literature underlines that crime-related and commercial images dominate the media. Therefore, this article first of all scrutinizes (1) which images about young people are perceived in the media by Flemish youth. It is more specifically investigated whether these perceptions correspond with the images from the content analyses that were discussed in the short literature review of this article. Secondly, it is investigated (2) whether the perception of specific images about youth correlates with the *quantity* of the youth's media consumption. Third, (3) the question whether the perceived images correlate with the youth's self-esteem is addressed, based on the hypothesis that confrontation with Amundson et al.'s (2005) 'alternative frames' – which focus on constructive characteristics and events regarding young people – correlate with a higher self-esteem, and 'traditional frames' – which focus on risk behavior and delinquency – correspond with a lower self-esteem. In this analysis, media consumption is controlled for, to avoid mediation through this variable.[4] If a significant effect is found, eventually, (4) important

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[4] A higher media consumption is found to correlate with lower self-esteem through other imaging processes as well. For example, Bai's (2013) study uncovers how an overrepresentation of attractive and rich people in the media negatively impact self-esteem because these images are compared with one's own situation. For this reason, it is important to include media consumption as a control variable in the study.

known correlates of self-esteem are controlled for – variables relating to experiences of failure and success, and to relations with significant others – to test whether the correlation is mediated by these variables.

5. Methodology

6.1 Survey

In contrast to the studies that were consulted for the literature review in this article, the current investigation is *not* based on a content analysis of existing media. Instead, the prevalence of certain images in the youth's perception is assessed. This approach is in line with the concerns of Huntemann & Morgan (2001) who observed that the large majority of research regarding media images consists of content analyses. On the one hand, they recognize this as a strength of the research tradition, because these studies allowed for the construction of a clear inventory of images communicated through the media. On the other hand, they underline the weakness of this situation, because the current designs do not allow for investigation of possible relations between media images and identity construction. Therefore, Huntemann & Morgan (2001) recommend a survey methodology (also see Cohen & Wiemann, 2000). An example can be found in Dirikx' (2012) doctoral study, in which surveys were used to investigate the impact of news stories and police series on Flemish youth's attitudes towards the police.

6.2 Procedure

For this study, the self-report data of the third youth monitor of the Flemish Youth Research Platform (JOP) are used. More specifically, data gathered through a mail survey for youth between the ages of 14 and 25 years are the basis for the current analyses. To differentiate between adolescents and young adults, the group of youth between 14 and 18 years is analyzed separately from the group of youth between 19 and 25 years. This distinction is based on the assumption that adolescents are still in a phase of identity construction and may therefore be more vulnerable to media images than young adults.

Data gathering started on March 14, 2013. A total of 8033 surveys was sent out to a sample of Flemish youth (between 12 and 30 years old) who were randomly selected based on the National Registry. To realize a response as large as possible, the 'total design procedure' was used: the selected youth who did not respond to the survey request were contacted four times. Doing so, a total of 4777 completed surveys was obtained when the data gathering procedure was closed, on May 9, 2013. The eventual response rate is 46.4%, which is acceptable for a mail survey targeting youth (JOP, 2014). More detailed information on the sample and the procedure can be found in the technical report of this third youth monitor (JOP, 2014), which can be consulted online (www.jeugdonderzoeksplatform.be). For the current analyses, only data from respondents between 14 and 25 years old are used (n=2196).

6.3 Respondents' attributes: gender, age and education

Mail surveys are traditionally skewed based on background characteristics and/or socio-economic status (SES). For example, very young children, girls and youth who are enrolled or graduated in a general school track (compared to a technical or vocational school track) are more likely to return a completed survey (Elchardus, Roggemans & Siongers, 2011; JOP, 2014). To prevent this skewness to influence the analyses, the data of the monitor are weighed based on gender, age and school track.

6. Results

7.1 Descriptive statistics

7.1.1 Self-esteem

The scale to measure self-esteem is based on the following four items: 'I generally feel like a failure', 'I think I am pretty OK', 'I think I can be proud of who I am' and 'I think I have a number of good qualities' (author's translation). More information on the background of this scale, the scores on these separate items as well as the scale characteristics can be found in the technical report of the third monitor (JOP, 2014). Table 1 only displays scale scores.

