Secrets in the Bedroom: Adolescents' Private Use of Media

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This essay discusses the functions of solitary media use within the ongoing daily emotional lives of adolescents. I review evidence suggesting that adolescents find in solitary TV watching and especially music listening, the opportunity, first, to cultivate a newly discovered private self: teens use media to explore numerous possible selves including those that are desired and feared. Second, I propose that solitary media experiences provide adolescents an important context for dealing with stress and negative emotion. Popular music listening allows adolescents to internalize strong emotional images around which a temporary sense of self can cohere.

INTRODUCTION

I'd like to find a perfect guy and live a simple happy life, dedicating ourselves to saving the world and everything in it. I want an empty apartment with a beautiful view—only necessary furniture and artistic decorations (my husband's?). I hope my life won't turn out too disappointing.

This flight of fantasy, reported by a 17-year-old girl lying on her bed listening to music, conveys the vivid hopes and fears that can come alive for adolescents in the privacy of their bedrooms. With their imaginations fueled by the potent feelings and images from the media, thoughts of perfect love and happiness commingle with worries of disappointment. In this

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essay I address a frequent adolescent puzzle suggested by this girl's flight of thoughts. On the one hand, adolescents in our culture place increasing importance on defining who they are and who they will be in the future. They partially shed the secure and unquestioned sense of self acquired from their families and begin to look for a more personally determined, authentic sense of identity. On the other hand, adolescents often seek these identities in what seem to adults to be predictable formulas, such as this girl's ascetic apartment, "saving the world," and idealized romantic partner. In searching for a private sense of who they are, they frequently draw on very public packaged images, often drawn from the media.

Part of the answer to this puzzle, I will suggest, resides in adolescents' bedrooms: in the kinds of experiences they have with the media when alone. Although much has been written about the role of media, particularly teenage music, in bonding adolescents to peer subcultures (e.g., Hebdige, 1979; Lull, 1987), we know much less about adolescents' private and personal uses of the media. Yet teenagers actually spend more time engaged with the media when they are alone than when with peers. I argue here that there are important, and different, things to be understood about this segment of their media experience. It is in their solitary bedroom lives where media has some of its most significant functions, where the private and public are woven together.

In order to understand adolescents' solitary media experience, we need to understand how it fits into the hour-to-hour ebb and flow of adolescents' lives. Thus, in the first half of this essay I lay out the larger developmental changes that structure adolescents' daily experience. What are the exigencies that shape their daily consciousness? In the second half of the essay, I then examine how solitary media use—including flights of fantasy or worry—fit into this flow of daily experience. Where do intervals of seclusion into one's room fit into the hour-to-hour cascade of teenagers' lives? The evidence I draw on comes largely from European-American and European adolescents use of TV and music—thus readers should recognize these constraints, even when the text does not specifically acknowledge them.

DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGES IN ADOLESCENTS' EXPERIENCE
OF THE SELF

Fragmentation in Early Adolescence

Scholars associate the onset of adolescence in Western culture with a questioning, "softening," or fragmentation of the childhood self. Children,
it is generally recognized, have a fairly secure sense of who they are, based on parental and societal ascription; however, it begins to weaken in adolescence. Acquisition of abstract reasoning skills coupled with increasing desire to deindividuate from parents leads to interrogation and deconstruction of this ascribed self (Boyes and Chandler, 1992; Erikson, 1968). Adolescents begin to see through their idealized images of their parents, upon whom their own identity has been anchored, and perceive them more accurately and critically: be they alcoholics, bigots, or just middle-aged bores. Research demonstrates that early adolescents begin to see themselves as more emotionally separate from their parents than they did as children (Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986).

Many studies on self-esteem also show a decline in the worth attributed to self around this age period, suggesting that this emotional separation from parents is associated with weakened self-confidence (e.g., Simmons et al., 1973). Interview research indicates that adolescents hold multiple, often contradictory conceptions of themselves (Harter, 1990). This process of separation from family and fragmentation of the ascribed self, or course, sets the stage for Erikson’s process of resolving a personal identity in late adolescence, but in the early stages adolescents enjoy, explore, and suffer multiple conceptions of themselves.

