

## **Youth, identity, and stigma in the media: From representation to the young audience's perception**

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### **Abstract:**

This article presents the results of a news audience study with African migrant children and young people in Lisbon's surroundings. Using qualitative and participatory methodologies in a nine-month study, we analyzed the role of the news in their lives, focusing specifically on their identity construction in light of the often stigmatizing media discourses. We have concluded that the experience of violence in their neighborhoods and the insistent news representation of this violence (perceived by them as the main cause of the community's negative external image) significantly mark the socialization process of the study group. This contributes to identity constructions that we classify into the following three categories: mistrustful identity, anguished identity, and stigmatized identity.

**Keywords:** children and young people, ethnic minorities, news audience, identity, stigmatization

### **Introduction**

Previous research has identified meaningful contrasts in the representation of children from different economic and social backgrounds in the Portuguese news media (Ponte, 2009; Carvalho et al., 2009; Coelho, 2009; Marôpo, 2013).

Children and young people from the 'lower economic classes' (and especially from migrant backgrounds and ethnic minorities) are predominantly represented as strangers or as being dangerous, marked by deviation, poverty, and distancing. The young offenders in disadvantaged situations are usually represented with the reductive binomial of order/disorder. As such, their life context (school or family, for example) is sparsely

contextualized and the prominent media coverage amplifies the perception of their involvement in the phenomenon of delinquency.

'Middleclass' children and young people are mainly represented as a target of parental anxieties and concerns in news suggesting how to avoid and overcome risks. The news coverage emphasizes a private and individual point of view which suggests to the parents how to better deal with and educate their children. The young offenders from higher social strata are often condoned and characterized with attributes such as levity, deviations of character, immaturity. This news representation seems to reinforce the social perception of children and youths from low-income areas as a 'social other' which further promotes stigmatization and exclusion (Ponte, 2006:03).

Given that the media comply with functions of social reproduction, socialization, and integration of individuals, and therefore significantly influences the images that people have of them, of the others, and of their necessities (Patterson in Correia, 2004: 33), how do these negatively represented children construct their identities in light of these frequently stigmatizing discourses?

In order to explore this question, we used qualitative methodologies over the course of nine months, including focus groups, interviews, participant observation, and participatory visual methods in weekly meetings with 15 children and young people (aged 9 to 16) in an African migrant community in Loures, which is in Lisbon's surroundings.

Often labeled as 'troubled' by the media, this neighborhood was built between 1998 and 2000. Families from African countries with Portuguese as the official language that inhabited unfinished and degraded buildings and stalls were accommodated in the new neighborhood (Pereira, 2005 e Esteves, 2004). According to the Municipality of Loures, today it houses about 2,600 residents, of which approximately 700 are children (aged 0–18), for whom this territory is a fundamental space of identity construction.

Carvalho (2010: 257) draws attention to the fundamental influence that the territory where children live exerts in terms of the way they interpret, reconstruct, and represent social problems, as well as how they position themselves with respect to these problems.

Among children in our study, for example, the fact that they live in social housing, the lack of opportunities of living experiences outside of this neighborhood, and their migrant background seem to be crucial for the sense of community belonging they express. Like other studies on immigrants in underprivileged areas, the neighborhood appears as a factor of identity and frequently as a 'safe haven'. This, in turn, leads to dwellers' consequent concern about its negative image which is often reproduced by media discourse (Padilha, 2011: 164).

Previous studies have verified that the peripheral areas of large cities, public housing, and communities of immigrants and ethnic minorities are often ignored and represented as dangerous in the news media coverage, raising concerns about the stigmatization of these territories (Hall et al., 1978; Wilson II et al., 2003).

In this context, marked by the media as a central symbolic resource, we can speak of the children's experiences, their feelings of belonging, and personal relations that

contribute to the construction of individual (of a person, a voice, a position, a subjectivity) and group identity ('we', that are similar, in relation to 'others' who are different from us) (Pais, 2005).

### **Media, identity, and stigmatization**

Although the context in which children live is characterized by competing, complementary, and divergent values provided by parents, school, the consumer society, peer relations, and the media, this last element (i.e., the media) gains importance as it has come to play a more central role in the way children and young people interpret the world. Already in 1994, Gerbner said that the children heard more stories and facts through different media than through parents, schools, or community. This is a phenomenon that Livingstone (1998) identified as mediated childhood.