[Table 1 here]

Table 1 shows that respondents have an average score of 74.8 points (to 100) on the self-esteem scale. In Youth Monitor 1 (2005) and Youth Monitor 2 (2008), the self-esteem of Flemish youth between the ages of 14 and 25 years is measured based on the same scale. In these former two monitors, the respondents had an average of 75 (Youth Monitor 1) and 73.9 (Youth monitor 2) (Op de Beeck, 2010). With an average score of 74.8, the respondents from Youth Monitor 3 do not only closely connect to the results of the former monitors. These findings also show that no increase or decline in self-esteem can be observed over the last eight years; the average appears to be located around a fixed constant.

7.1.2 Media images and imaging about youth

      7.1.2.1 Perceived images and imaging processes

The role of media images in imaging processes about youth is investigated in two ways. First of all, a descriptive component is constructed, based on the images that are perceived by the respondents. The respondents are asked how often they are confronted with certain images (the answering options are 'never', 'sometimes', 'regularly', 'often' and 'every day', author's translation). Secondly, an evaluative component is included in the study, by asking the respondents to what extent they believe the perceived images correspond with reality (the answering options are 'no correspondence at all', 'no correspondence', 'between the two', 'correspondence' and 'complete correspondence', author's translation).

The media images included in the study are first and foremost inspired by Amundson et al. (2005). Two images from a 'traditional' frame are included in the survey: 'children and youth who are threatened or who become victim of a crime' and 'children and youth who commit an offence'. Secondly, the perception of an alternative frame is questioned, for which inspiration was found in Korać & Vranješević' (2003) description of the image of 'the active child', which they define as 'the successful child' and 'the child in his leisure context'. Based on these descriptions, the images 'children and youth who do fun activities with their friends' and 'children and youth who are rewarded for doing something positive' are included in the survey.

To get a clear overview of the respondents' answers to the question how often they are confronted with these images, table 2 integrates the categories 'never' and 'sometimes' as well as the categories 'regularly' and 'often'.

[Table 2 here]

The table shows that 'children and youth who are rewarded for doing something positive' is the least perceived of all four images: 67.8% of the youth between 14 and 18 years and 73.5% of the youth between 19 and 25 years old reports to rarely or never see this image. Nonetheless, it was found in this case that the formulation of this image may not have been the most adequate, as both 'doing

something positive' and 'rewarded' are included in one and the same image. Possibly, the scores on this image would have been higher if only 'youth who do something positive' was questioned, without the condition of having to be rewarded for it.

Regarding the images that are perceived most often, the results for 'children and youth who do fun activities with their friends' are noteworthy. On the one hand, 'every day' is answered most often here, in comparison with the other images (7.8% of the youth between 14 and 18 years and 5.3% of the youth between 19 and 25 years reports to see this every day). On the other hand, almost half of the sample claims to rarely or never see this image in the media (47% of respondents between 14 and 18 years, 49.8% of respondents between 19 and 25 years). This duality could possibly be explained by the assumption that part of the sample may mainly consume 'child and youth directed media' in which, for example, television shows focusing on friendships between young people are more prevalent.[5]

Finally, it can be observed that the 'traditional frame' of Amundson et al. (2005) is rather often perceived through the media: 62.2% of the youth between 14 and 18 years and 63.8% of the youth between 19 and 25 years reports to regularly or often perceive children and youth who are threatened or victim of a crime. A total of 57.4% of the group between 14 and 18 years and 64.5% of the group between 19 and 25 years regularly or often sees in the media children and youth who commit an offence.

For the evaluative component of the analysis, which relates to the extent to which the respondents believe the media images correspond with the reality, the categories 'no correspondence at all' and 'no correspondence' as well as the categories 'correspondence' and 'complete correspondence' are discussed together in table 3.

[Table 3 here]

Both age groups appear to be of the opinion that the image of children and youth who do fun activities with their friends corresponds most with reality: 48.9% of the youth between 14 and 18 years and 28.6% of the youth between 19 and 25 years believes this image (completely) corresponds with reality. The image of children and youth who are rewarded for doing something positive is found to be the least realistic: 26.3% of the respondents between 14 and 18 years and 28.6% of the respondents between 19 and 25 years believes this image (completely) corresponds with reality. Here as well, however, it can be observed that the formulation of the image is not conclusive: do the respondents find the image of children and youth doing something positive unrealistic? Or the fact that they are rewarded for it?

The images of children and youth as victims and offenders can be located between these extremes: the majority of respondents in both age groups chose the category 'between the two' to answer the questions regarding these images.