Up to this point we have been talking about “the self” as an image of whom one is. For many theorists, such as Harter (1990), the self or the “self-concept” is a personal iconography of values, symbols, and identifications that answer the question, “Who am I?” A rejection of school, a punk hairdo, an identification with Whitney Houston may be elements a teenager mentions when asked to describe him or herself.

Contemporary psychoanalysts, however, hold a somewhat different conception of the self, which is equally relevant. They see it as a psychic structure that is central to the regulation of internal emotional life (Kohut, 1971). This “self” is a core sense of personal coherence developed in childhood through modeling and supportive interactions with parents. Possession of a firm core allows one to survive the scrapes and bruises to one’s self-esteem that are part of daily life. In childhood this fledgling core is bolstered by conscious identification with parents and direct interventions from them when needed. Adolescents, however, often try to distance themselves from identification with their parents and increasingly attempt to regulate their emotional life, however precariously, without parental scaffolding (Blos, 1967; Wolf et al., 1972).

While seemingly different, this second, more dynamic conception of self is not incompatible with the first. The values, images, and identifications that make up a person’s sense of self shape his or her emotional self-regulation. An adolescent’s identification with a role model, for exam-
ple, provides an exemplar of how to think and feel in different circumstances. One adolescent boy describes how, in difficult situations, he thinks of how Michael Jordan acts on the basketball court: "He just stuffs it" (Live Wire, 1988). For psychoanalysts, the person who has a coherent and integrated imagery of self (something few adolescents possess) is likely to have a much more stable emotional life than a person whose sense of self is fragmented and in flux (Kohut, 1971; Wolf et al., 1972).

The liminal period of adolescence, then, might be thought of as a period when a person has multiple and fragmented conceptions of who he or she is, and, concurrently, a time when responsibility for emotional self-regulation is being transferred, albeit sometimes precariously, from parent to child.

The Self in Daily Life

To relate these changes to media use, we need to understand their significance for adolescents' daily lives. In my research, this fragmentation of childhood stability was evident in the substantial differences in the hour-to-hour emotional lives of children and adolescents. My colleagues and I had 483 5th–9th graders (all European-Americans) carry electronic pagers for one week and provide reports on their activity, companionship, and emotional states when signalled at random times by a pager (Larson and Richards, 1989)

We found substantial age changes in emotional experience. The pre-adolescents reported being happy the great majority of the time; in fact, 5th graders reported feeling "very happy" for 28% of random time-samples (Larson and Lampman-Petraitis, 1989). The only times they reported feeling unhappy appeared to be when there was some kind of immediate, short-term event that compromised their well being, such as losing a game or being disciplined by their parents (Larson and Asmussen, 1991). They seem to be dogmatically content with life, a finding that I think reflects their secure and unquestioning acceptance of who they are, as well as the role parents play in protecting them from emotional threats and chronic worries.

As they enter adolescence, however, this naive, stable happiness appears to come apart; for some, the bottom falls out. Numerous studies show adolescence to be associated with increasing rates of depression, eating disorders, suicide, and delinquency. Our data show that 9th graders report far fewer times when they feel extremely happy and far more times when they feel unhappy, particularly mildly negative, free-floating dysphoria (Greene and Larson, 1991; Larson and Lampman-Petraitis, 1989). Research by others substantiates this increase in negative emotion (Baydar,
et al., 1989; Rutter, 1980). This is the "moody adolescent" of popular discourse, a youth who begins to swing more often between positive and negative emotions.

This increased emotionality, I believe, stems in part from the breakdown of the ascribed childhood self experienced with development by Western adolescents. Our data fail to attribute their greater negative emotion to puberty, as is commonly assumed (Richards and Larson, 1993). Rather these negative swings correlated with the elevated stressfulness of adolescents' lives. They experience more stressful events and changes than preadolescents, and these are directly correlated with their greater negative emotion (Larson and Ham, 1993). More important, however, is our finding that they are more vulnerable to these events than are preadolescents (Larson and Asmussen, 1991; Larson and Ham, 1993). Because they do not have a stable internal sense of self, aversive events appear to be more disruptive to adolescents' than preadolescents' hour-to-hour emotional states.

