

# Chapter 6

## Media and Parental Communication: Effects on Millennials' Value Formation

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### ABSTRACT

*Both popular media and scholarship have attributed adolescents' antisocial values and behaviors in part to media usage. Nevertheless, many scholars posit that media usage can be positive in certain contexts and that parent-child communication may abate negative media effects. An analysis of the educational longitudinal study data from 2002 to 2006 examines the effects both parent-child communication and various forms of media had on millennial teenagers' values development during a time of tremendous digital evolution. Results support that not all media was negative in effect on millennial value development and that parent-child communication may counteract some negative effects of media.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Millennial generation has often been stereotyped as lacking altruistic social values, as compared to previous generations (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010; Stern, 2005), a shift frequently blamed on Millennials' media diets in adolescence and beyond. Likewise, theorists across numerous academic disciplines believe today's media—encompassing diverse forms including television, video games, social media, and other online experiences—fosters an egoistic society (Gamson et al., 1992; Grindstaff & Turow, 2006). Media effects are important to essential cognitive orientations such as the development of agentic values (Bandura, 2006), and such effects are, of course, important in the lives of adolescents (Anderson et al., 2003; Greitemeyer, 2009). Distinctive media forms that dramatically increased or emerged during Millennials' adolescence hold particular study interest when discussing values adoption, including: violent video games, “reality” television shows, and a plethora of digital media interactions, including social networking (Coyne et al 2018; Torr, 2001).

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Alongside the power of media, however, diverse competing forces shape teenagers' development of self and values systems during adolescence (Fine, 2004), especially the influence of parents and peers. Parents often feel that their influence is small, perceiving teens' egoistic values and poor behavior choices the result of "bad influences" from media and peers (Nathanson, 2001; Ragelienė & Grønhoj, 2020). Parental restrictions may even trigger rebellion from the teen (Nathanson, 2002). Nevertheless, numerous studies demonstrate the ways parents and peers can shape adolescents' development of values to encompass prosocial attitudes (Clark, 2011; Nathanson, 2002; Shin & Huh, 2011).

Rather than accede uncritically to the stereotype of media-addled, egoistic Millennials, then, it is crucial to examine how countervailing influences, especially the guidance of parents, shaped Millennials' values in adolescence. Values evolve slightly over a lifetime, but adolescence is a foundational milestone when young people begin to "construct their personal, institutional, and communal personas" (Fine, 2004). In this process, some values may be more central to self-definition than others. Accordingly, adolescents' perception of the importance of certain values, along with their experiences of displaying them, influences values hierarchy (Rosenberg, 1979). Likewise, values make up part of self-concept and are integral to Mead's socially developed "self" (Burke, 2004; Mead, 1934). Therefore, as comprehension of their cultural environment increases, adolescents' values evolve (Beech & Schoeppe, 1974), and hierarchical systems develop to support decision making (Rokeach, 1968).

To delineate and measure the differing power of media and parent-child communication to shape adolescents' development of values, this study empirically investigates the relationships among parent-child communication, various types of media consumption (including digital media), and structural factors in the development of teenagers' altruistic and egoistic values and the altruistic behavior of volunteerism, drawing on Education Longitudinal Study data from 2002-2006. More precisely, the following research question is examined: How did media operate in relation to Millennial adolescents' developing values and behaviors in comparison to parent-child communication and other influences, particularly at a time when teenagers were first fully immersed in the digital age?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Altruism, Prosocial Behaviors, and Parental Influence**

Altruism is an intention to benefit another devoid of the expectation of reward (Wilson, 2008, para. 2), and motivated by selflessness and empathy (Eisenberg et al., 1991). Prosocial behaviors driven by altruism are "healthy, ethical" (Siu et al., 2013, p. 19), and conducive to a harmonious society. Although adolescence is often rife with competition around social capital, status, and academic performance (Nauert, 2015), adolescents "also cooperate with each other in altruistic or prosocial behaviors," providing emotional care that offsets competition and renders mutual support (Williams, 1987, p. 157).

Development of altruistic values within peer groups and the family can be enhanced or deterred by parental mediation (Clark, 2011; Nathanson, 2002; Shin & Huh, 2011), family communication patterns (Carlo et al., 2007), or peer mediation (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). In addition, family communication patterns and parental behaviors also contribute to development of empathy, which affects altruism and behavioral outcomes (Yoo et al., 2013; Kaufman, 2011). Some parental actions, such as parental solicitation and psychological control, negatively impact adolescents' prosocial behavior. However, ac-

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