In this intensively mediated world, the agenda-setting function of the mass media, including the way it frames events, works as a symbolic resource to reinforce and construct identities (Correia, 2007:132). In this sense, although there are differences in terms of the type of media and the target audience, in general, how are these children and young people, their community, and their peers represented in the media?

A search for the neighborhood in Google News provides clues to answer this question. We found an overwhelming predominance of the crime in the neighborhood as a news topic. In these news items, a framework often reduced to what Bennett (2007: 43) called the 'authority-disorder syndrome' prevails. The news represents a world where order is threatened or was reestablished. The central question is whether the authorities are able to establish or restore order at the expense of a contextualized approach. We can say that this news disseminates versions of what the social order is as well as how it should be based on the following three fundamental aspects: the moral evaluation (what is considered inside or outside of the order is judged in terms of whether it is good or bad, healthy or unhealthy, normal or abnormal); procedures (methodically necessary for the order maintenance or restoration); and the hierarchy (the order is directly related to attributes such as class, status, and social position) (Ericson et al., 1991: 4).

From these three elements, the news discourse identifies the neighborhood as out of order, as a necessary target of police procedures, and as a place of low social status and dangerous people. This representation echoes the pejorative expression 'troubled neighborhood', which is widely used by the media.

This is a suspicion frequently presented in the media representation of these minorities, especially of the younger population. Ponte (2006: 3) calls attention to the definition of 'the other' - a stranger to the dominant identity - as a strategy for both standardization and exclusion and inclusion in the news discourse on risk. It is this perception of 'the other' (as opposed to adults, newspaper readers, middle-class whites) that will influence the news coverage about violence involving young, thereby promoting hate campaigns against groups of children and youth that are almost always in the margins of society (Hammarberg, 1997: 248).

This idea of ‘the world of others’ marked by attributes such as poverty, violence, and deviation (Ponte, 2009: 2) has often dominated the news discourse in Portugal regarding minority groups. The young offenders from higher social strata are generally represented by attributes such as slight deviations of character or immaturity, while the skin color and social origin of other young people can encourage hasty and exaggerated spectacle (Carvalho et al., 2009), thereby contributing to the moral condemnation of such youth. Similarly, Azeredo (2007: 205) argues that the news framing of nonwhite youth contributes to expanding the perception of their involvement in the phenomenon of crime and consequent stigmatization. From an exploratory analysis of the Portuguese press, Coelho (2009: 375) concludes that the predominant representation is based on the stereotype of the troubled youth.

In an analysis of this phenomenon in the context of Brazilian society, Ramos and Paiva (2007: 77) point to the following reasons for the stigmatization of poor communities in news discourses: the lack of legitimate and independent local news sources; the lack of knowledge of the local reality by the journalists that usually live in middle class neighborhoods and are rarely a part of these minorities; the target audience that sees these minorities with prejudice; and the feeling of insecurity among journalists that inhibits their entry into these communities without a police presence.

These are all reasons that remind us of the predominant social forces, the business priorities of the media, the limitations of journalists' professional routines, and the minority status of these populations (Marôpo, 2013). In this sense, there is a prevalence of news frameworks reinforcing stigmatized identities over more varied and complex representations of territories and populations viewed as ‘outsiders’ (Correa, 2007: 145).

The stigma is an attribute that differentiates and deeply discredits, complicating the relations between the stigmatized individual and the ‘normal’ individuals (Goffman, 1975: 13). A stigmatized person is isolated. He/she has his or her rights threatened and is the target of discriminations often considered justifiable. The society (here we include the media) encourages these people to internalize criteria that make them very sensitive to what others see as their difference and, as a result, they often feel that they are not what they should be. These stigmatized identities frequently have their origin in issues related to ethnicity and cultural diversity. Ethnic minorities have become an object of suspicion, more or less hostile in the host countries, making it more difficult to maintain a multicultural ideal (Correa, 2004: 123).