We can also relate this increased emotionality to adolescents' altering relationships with their families. Whereas preadolescents often turn to their parents in times of distress, adolescents are less inclined to do so. Indeed, our findings suggest that just spending time with one's family is associated with lesser emotional variability (Larson et al., 1980), yet adolescents spend much less time with their families than do preadolescents (Larson and Richards, 1991). Just at an age when stress increases, teens distance themselves from the care and stability of their parents.

In sum, the softening and fragmentation of the self contributes to fragmentation and more frequently pain in adolescents' daily emotional experience. One more dimension of these changes needs to be recognized before we turn to the topic of solitary media use.

**Discovery of the Private Self**

In an article titled the "Divided Self in Adolescence," John Broughton (1981) proposes that the primary fission in adolescence is between the "exterior self," which a teenager experiences and enacts with others, and a nascent "interior self," born from the recognition of personal feelings and thoughts that diverge from the public and ascribed self. Broughton found that adolescents often view this private self as more real and genuine. But given the tenuousness and insecurity of this nascent interior self, it is shared, if at all, only with closest friends (Harter, 1990).

One of the most poignant renderings of this divided self is the 14-year-old Anne Frank, who looks back on the "amusing" and "superficial" schoolgirl that she left behind when her family went into hiding from the
Nazis and provides vivid description of a new, private, more critical, and self-reflective persona. While most adolescents probably do not experience the degree of fission encountered by Anne, nor the coherent voice she found for her inner life, research indicates that for the majority of youth (with girls somewhat ahead of boys) early adolescence is associated with increased self-reflection and the emergence of a conscious distinction between one's public and private selves: between the enacted me and the real me (Blasi and Milton, 1991). Carol Gilligan asserts that the early adolescent girl "goes underground" (Prose, 1990), a process I think also happens for many boys.

Within the course of daily life, this emergence of the private self is most evident in a growing demarcation between the time early adolescents spend with others and the increasing amounts of time they spend alone. They become more positively disposed to being alone (Marcoen and Goossens, 1993). Research by Parke and Sawin (1979) found that young adolescents become more vigilant about privacy. Parents suddenly encounter a child who keeps the bathroom and bedroom doors closed and insists that others knock before entering. For many adolescents the bedroom becomes a personal sanctum, with Rod Stewart or L.A. Raiders posters springing up on the walls (Steele and Brown, this issue; Brown et al., 1993).

Although adolescents have a reputation of being intensely enmeshed with their friends, early adolescents actually spend only a little more time with friends than do preadolescents. Most of the time they no longer spend with family is now spent alone. We estimated that the amount of time spent alone increases from 17% of waking hours in 5th grade to 28% of waking hours in 7th grade (Larson and Richards, 1991). Much of this solitary time is spent in their bedrooms, yet even adolescents who do not have their own bedrooms find ways of obtaining the same amount of time alone as those who do (Larson, 1979).

The conundrum is that adolescents spend more time alone, even though they report emotions during this time that are more negative than during other times. Far from being a happy context, time alone is associated with more frequent feelings of loneliness and negative mood. At least part of the increased negative emotion that comes with entry into adolescence occurs in this private time (Larson and Richards, 1991). Careful analyses convince me that they are not alone because they are forced to be; rather, with age early adolescents choose to inhabit this more lonely and depressed private world (Larson, 1979; 1990; Marcoen et al., 1987).