In sum, these findings show that the image of children and youth who are rewarded for doing something positive is not only the least often perceived, but also evaluated as the least realistic image, even though this result may possibly be ascribed to methodological issues. Children and youth who do fun activities with their friends is considered the most realistic image and is daily seen through the media by a small group of the respondents, even though half of the sample claims to

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[5] This idea is supported when the findings are compared to the results of the youngest group in Youth Monitor 3, the youth between 11 and 13 years, who can be understood to be even larger consumers of media specifically targeting children. The daily perception of children and youth who do fun activities with their friends is even higher in this group: 11.2%.

rarely or never see this image. Furthermore, respondents appear to be rather regularly confronted with a 'traditional' frame about their age group: about two thirds of the sample regularly or often see children and youth as victims or offenders through the media.

7.1.2.2 *Perceived images by (digital) media consumption*

In a second analysis, the extent to which perceived media images differ based on digital media use is scrutinized. To do so, a new variable 'digital media consumption' is constructed. This variable has three categories: 'internet and television consumption are below median', 'internet or television consumption is above median', 'internet and television consumption are above median'. These categories are based on the frequency with which the respondents watch television, watch films, use social media websites (such as facebook), use search engines, keep a weblog, look for online information, etc. The extent to which the perceived images differ between the three categories in the digital media consumption variable is tested using a Kruskall-Wallis test.

This test shows that among the youth between 14 and 18 years old, significant differences between the digital media consumption groups exist regarding the image of children and youth as victims (p<.05) and children and youth as offenders (p<.01). Among the respondents between 19 and 25 years, the only significant difference between digital media consumption groups is found for the 'children and youth as victims' image.

To find where these differences are located, numeric values are attached to the different answering categories in the variable measuring how often the respondents perceive the images in the media: 'never' and 'no correspondence at all' get 1, 'every day' and 'complete correspondence' get 5, the categories lying in between get 2, 3 and 4. Consequently, the higher the average score on this variable, the more often respondents are confronted with the image and/or the stronger they believe the image corresponds with reality. An overview can be found in table 4.

[Table 4 here]

Findings from table 4 in combination with the results from the Kruskall-Wallis test show that both the youth between 14 and 18 years and the youth between 19 and 25 years who have a higher digital media consumption perceive more images of children and youth who are threatened or victim of a crime (respectively p<.05 and p<.01). Furthermore, the group between 14 and 18 years with a higher digital media consumption more often perceives images of children and youth who commit a crime (<.05). Nonetheless, the differences between the groups are small, as is shown in table 4.

7.2 Deductive analyses

7.2.1 The relation between perceived images and self-esteem

To investigate the relation between perceived images and self-esteem, a linear regression analysis is performed with self-esteem as the dependent variable. As independent variables, the perceptions of the different images are included in the analysis. Furthermore, the attributes age, gender and schooltrack are controlled for. To investigate whether the relation between perceived images and self-esteem differ between the two age groups (based on the assumption that the youngest group may be more vulnerable to the influence of images); interactions between age and perceptions are tested. Finally, the digital media consumption variable is included in the analysis.[6]

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[6] Because the perception of some of the images correlates with digital media consumption, as was shown earlier in this article, the possibility of multicollinearity in the model was taken into account. However, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) in the model appears to be low (highest: VIF=1.374), suggesting that

First, a model which includes all variables, is built (model 1 in table 5). Second, all insignificant effects are removed stepwise (the least significant is removed first) to come to a model that only holds significant effects (model 2 in table 5).[7] Only the second model is discussed in this article. [8]

[Table 5 here]

Table 5 shows no correlation between digital media consumption and self-esteem. The content of the images that are perceived, on the other hand, does play a significant role. A more frequent perception in the media of children and youth committing a crime significantly correlates with a lower self-esteem (B=-.719, p<.05). A more frequent perception of children and youth who do fun activities with their friends, on the other hand, correlates with a stronger self-esteem (B=1.086, p<.01). It is important to underline that the effects are small. None of the interactions remain after a stepwise elimination of insignificant effects. Thus, the correlations between perceived images and self-esteem do not differ between age groups, which contradicts the hypothesis that adolescents are more vulnerable to media images than young adults, at least in terms of their self-esteem. Finally, model 2 shows that the perceived media images only explain a very small part of the variance in self-esteem (R²=.026).