The negative news discourse has a significant impact on the social image of these minority groups and consequently on their identity construction. Unlike the mediacentric point of view criticized by Buckingham (2000), we are not here to address the children’s vulnerability to traumatic news or the *effects* of television. What we do want to know is their point of view, i.e., how do they make sense of the news, as a useful way to reflect on the relationship between news discourse and identity processes.

Based on Altheide’s (2000) assumptions, we see the young people’s identity as more negotiated than institutionally grounded. It is a social production and not an individual

property; in other words, it requires others' recognition. We live in the identity process because we do not "have" or own an "identity," but rather, we exist as social beings in the midst of process. The author situates the concept of the definition of situation as central to the debate on identity; identity emerges and is acknowledged in situations. Altheide (2000: 03) cites Schopenhauer, stating "It is not what things objectively and actually are, but what they are for us and in our way of looking at them that makes us happy or unhappy."

In this sense, the media is seen as making an important contribution to the affirmation of identities. It contributes to the definition of situations in social life and to the generalization of others. Identity also connects with popular media culture's emphases on individual consumption, style and performance, and success. Altheide (2000) stresses that numerous researchers highlighted the impact of media logic on everyday life and, citing Grossberg, Wartella, and Whitney, affirms that the most powerful and important media effect is the ability to produce people's social identities, in terms of both a sense of unity and difference.

Hamley (2001) adds that we live in a media-saturated environment; therefore, young people make use of imagery derived from the popular media to construct their identity. The mass media functions as a wide-ranging source of cultural opinions and standards for young people as well as differing examples of identity. However, the meanings gathered from the media are open to reshaping and refashioning and can be updated or changed.

In this sense, the news discourse has a role in the identity processes of the young people in this study because it is part of their daily lives. Even though they prefer other media content, they acknowledged having regular contact with the news media during family reunions or as a way to pass their free time. The news media also reinforces a negative image of their community that they have to face in their daily lives. The children and youngsters demonstrated great familiarity and proximity with the news about the community, stressing several consequences of the frequently negative framings of the news in a very sensitive way.

### **Methodological Guidelines**

In our methodological approach we used various qualitative and participatory methodologies to study the meanings generated by children and young people about their realities, seeking to understand how the news discourse is part of their negotiations of identities. Research, action, and participation were developed side by side in a process built largely from regular experience on the ground, which can be identified as action research (Greenwood and Levin, 1998).

The meetings were organized in a local association funded by the government to support children with low school performance. The children and youth call the place the 'spot' and it is a popular meeting point in the neighborhood. With different levels of involvement and attendance in accordance with their own interests and desires, 15 children and young people (9 to 16 years old) participated in the study. They were selected among those who showed greater involvement in the local association activities, but they still had

an irregular presence in the meetings. This hindered further characterization of the participants, but some observed data helped in contextualizing the subjects of this study.

There was a balance between the number of boys and girls participating. However, the number of male participants prevailed among the older ones (at least at the beginning of the project), while among the girls the younger ones were the majority.

The girls usually justified their absences due to domestic obligations, a clear demonstration of how gender is a determinant in their participation. We also noted greater regularity of the presence of the younger ones from both genders (9 to 13 year), while for those over this age, the greater freedom of youth mobility and competition with other interests made it more difficult to keep them motivated to participate in the meetings.

All the participants have African origins – predominantly in Cape Verde, Angola, and Guinea Bissau – but were born in Portugal. In almost all cases, their parents have low-skill jobs; for example, many of the mothers are cleaners, while many of the fathers are construction workers. These fathers are often absent because they had immigrated to other European countries or have formed new families. Several of the children and youths were living with extended families and reported the unemployment situations of their mothers and fathers.

Our nine-month contact with this group began in August 2011, with the intention of stimulating a club of journalism to debate and produce news. The interest and concern of the group regarding the news about their community which was demonstrated on several occasions led us to specially focus our investigation on this aspect, as shown by the field notes below.

The news broadcasted on SIC on an August afternoon talked about the stabbing of a boy in the neighborhood. The entire room was watching almost silently. Until that time, television was almost always on at the Spot, but as an accessory to which no one paid much attention. Suddenly, the children kept quiet, stopped playing, and were attentive to the newscast (Field notes, 08.18.2011).