The reason is suggested by interviews with high-school-aged adolescents who reported using this solitary time for self-reflection, emotional discharge, and personal renewal. In fact, these teens spoke of a "need" to be alone (Freeman et al., 1986). One girl said she liked to be alone to
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"purify her mood state." Younger adolescents are less articulate about why they want to be alone, but their motives appear to be similar. They talk about getting away from others when they want privacy or when they are in a bad mood (Tenbrink, 1990; Wolfe and Laufer, 1974). Rather than being merely the absence of people, aloneness becomes recognized as an experiential niche providing valuable personal opportunities for emotional self-regulation and cultivation of the private self. Indeed, I found that adolescents feel better after a period of being alone (Larson, 1979; Larson et al., 1982), and in three separate studies I found that adolescents who spend some moderate amount of time alone—and presumably take advantage of these opportunities—are psychologically healthier than those who are rarely alone (Larson, 1979; Larson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1978; Larson and Richards, 1994).

In short, these findings suggest that adolescents deliberately use solitude for personal needs and for the cultivation of the private self. I think the bedroom door is guarded vigilantly by adolescents because this private self, this self that they experience as more "real," is tentative, fragile, and thus highly vulnerable. We are now ready to address the question of how media use relates to these processes.

MEDIA USE AND THE CULTIVATION OF THE PRIVATE SELF

Changing Channels

As children enter adolescence, major changes occur in both the content and context of their media use. First, we and others have found that TV use declines substantially during early adolescence for Western youth. About 6th or 7th grade, adolescents rapidly lose interest in cartoons, and while interest may increase in MTV and other new options provided by cable TV, overall viewing decreases (Comstock, 1991; Larson et al., 1989). Teenagers also report lower emotional involvement than preadolescents when they do watch TV (Larson et al., 1989). We have argued that this is because most television programming, produced by adults for a general audience, does not speak to adolescents' developmental issues.

Our findings suggest that TV is linked for adolescents with the family. In two studies, we found that adolescents who watch the most TV are more family oriented, as suggested by their spending more time with family even when the TV is turned off (Larson and Kubey, 1983; Larson et al., 1989). In one study these heavy TV viewers also reported more positive average affect with their families (Larson and Kubey, 1983). In terms of the Western developmental process of individuation, these heavy viewing teenagers...
might be described as developmentally behind: TV viewing reflects, or may be deliberately used, to maintain close emotional bonds to the family.

Popular music listening, in contrast, increases substantially with entry into adolescence (Larson et al., 1989) and reaches a life-span high water-mark (Arnett, 1992). In our time sampling research with adults, listening to music was very rarely a primary activity (Larson and Richards, 1994). Yet adolescents frequently reported that listening to music was the main thing they were doing. The white adolescent girls in our sample (studied during the period from 1985 to 1987) reported frequently listening to soft rock and Top 40 music; the boys listened to these and to hard rock and heavy metal music (Thompson and Larson, in press; see also Arnett, 1992). We have attributed teenagers’ high rates of music listening to the fact that teen music, unlike TV, is produced by and for young people, thus it reflects adolescent concerns with autonomy, identity, love, and sexuality (Larson and Kubey, 1983). Indeed, we found a negative correlation between amount of music listening and the amount of time a teenager spends with his or her family. Adolescents who were most involved with music tend to be less engaged with their families. This suggests that music listening is somehow associated with the process of disengagement from family.

I want to avoid pushing this point too far. The image of the typical adolescent as an armed rebel using rock or rap to bludgeon parents is a caricature. In a content analysis, Leming (1987) found that the themes of much teen music are quite conservative and prosocial, and in an interview study Arnett (1991) found that even heavy metal listeners do not see their music as a deliberate vehicle of rebellion or defiance of parents.

It is well established that the great majority of adolescents value and feel close to their parents (Offer et al., 1981; Montemayor, 1986). They neither need to nor want to “blast” themselves out of their parents’ clutches as much early psychoanalytic writing suggested. Rather current research and theory indicates that what adolescents seek is a renegotiation of their relationship with parents that gives them more independence and personal jurisdiction (Grotevant and Cooper, 1986; Smetana, 1988). The asocial or antisocial themes of adolescent music, when they occur, provide a forum for exploring fantasies and impulses underlying this desire—they may be trying symbolically to distance themselves from their parents. But it is a mistake to think that this fantasizing, at least in most cases, is seriously contemplated as a program for action. Even turning the amplifier up loud, in most instances, does not say to parents “Go to hell”; it says “I exist. I have my own tastes that are different than yours.” In a similar vein, a friend of mine described using music as a protective shield against the extremely painful marital discord going on between his mother and father. As Willis
and colleagues (1990) wrote, music can be used to “create and mark off cultural and personal space” (p. 71).