7.2.2 The relation between perceived images and self-esteem, controlling for other important components of self-esteem

The fact that the correlation between self-esteem and the investigated perceived images is weak, does not need to be surprising and may even be encouraging. It suggests that the respondents' self-esteem somewhat correlates with the images perceived in the media, but it does not highly depend on these images. Other influences may be of more importance. For example, earlier JOP research showed that youth's self-esteem strongly correlates with feelings of failure or success and the quality of relations with significant others (Op de Beeck, 2009). Therefore, a final analysis checks to what extent the identified correlations between perceived images and self-esteem hold when these other influences are taken into account.

'Relations with significant others' is operationalized as the responsiveness of father and mother, the quality of relations with teachers and the number of real friends the respondents report to count on. The experience of personal failure/success is operationalized as the youth's future prospects, the feelings of control (over their own life) they experience and the number of grade retentions they had. More information on these variables and scales can be found in the technical report of Youth Monitor 3 (JOP, 2014).[9] Only the two images that were significant in the former models, are included in this analysis. Digital media consumption, the insignificant images and interactions are left out. A similar procedure as in the former regression analysis is maintained: first a model including all

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multicollinearity in the model is limited. This finding is in line with the earlier argument that the link between digital media consumption and media images is existent but weak.

[7] The control variables age, gender and schooltrack are kept in the model, even though they are not significant, because they are not tested as theoretical variables. These variables could possibly be significant if they were coded differently, but this was not done for the current analysis because they only serve as control variables.

[8] The table presents unstandardized coefficients, but the variables reflecting the perceived images were standardized before being brought in the model.

[9] The scale '(limited) control' is called 'futility' (in Dutch: 'futiliteit') in this report

theoretical variables is run (model 1 in table 6), after which the insignificant effects are removed stepwise (least significant first) to come to a final model (model 2 in table 6).[10]

[Table 6 here]

Future prospects and experiencing (a lack of) control appear to be the most important correlates of self-esteem in the model (respectively B=-7.079, p<.001 and B=-3.220, p<.001). Relations with significant others are important as well : a close relation with mother (B=1.150, p<.01) as well as a good contact with teacher(s) (B=1.726, p<.001) significantly relate to a stronger self-esteem. Grade retention in elementary school is also correlated with lower self-esteem, although this correlation is weaker (B=-.846, p<.01).

Perceived media images are not significant in table 6. As well, the number of real friends of the respondents does not add to self esteem. This is remarkable, because peers do play an important role in the lives of young people, and analyses on Youth Monitor 1 did uncover significant relations between the number of real friends and youth's self-esteem (Op de Beeck, 2009). Responsiveness of father is not significant in table 6. This latter finding could be due to the fact that a rather strong correlation exists between the responsiveness of father and mother (r=.443, p<.01). Indeed, including responsiveness of father without responsiveness of mother in the final model uncovers a significant effect for father's responsiveness (B=.843, p<.05, not in table).

Finally, table 6 shows that the final model offers a more fitted explanation for the respondents' self-esteem than the model that only included digital media consumption and media images. The variables can explain almost half of the variance in the self-esteem scale (R²=.461).

7. Discussion and conclusion

Based on the cultivation theory and existing international research about media influences, this article started from the hypothesis that media images can impact young people's self-esteem through imaging processes, because (1) young people identify themselves with common images about their own age group and (2) because the images can influence care-givers and decision makers which may affect the support and protection they provide to youth. To test this idea, this article demonstrated (1) which media images about youth dominate the Flemish media, based on the perceptions of Flemish youth and (2) whether, and how, these perceived images correlate with their self-esteem.

First of all, it could be observed that a small group of young people reports to see images of children and youth who do fun activities with their friends every day. Furthermore, this image was considered to be the most realistic. Two-thirds of the respondents are regularly or often confronted with crime related images or the so-called 'traditional frame' (cf. Amundson et al., 2005): children and youth who are threatened or victimized, and children and youth who commit an offence. When the perceived images are crossed with digital media consumption, it can be observed that youth who use digital media more frequently, see more crime-related images. Nonetheless, this link appeared to be rather weak.