Some comments and situations reinforced the need to debate the children's perception of the news about their neighborhood. 'There's only bad news about the neighborhood', lamented André (15 years old). One of the monitors also commented that he felt a climate of tension growing in the community and showed his concern that the news' sources have asked not to be identified in the report: 'it was not like that before'. Helena (12 years old) told me discreetly that she saw everything and she knew who committed the reported crime, but chose not to talk to the police: 'My mother comes from work late and I'm afraid they will do something bad to her'. On the next day, we heard on the street a community leader addressing a boy: 'It is very bad to promote bad news about the neighborhood because of your mess. That's enough, isn't it?'

What are the consequences of this predominantly negative news broadcast for the identity constructions of these children and young people? This central question led us to conduct five focus groups with an average of 10 participants among the group we studied, a common methodology in audience studies that allows us to see how people understand the issue at hand from the conversation and interaction between them (Hansen et al., 1998). In these focus groups, we debated the following questions, among others: What is news? Are they interested in the news? How do the journalists decide the news agenda? What do they know about the newsmaking process? Do they remember news about their community? How is this news? What are the consequences of this news in their lives? In order to provide better contextualization, we also discussed what children and young people like and dislike about their neighborhood and how they see the world today.

During the field work, in order to complement the data generated by the focus groups and to try to address their preference for practical activities involving communication technologies, we have established a partnership with a project developed by a fellow researcher, Daniel Meirinho. The In Focus Project uses audiovisual participatory methodologies – especially photos and videos – which are produced by the children and young people and are used as tools to debate personal and social problems (Meirinho, 2013). Therefore, we followed the children in the production of a video and a short movie. We also participated in a photo workshop that resulted in an exhibition in the neighborhood.

Our approach in the field is also ethnographically inspired since we used observation and informal interaction as key methodological tools during a significant period of time. The field diary and audio recording of the activities were key instruments to pick up the voices, actions, and meanings constructed by the children.

It is also important to address the main constraints that we found on the work field of this action research which meaningfully influenced the results obtained. Such constraints included the difficulty in enabling an open debate with children and young people with low levels of attention; the lack of structure to fulfill many of the proposed activities; and the challenge of reconciling research and intervention at the same time. This work also raises ethical questions that are difficult to resolve: although we have formal authorization from the Social Project for the study, we could not obtain the informed consent of all the parents and children/young people because some of them only occasionally participated. Another dilemma is how to reconcile privacy rights and participation. In our articles we prefer not to directly identify the children and young people and use fictitious names to avoid embarrassment. Moreover, their voices, images, and identities are thus disclosed in the communication products which they produced in accordance with the participation rights and freedom of expression guaranteed in Articles 12 and 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

After taking into account the previously mentioned methodological procedures and constraints, we analyzed the identity construction among children and youth in face of an often stereotyped representation. How does this media representation influence the

construction of the individual and group identities of these children and young people? To what extent does the stereotype of the 'trouble' neighborhood and youth publicized by the media intersect with their discourses about themselves? How do they perceive the role of the media in their processes of identity affirmation? These are the questions that will be discussed below.

### **Identities: from bad news to stigmatization**

'Who remember the news about the community?' The initial question of the third focus group gave rise to a torrent of answers and comments. They all spoke at the same time and practically said the same thing: 'Bad news!' After some moments of trying to organize the children and youngsters' anxiety, more specific answers appeared, chiefly from the older boys: 'They killed a young person' (André, 15); 'a young man attacked' (Valter, 16); 'A boy was attacked with a knife' (Pedro, 15); 'The young people are problematic here' (Jorge, 14). The younger boys and the girls complemented these responses. Everybody was anxious to talk about the violent episodes on the news, which some of them had witnessed.

There was a unanimous perception of the relation between the youths and the violence in the community as the most frequently and highlighted news topic. That negative coverage was also understood as a cause of the negative external image of the community, an image with real consequences for the community's habitants.

*You were saying that you saw news about the neighborhood (Researcher)*

Someone stabbed a young person in their twenties (Mário, 10).

*Where did you see it?*

On SIC (a TV Channel).

*And what did you think when you saw the news?*

I thought so many people would speak badly of our neighborhood (Mário, 10).

...

*So, why do you think this is terrible news?*

Because it talks about death and violence (Vasco, 13).