Music listening increases dramatically in adolescence, then, because it both speaks to adolescents’ personal issues and helps them create a separate experiential space at home. Of course, music is also important to adolescents because it helps define their public self outside the family. As others have shown, identification with a musical subculture is a means of establishing solidarity with a peer group (Hebdige, 1979; Lull, 1987; Lewis, 1987) and can be a way of articulating one’s relationship to school (Roe, 1987). A second age trend in our findings, however, confirms that there is much more to adolescent music listening than these much-discussed public functions.

**The Shifting Social Context of Media Use**

The second way in which media use changes is that it becomes more solitary. Solitary media use increases somewhat across the grade school years (Christenson and DeBenedittis, 1986). But we found a leap in solitary media use at the early adolescent transition, at least for the white working- and middle-class youth who were part of the pager study we described above (Kubey and Larson, 1990; Larson *et al.*, 1989).

Solitary TV viewing increased from about 30% to 40% of all viewing between the late elementary and junior high age periods (Kubey and Larson, 1990). While the majority still occurs with family, adolescents are less likely to flop down with their siblings or parents in front of the TV set in the living room. They are more likely to have their own TV in their bedroom or to find times to watch when others are not around. It is not that they enjoy solitary viewing more; in fact, their emotional states are less favorable than during viewing with others (Larson and Kubey, 1983). Rather it provides the opportunity for more personal choice of programs and more personal viewing experiences. Covert observational research by Rivlin and Wolfe (1972) suggests that adolescents, but not children, act differently when alone. Solitary viewing allows adolescents to assume whatever posture they like, perhaps to stroke their changing bodies, or just appreciate avoiding the inane commentary of other family members.

The shift in music listening to a solitary context is more dramatic. Primary music listening—that is, times when music listening is their main activity, occurs alone for 40% of the time in 5th–6th grade and jumps to 65% in 7th–9th grade. Several of our students described a favorite chair in their bedrooms that they liked to sit in. Another described lying flat on his bed with the headphones on and his mind in a flight of fantasy. Another
Larson described dancing wildly around the house when her parents were out, imagining herself a Cabaret dancer. Being alone becomes an important element of much music listening.

Turning Off and Turning On

To summarize the points thus far: first, adolescents shift their media time toward greater music listening, because it speaks to adolescent issues, and, second, they engage in more media use in solitude, which I described earlier as a sanctum for exploring the private self. The synthesis of these two points is that we would expect private adolescent media use, especially music listening, to be a context for cultivation of the private self.

This is probably less true of TV, given TV's lesser engagement with adolescent issues. I can point to the example of a boy who describes a flight of fantasy while watching the World Series. "Nobody was home. Nobody bugged me. I felt really into the game, like I was one of the players. I just watched someone hit a home run and I felt really good." In most cases, however, teenagers do not feel strongly aroused or captivated by the images they see on TV. In fact, adolescents usually report feeling vacant during TV viewing. They feel less of everything: less often happy or sad, cheerful or irritable (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1977). If anything, the comfortable messages of TV are an opportunity to turn off the self.

This disengagement may serve adolescents as a form of emotional self-regulation. Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) found that adults in their study choose to watch TV more on stressful days and the experience had a numbing effect on their emotional states. This function may explain why TV viewing does not disappear in adolescence. By turning on the TV adolescents are able to turn off the stressful emotions they experience during a long day of school and interactions with peers. I suspect that, compared to children, adolescents begin to use TV viewing more deliberately as a response to negative emotional states.