Secondly, the analyses showed that the perception of images of children and youth who do fun activities with their friends correlates with higher self-esteem, while seeing children and youth who commit offences correlates with lower self-esteem. These findings appear to confirm suggestions

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[10] The variables 'responsiveness father', 'responsiveness mother', 'number of real friends', 'quality of contact with teacher(s)', 'number of grade retentions in elementary school', 'number of grade retentions in high school', 'future prospects' and 'control' are standardized before being brought in the model.

from the literature that young people's self-esteem is in fact affected by the images that circulate about them. However, a first important limitation to this finding relates to the cross-sectional nature of the data that were used: the model tested correlation, not causality. In this article, the link between media images and self-esteem is interpreted based on the cultivation theory, but a reverse connection could also be possible: it is not unimaginable that youth with higher self-esteem recall more positive images and vice versa.[11] The first consequence of this limitation is that the quantitative analyses cannot be read separately from the theoretical frame that is used in this study. A second consequence to this limitation is that, if these findings are to be replicated causally, a different research design is necessary, such as an experimental or longitudinal design. It would for example be interesting to use a similar set-up as Primack et al. (2009), who followed a considerable number of adolescents to map out the impact of media use on youth well-being in the long term.

A second limitation to these findings relates to the observation that the variance in self-esteem that can be explained by the perceived images is small. The models in which only the impact of media images and three control variables is tested, explain just two or three percent of the variance. This finding suggests that even though self-esteem may correlate with perceived media images, the link is certainly not strong or unambiguous.

For that reason, variables that are known to more strongly correlate with self-esteem were added to a final model. More specifically, the impact of the quality of close relations and experiences of success was tested. This last model underlines the importance of a strong relation with parents; the number of 'real' friends of the respondents does not significantly add to this model. The strongest correlates of self-esteem in this model are the youth's future prospects as well as the amount of control they experience in their lives.

In this final model, media images are not significant. This observation does not need to be surprising and can even be considered encouraging: media images may be rather distant forces in young people's lives that – at least for the construction of their self-esteem – are inferior to daily experiences and interactions with others. This idea is in line with findings from the literature. For example, Joye (2012) describes how variables located in the immediate context of the individual, such as socio-economic status, education, family, friends etc., are more important for the individual's daily reality than media images. The impact of media rather follows a subtle and indirect process through strengthening themes that are not necessarily important for the common reality (*cf.* Joye, 2012).

In combination with Joye's (2012) insights it can thus be concluded from this study that, even though the identified effects in the empirical analyses are small, this does not mean that the role of media should be underestimated. More investigation is necessary to more concretely define or exclude media influences. Until then, the media's potential to add to a social climate which defines perceptions and cognitions about youth remains a power to be aware of. Media may indirectly influence actual behaviour towards young people, which underlines the relevance of a correct and qualified coverage in which realistic stories are distinctly better appreciated than more sensational reporting.

8. References

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[11] Generally, research using cross-sectional data that is based on a clear theoretical framework starts from the assumption that *not* finding correlation between the different concepts most likely signifies that the (theoretically) assumed causality does *not* exist. When, on the other hand, a significant correlation is found, it is expected that the causality from the theory is also empirically present. Indeed, even though this cannot be considered a tight criterion, causality cannot be easily observed (Op de Beeck, 2012).

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9. Tables

Table 1. Self-esteem (scale)

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Age 14-18 years	6.3	100	74.5	15.4
Age 19-25 years	18.8	100	74.9	14.8
Total	*6.3*	*100*	*74.8*	*15.0*

Source: Youth Monitor 3 (2013)

Table 2. Descriptive component: 'How often do you perceive in the media…' (N/%)

How often do you perceive in the media…	Frequency	14-18	19-25
Children and youth who are threatened or victim of a crime	Never/sometimes	307 (34.3%)	405 (32.5%)
	Regularly/often	558 (62.2%)	796 (63.8%)
	Every day	32 (3.6%)	46 (3.7%)
Children and youth who do fun activities with their friends	Never/sometimes	421 (47%)	621 (49.8%)
	Regularly/often	405 (45.2%)	562 (45%)
	Every day	70 (7.8%)	66 (5.3%)
Children and youth who commit an offence	Never/sometimes	372 (40.6%)	390 (31.3%)
	Regularly/often	513 (57.4%)	805 (64.5%)
	Every day	18 (2%)	53 (4.2%)
Children and youth who are rewarded for doing something positive	Never/sometimes	604 (67.8%)	915 (73.5%)
	Regularly/often	266 (29.8%)	319 (25.6%)
	Every day	22 (2.5%)	11 (.9%)

Source: Youth Monitor 3 (2013)

Table 3. Evaluative component: 'Do you believe this image corresponds with reality?'