*What does this mean? What are the consequences?*

It is bad for the neighborhood (Jorge, 14).

Not only for the neighborhood! The neighborhood is composed by whom? (Vasco, 13)

By us, the people... (Jorge, 14)

This dialogue demonstrates that, from their point of view, the news broadcast of the violence in the community strongly contributes to defining their situation in a negative way by generalizing them as troubled youths. This clearly shows that those young people have to deal with this negative media imagery when they are constructing their identities. According to Brown et al. (1994: 814), 'they (the adolescents) use the media and the cultural insights provided by them to see both who they might be and how others have constructed and

reconstructed themselves.’ However, since we see them as an active audience, they make sense of the news in a negotiable way, contributing to different identities that we classified in the following three categories: mistrustful, anguished, and stigmatized.

### **The mistrustful identity**

If, on the one hand, their daily experiences and the media coverage of the violence contribute to the children’s perception of the community as a ‘violent ghetto’; on the other hand, they foster local friendships and gratifying experiences associated with leisure and learning that reinforce a strong feeling of belonging to their community. From this perspective, the district is also seen as ‘a house extension’ a fundamental free space in which these children and youths have their family’s permission to circulate. This sense of belonging is also reinforced because their possibilities of living experiences beyond the community’s borders are scarce due to the lack of time and/or financial resources of their parents.

The older ones are proud to say that they remember the ‘old neighborhood’, although they were only a few years old when they were rehomed. They like to express to the younger ones their nostalgic feeling about the old settlements where they had once lived. They describe their remembrances as an idealized happy time, without reference, for instance, to the bad residential conditions during that time.

This group identity is strongly anchored in the community as a place of belonging. Furthermore, the discomfort caused by the negative public image of the community strengthens a sentiment of distrust toward other external groups, especially in relation to the police and the media, identified as the main proponents of this bad image. The police force, for example, has been accused on several occasions of being abusive and causing various types of trouble. Here, what prevails is that there is a sentiment that ‘we the residents of the community’ suffer the consequences of the police harassment.

I think that the police should come to the settlement once in a while to monitor the situation, but every day it is very annoying. I think that every day is an annoyance for the neighborhood (Helena, 12).

In relation to the media, we identified a perception of the news being responsible for too frequently falsely amplifying the representation of the community’s problems.

According to Maria (13), ‘The others don’t like us!’ On several occasions, the narratives made this perception clear, and those ‘others’ were identified as journalists, especially by the older youngsters. Although they could not identify the reasons, the journalists are seen as having a deliberate intention of speaking badly about the community:

*What do you feel when you see such news?* (Researcher)

That they don’t like the neighborhood (Jorge, 14).

*Why?*

They're saying there's a stabbing every week in the neighborhood! (Jorge, 14)  
They say there's a shooting every week! (Helena, 12)

This identity construction is strongly marked by the perception of the community as an 'extension of the home', by the distrust toward the 'outsiders' and by a sentiment of victimization. The difference (in relation to the 'outsiders') is constructed around the violence in the community, whose representation is perceived as distorted (exaggerated) and imposed from the outside by the media. In this way, these factors provide the origin for the general attitude of distrust in relation to the 'outsiders', provoking reactions of indignation.

### **The anguished identity**

In the second identity construction that we assigned specially among the younger ones, the menace is perceived as being caused by an internal element of the community, a kind of 'danger in our midst'.

The narratives are marked by a sentiment of fear of violence, which would be caused by a minority of the inhabitants of the community being identified as bandits, fugitives of the police, and youngsters who attack the people.

The people who don't live in our community like to always say that our community is the bad influence; the teachers say at the school that we should get out of here, from this community; and they don't know that we don't do this; the problems are created by some other people in the community (Helena, 12).

The news discourse seen in daily TV news reinforces the sentiment of distress and fear experienced in conflicting daily situations. Through the representation of violent events too close to the children and youths, which occasionally happened in their presence, the news strengthens sentiments of sadness and fear.

*What do you remember when you see the news?*

I remember what happened (Mario, 10).

*You said that you also were present. How did you feel?*

Fear (João, 12).

*And what do think when you see the news on the television?*

I think sadness; I think it is sad (Silvia, 9).