"In My Room"

It is in music listening that we see clearest manifestation of the private self. Solitary music listening serves for more than just demarking separation from parents, it is a context for self-exploration. Willis and colleagues (1990) suggest, "you can read yourself into a song and temporarily inhabit its identities . . . . The sophisticated sound reproduction of the recorded voice and the conversational qualities of many popular music lyrics are linguistic codes that can be inhabited by and so made highly personal to the
listener” (pp. 69-70). Gordeeva (1994) has shown that even classical music elicits from teenagers rich free associations that are reflective of their inner lives. Steele and Brown (this issue) demonstrates how these fantasized identities are represented, and given personal meaning, in the posters and other items that adolescents put up on their walls.

Among the girls in our sample, a frequent scenario was sitting alone in one’s room listening to soft rock, sometimes thinking about boys. The moods reported during these times were often quite dysphoric—they felt sad and lonely. Yet clearly this was an activity they had chosen (Thompson and Larson, in press). One girl described sitting in her room listening to music and asking herself, “Why does everyone else have a boyfriend and I don’t?” We found a similar depressed state when girls watch music television, typically not MTV, but rather a channel that featured ballads and Motown hits (Kubey and Larson, 1990).

In an interesting variant of research on the “self,” Markus and Nurius (1986) propose that adolescents conceive of multiple “possible selves,” which include not only idealized people they might like to become, but also undesired people that they fear they are being. As such, exploration of the private self is not always a “fun” activity, but may at times be a worrisome and scary enterprise. Many popular songs deal with loss or unrequited love (for example, “Hole in My Heart” by Cyndi Lauper). Some deal with contradictions (such as, “I Hate Myself for Loving You” by Joan Jett and the Blackhearts). Because music listening does not tie up attention as much as TV, it leaves the mind and “heart” free to wander or ruminate on the universal conundrums and pain expressed in these lyrics.

Many of the themes of soft rock and Top 40 music are also themes of “codependency.” Rather than asserting emotional autonomy, they tell a story of merger and losing oneself in another. Such themes are suggested by the titles of popular songs during the period of our study: “Heaven is a Place on Earth” by Belinda Carlisle and “Love Will Save the Day” by Whitney Houston. An example from my youth are the lyrics of a song that boldly asserted “I will follow him where ever he may go.” In the language of the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1971), these songs describe an idealizing transference. They construct a partner who is perfect, who is a “selfobject”—with whom merger is fantasized, and with whom the negative feelings and loneliness one is currently experiencing will be forever banished. Whether codependent or not, these songs provide a sense of personal coherence at an age when self-esteem can be quite fragile.

A striking finding was that when girls listened to soft rock in their bedroom with a friend, their moods were strikingly positive (Thompson and Larson, in press). It appeared that the presence of a close friend transformed the sad, lonely themes of love and love lost into an experience of
connectedness and human solidarity. Sharing this personal experience created a feeling of validation for the private self.

For the boys in our study, music listening was also sometimes associated with dysphoric emotions; however, as they moved into early adolescence, their moods during primary music listening became more positive (Larson et al., 1989). The most intense state reported by these white boys was arousal when listening to heavy metal or hard rock (Thompson and Larson, in press). I suspect one might obtain similar findings now for rap music. This highly energetic music seemed to get them pumped up. Our boys also reported more frequent positive emotion than girls when watching music television (Kubey and Larson, 1990).

The emotional imagery of hard rock and heavy metal hardly needs elucidation, given its graphic depiction on MTV and in excellent analyses of its content. It appears to be an imagery of power, potency, and sexual conquest. However, I would urge caution in assuming we can read from the public text exactly what is going on in adolescents’ minds. It may be the emotion expressed, more than the imagery used to invoke this emotion, that is important to adolescents. Teens imbue these images with unique private meanings (Steele and Brown, this issue). Through lyrics repeated over and over again an adolescent tells him- or herself to disregard other’s opinions or “hang tough.” Willis and colleagues (1990) suggest that “Much popular music produces feelings and affective states, first and foremost, before it produces any specific attitudes or forms of social consciousness” (p. 64).

