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## Honors Thesis Proposal

### On Personal Identity and Persuasive Media

The purpose of this project is to determine if there is a statistically significant correlation between the genres or type of media one consumes and certain personality traits. While there are a myriad of factors that contribute to the formation of an identity, it is only recently in human history that persuasive messages are disseminated with such reach and constancy so as to have a real impact on one's development and identity formation. Surprisingly, there has been little research done on the topic until now. Therefore, I will determine if there is a correlation between certain personality traits in persons who consume similar media in order to further explore the media-consumer relationship.

This project will be of importance because the field of communications is rapidly evolving, and while there are generally accepted ethics in journalism and communications, knowing to what extent persuasive messages shape one's personality will help the following groups:

1. Advertisers and communicators will better understand their intended audiences and the methods that can best be employed to reach them.
2. Consumers will better know how to recognize and differentiate persuasive thoughts and efforts from one's own identity.

#### Overview

My secondary research up to this point has led me to believe that media consumption forms a significant part of peoples' perceived identities, whether the media inspires them to act or think a certain way or the consumer chooses to consume media that they feel they can relate to. My work will therefore attempt to differentiate intrinsic or inherent personality traits from acquired traits through media (though family and upbringing have a huge influence on one's identity, that is beyond the scope of this project). I will be conducting interviews and surveys with groups of people with similar upbringings, such as siblings, neighbors, or other close family/friends. While asking about their media consumption (mainly in their youth), I will take special note of discrepancies between those with similar upbringings, especially between siblings and twins, and attempt to determine if these discrepancies are perceived as a significant part of their identity.

After controlling as much as possible for personality traits acquired from family, I'll attempt to analyze the discrepancies in personalities between those with similar upbringing and see if those in similar circumstances, but with different media tastes, have personality traits that correlate with others who have indicated a preference for the same kind of media. Where the causation comes into play is beyond the scope of this project; I'll only be attempting to determine if there is a correlation in the first place.

Erikson (1960) proposed examining identity formation on 3 levels: ego, personal, and social. I'll be focusing on young adults, as adolescents, according to Erikson, are in the process of forming their identity proactively for the first time rather than simply reacting to what happens to them. Young adults

(18-25) have just exited the adolescent stage and will have a more solid view of their own identity than will adolescents.

The following are a few studies that have been done on the topic, or topics similar to mine.

Topolewska-Siedzik, Ewa, and Jan Ciecuch. 2018. "Trajectories of Identity Formation Modes and Their Personality Context in Adolescence." *Journal of Youth & Adolescence* 47 (4): 775–92. doi:10.1007/s10964-018-0824-7.

*This study analyzes the formation of adolescent personalities through choices and autonomy.*

Ciecuch, Jan, and Ewa Topolewska. 2017. "Circumplex of Identity Formation Modes: A Proposal for the Integration of Identity Constructs Developed in the Erikson–Marcia Tradition." *Self & Identity* 16 (1): 37–61. doi:10.1080/15298868.2016.1216008.

*Using the aforementioned Erikson model for personality development, the study proposes a model for the process of identity construction in the context of self-image, self-esteem, and self-concept.*

Long, Chen, J, M (2007). "The Impact of Internet Usage on Adolescent Self-Identity Development". *China Media Research*. 3: 99–109.

*This study analyzes the use of social media among adolescents in a similar vein as my study and determines that there is an impact that social media has on the developing psyche.*

It's important to note that I will be focusing on consumed media (television and music, mainly) rather than social or more interactive forms of media. These open up their own cans of worms that need to be analyzed on their own.

### **Funding**

I will not be requesting Honors funding for this project.

### **Culmination and Conclusion**

I would very much like to present my work to advertisers at the annual advertiser recruiting conference at Sundance early next year. Not only will I be able to show my work to agencies as a measure of my consumer research capabilities, but the industry is severely lacking in this sort of broad-stroke research on media impact.

I would emphasize that while I will use the best research practices available to me, this project ultimately is one of qualitative research, so the results will definitely not be conclusive. Rather, they will assist in our sociological and psychological understanding of the relatively new phenomenon that is mass communications. If I can find it, I would like to compare this research to similar personality surveys from the 20<sup>th</sup> century where mass communications were not nearly as prolific. If we can know, at least to some degree, the effects of what we see and hear (and seek), we can better understand what makes us who we are.