In this identity construction a perception of the community as a 'violent ghetto' prevails. The violence is the priority concern in descriptions of the community as a territory of deviant behaviors: shots, child molestation, aggressions, shootings, criminality, and strife. Those internal threats transform the community in a scary, dangerous, and sad place to live.

The news discourse functions as a reinforcement of the children's and youths' feeling of vulnerability.

### **The stigmatized identity**

The last and strongest identity construction refers to the stigmatization reinforced by the news. The majority of the children and youths insisted on commenting on the issue, which was referred many times in the focus groups and during other informal moments.

Beyond the 'presence of the cops' and the 'youngsters who mug', the news is considered as the central cause that makes 'the outsiders' avoid the community when they are asked to go there.

*Pedro was saying because he dislikes (negative news about the community)...*

Because of the news, there are many people, members of the family, who don't like to come here. They think they are going to come in here and be immediately assaulted. My relatives don't come here because of this (Pedro, 15).

The people from outside don't have the courage to enter here! (Several)

The taxi drivers don't want to come in here! (Several)

When we go shopping, we call the taxi and many times it doesn't show up... (Carla, 12)

The elements that Goffman (1975) identified as characteristics of stigmatization are presents in these narratives: discredit, isolation, justified discrimination, threatened rights, and difficult relations among the stigmatized and 'the normal'.

The reactions to these experiences vary between a very clear perception with direct responses and a tendency to minimize and ignore it, on the one hand, and a resigned attitude on the other.

*And do the people comment to you about the news?*

Yes, some say at school after seeing the news: 'If I go where you live I'm targeted with a shot in the head and I'm attacked!' (Carla, 12 year)

Who says so? (Pedro, 15)

After they say something like this, I ask them, 'Did you go there to check it out?' (Carla, 12)

They play around at school with this. They say in a kidding way 'I'm not going there in fear of being attacked' (Pedro).

To me they don't say it kidding! (Carla)

If it were about another neighborhood they wouldn't kid around with this subject! (André, 15)

I think that other people say immediately that we created the violent situations they see in the news (Mário, 10).

This identity construction is marked by the challenge in dealing with the external suspicion. The media are seen as one of the principal causes of the problem, since they frequently stress the violence which occurs in the community. This news discourse frequently motivates negative external reactions to the community that the children and youths need to deal with in their daily lives.

### **Final remarks**

During nine months we accompanied the process of 'biographization' (Beck, 1998: 78) of an ethnic minority group of youths in the Lisbon suburbs. Taking into consideration the self-recognition and social recognition process, we tried to understand how they construct their identity in an environment meaningfully marked by a negative visibility in the news.

In spite of the apparent indifference demonstrated initially by the news discourse, in several occasions it was clear how the news discourse was present in their daily lives, taking part in their socialization process.

Even though they prefer other media content over the news, these children and youths are regularly exposed to the news discourse, both directly at their homes and indirectly when they are confronted at school or in other environments where the TV news or other journalistic media are present.

The main concern and topic of interest when we talked about the news is the coverage of their neighborhood. Predominantly featuring negative framings, this news representation is perceived as the main cause for the community's negative image among outsiders. Although children and youths react differently according to their capacities and abilities, the news discourse significantly marks the identity constructions of the studied group.

The media visibility of the community, strongly anchored in negative attributes such as violence and deviation, contributes to enhancing the sentiment of fear and distress, especially among the younger ones, who relive the violent episodes through the media which they personally witnessed or that they closely experienced. It also contributes to strengthening, especially among the older ones, a very firm local identity, a sentiment of distrust toward the media and other external social agents facing the community.

Moreover, it unites all in a common challenge in their identity processes: confronting a stigmatized image, where 'we' always have to face the suspicion and transcend the barriers, trying to establish a relationship of quality with others and be recognized as 'normal people', who are worthy of respect.

With a basis in our action research, this identity recognition can be stimulated by utilizing communication in the following three ways: the media and its contents as an object of reflection among children and youths; the production of communicational objects by the children and youths to be divulged in various support systems (videos, photographs, texts, etc.); and the media supply of information to stimulate positive news on these territories and populations. These are research paths that we intend to deepen in a future action research project.

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