Schave and Schave (1989) argue that young adolescents often attempt to construct a self around strong emotions. Intense affect, such as the feelings a teenager might get from a favorite song, may serve as an organizer of the self. One boy often listened to music to get himself energized before school. The emotion of the song became a personal mantra that echoed in his head all day and helped keep the provisional self that he had built around this song intact. The anger, oppositional themes, and power some boys identify with in heavy metal may be especially welcome at the end of the day for low achieving boys after enduring a day in school of being told one does not measure up.

The emotional images of music, then, provide a temporary sense of stability that stands in for the lost preadolescent stability anchored in parents. Listening before school orients one to strong personal feelings and an internal self. Listening at day’s end may help restore a tattered sense of wholeness after the assaults of the day. Adolescence is a time of increased stress, and Kurdek (1987) found that adolescents identified music listening as their most frequently used coping strategy for dealing with stress. Arnett (1991) suggests that adolescents often use music for a “purgative function”: the themes of power and energy dissipate accumulated anger
and frustration generated by the stressfulness of adolescent life. The intense emotion expressed in a song provides a strong anchor point for confronting, reappraising, or disassociating oneself from the potent events of the day.

CONCLUSION

Before finishing, I should reiterate the limitations of my analysis to the population from which my evidence has been drawn: Western and more specifically European-American adolescents. The role of solitary media use in their lives, I believe, is partly a response to the unique expectations faced by youth in this cultural group.

I have argued that these adolescents deliberately use their private media experiences for their most personal and age-appropriate needs. The teenage years are a time when they struggle with fragmentation, when their sense of surety about who they are is thrown into question. It is also a time when their daily emotional states are more often negative than they were a few years earlier.

Adolescents use television, I suggest, to turn off and disengage from this struggle. For adolescents, and adults as well, watching television is associated with a state of nonfeeling. And in some cases it may be an effective means for adolescents to numb the stress and anxiety in their lives. Television is also a medium that maintains ties with family, and with the security they may offer. Watching TV with family members remains quite common in adolescence, and this situation may allow teenagers a valuable opportunity to be in the presence of parents without being required to create meaningful conversation. One teenager would watch football in his room while his dad watched in the living room, and they would shout back and forth when a big play occurred.

Adolescents use music listening, in contrast, to directly engage with issues of identity. Solitary music listening, I have argued, is a fantasy ground for exploring possible selves. Sometimes this involves pumping oneself up with images of power and conquest; other times it may involve fantasies of merger and rescue by an idealized lover; yet other times, it may involve intense worry about personal shortcomings and their significance for one’s future. The images and emotions of popular music allow one to feel a range of internal states and try on alternate identities, both desired and feared. While I have not been able to discuss other media, such as magazines, books, computers, and videos, we might expect them to play similar roles within adolescents’ solitary bedroom lives.

The irony or puzzle is that adolescents’ quest for a more secure and authentic self involves use of a public, shared medium. Rather than seeking
truly unique experiences in their solitude, adolescents reach out to packaged images provided by a commercial industry. One of the reasons is undoubtedly that music provides the security of identification with other like-minded peers. The teenager who deeply identifies with Guns-N-Roses gains the solidarity of being soul mates with millions of other youth. Identification with M. C. Hammer connects you to a different group of peers.

An equally compelling reason, however, is that the secure self adolescents seek is not solely a static icon of who they are, but rather a dynamic personal imagery that helps them regulate their internal life. Popular music is crafted to generate powerful images and emotions that adolescents can use to make sense of and cope with their stressful lives. The strong passions awakened by a song provide a personal refrain around which a provisional identity might cohere, if lasting only until noon hour. A retreat to one's bedroom and headphones after school returns one to a forum of emotional images for reassembling a sense of personal stability after surviving the slings and arrows of the day. The predictable selves that come alive in music are a vehicle for navigating the unpredictable and sometimes uncontrollable cascade of adolescent daily life.

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