Do you believe this image corresponds with reality?	Evaluation	14-18	19-25
Children and youth who are threatened or victim of a crime	No correspondence (at all)	156 (17.9%)	177 (14.5%)
	Between the two	417 (47.9%)	604 (64%)
	(Complete) correspondence	298 (34.2%)	439 (35%)
Children and youth who do fun activities with their friends	No correspondence (at all)	164 (18.8%)	258 (21.1%)
	Between the two	280 (32.2%)	424 (56%)
	(Complete) correspondence	426 (48.9%)	536 (44.1%)
Children and youth who commit an offence	No correspondence (at all)	188 (21.5%)	233 (22.1%)
	Between the two	383 (43.9%)	554 (45.6%)
	(Complete) correspondence	301 (34.5%)	428 (35.3%)
Children and youth who are rewarded for doing something positive	No correspondence (at all)	240 (27.6%)	323 (33.7%)
	Between the two	388 (42.3%)	545 (44.8%)

	(Complete) correspondence	242 (26.3%)	349 (28.6%)

Source: Youth Monitor 3 (2013)

Table 4. Significant differences in perceived images between digital media consumption groups: average scores based on numeric values attached to the different answering categories.

Sample	14-18 years old			19-25 years old		
Digital mediaconsumption*	0	1	2	0	1	2
How often do you perceive in the media children and youth who are threatened or victim of a crime.	2.77	2.91	3.03	2.76	2.93	3.04
How often do you perceive in the media children and youth who commit a crime.	2.68	2.73	2.97			

Source: Youth Monitor 3 (2013)

* 0= television and internet consumption below median, 1= television or internet consumption above median, 2= television and internet consumption above median

Table 5. Linear regression with self-esteem as dependent variable (unstandardized coefficients)

Self-esteem	Model 1 (B)	Model 2 (B)
Gender (Ref. cat.: girl)	3.872***	3.843***
Schooltrack (Ref. cat.: vocational track)		
- General track and arts track	2.235*	2.354**
- Technical track	.705 (n.s.)	.782 (n.s.)
Age (Ref. cat.: 19-25 years)	-1.108 (n.s.)	-.991 (n.s.)
Digital media consumption (Ref.cat.: television and internet use above median)		
- Television or internet use above median	-.347 (n.s.)	
- Television and internet use below median	.395 (n.s.)	
Frequency of perception image 'children and youth who are threatened or victimized'	.526 (n.s.)	
Frequency of perception image 'children and youth who do fun activities with their friends'	.985 (n.s.)	1.086**
Frequency of perception image 'children and youth who committed an offence'	-.527 (n.s.)	-.719*
Frequency perception 'children and youth being rewarded for doing something positive'	.293 (n.s.)	
14-18 years x Frequency of perception image 'children and youth who are threatened or victimized'	.491 (n.s.)	
14-18 jaar x Frequency of perception image 'children and youth who do fun activities with their friends'	-.220 (n.s.)	
14-18 jaar x Frequency of perception image 'children and youth who committed an offence'	-1.282 (n.s.)	
14-18 jaar x Frequency perception 'children and youth being rewarded for doing something positive'	.141 (n.s.)	
R²	.028	.026

Source: Youth Monitor 3 (2013). ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p>.05; n.s.=not significant

Table 6. Linear regression with self-esteem as dependent variable, controlling for 'relations' and 'experiences of success' (unstandardized coefficients)

Self-esteem	Model 1 (B)	Model 2 (B)
Gender (Ref. cat.: girl)	4.172***	4.663***
Schooltrack (Ref. cat.: vocational track)		
- General track and arts track	.374 (n.s.)	.579 (n.s.)
- Technical track	-.852 (n.s.)	-.581 (n.s.)
Age (Ref. cat.: 19- 25 years)	-2.736 (n.s.)	-2.449 (n.s.)
Frequency of perception image 'children and youth who do fun activities with their friends'	.294 (n.s.)	
Frequency of perception image 'children and youth committing a crime'	-.335 (n.s.)	
Responsiveness father	.039 (n.s.)	
Responsiveness mother	.920 (n.s.)	1.150**
Contact with teachers	1.690***	1.726***
Number of real friends	.052 (n.s.)	
Negative future prospects	-7.102***	-7.079***
(Limited) control	-3.685***	-3.220***
Number of grade retentions in elementary school	-.546 (n.s.)	-.846**
Number of grade retentions in high school	-.178 (n.s.)	
R²	.483	.461

Source: Youth Monitor 3 (2013). ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p>.05; n.s.=not significant