



New Media, New Idols?¹

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Abstract. Who could be a role model for the teenagers? Whose attitude, outer and inner values appear to the teenagers as an example to be followed? Has the media and media usage an impact on this? How can this be identified? We wanted to find out whether the pupils from our region have idols and, if so, who their icons and role models are, who the ones are that have an exemplary behaviour in their eyes, to whom they would like to compare themselves when they grow up. Have the age, the gender, and residence of the pupils any influence on the choice of role model? Does the parents' educational level have any impact on this?

The paper aims to present the role model question among teenagers. The analysis is based on two important surveys conducted among Hungarian teenagers from Szeklerland, Romania (Covasna, Harghita and Mureş counties). The surveys took place in spring 2012, and more than two thousand of pupils in the 7th and 11th grades were involved.

Can we conclude that the new media brought along the new idols? The media has definitely a strong impact on the young people's, children's lives, on their world-perception – can this be identified even here, regarding the role models? And what do these results shed light on? What kind of new possibility, new chance or new challenge do the parents, pedagogues, teachers, local communities have if they know of these role model practices their teenagers have?

Keywords: role model, media usage, media star, teenager, value, content analysis

About Socialization and Imitation

The issue of socialization is an important topic for several fields of science, such as pedagogy, psychology, sociology. Thanks to this, in the last few decades, several studies were written about the role of socialization, its duty, the actors and mechanisms that influence social development. Thus, it is already widely

1 The Hungarian version of the study was published in a volume of essays (Gergely, 2013).

known that the nature of children's personality, their system of values, their moral ideas is influenced by three general socialization backgrounds. The first and most important is the family as a first social environment, the second is the schools, where the peer-group influence is dominating, and nowadays it has appeared, next to these, the mass media as a socialization medium (László, 1999; Berta, 2009). The researches that have been carried out in this topic highlight the increased role of the media, which often de-emphasizes the role of family and school. This could mean that the social norms and rules, which are acquired through socialization, could or might be replaced or overwritten by the messages from the media.

According to scientific research, the observational learning, the model selection plays a very important role in the socialization process. Modelling means an accurate observation of others' behaviour and its "be-likely" imitation. By model-following, one can acquire new behavioural elements, may explore new combinations of personal behavioural repertoire and can recognize the consequences of others' actions (Kósa, 2005: 96). However, the observational learning is also a significant time-saving method: we do not always need personal empirical experimentation; it is enough if we have learned a certain kind of knowledge from someone else. Even though we have never personally experienced a major part of what we know and of what we have learned, we still have the knowledge (Gerbner, 2000: id.; Berta, 2009). In a lot of cases, the different kinds of stories that we heard, events that we saw, tales that we were told contribute to our gender, peer-group, social, occupational and lifestyle roles. These stories, experiences shape and define our thinking, our actions and our way of life. But a growing media influence might also increase the probability of the non-physical "role model" choice, the subject of the imitation; the "idol" will not be chosen from the direct physical behavioural area but from the virtual one. Models from the media could replace or take over the place and the role of persons from the physical, everyday life.

Searching for an Idol – Empirical Facts from a Survey

In the spring of 2012, an important first survey research took place in Szeklerland among pupils in the 7th and 11th grade regarding media usage, knowledge about the media, user skills and so on.² 2,122 pupils were involved in our research from urban and rural areas from Covasna, Harghita and Mureş counties. We reached 63 schools where the pupils answered the self-completed questionnaires. The questionnaire had 49 questions; they had to relate their media usage, PC and

2 Our research group was formed by colleagues and students from the Sapientia University, Department of Social Science (Miercurea Ciuc); the survey was accomplished in partnership with the International Children's Safety Service (Budapest). The survey took place during March and April 2012.

phone usage, rules about all of these (in school, at home), Internet and PC knowledge. The major partial results of this research have been published in several academic publications (see Bodó, 2012; Biró–Gergely, 2013).

Among other questions in the questionnaire, there were included three questions about models and model-following: we wanted to find out whether the pupils from our region have idols and, if so, who their idols and role models are, who the ones are that have an exemplary behaviour in their eyes, whom they would like to compare themselves to when they grow up. This topic was also mentioned in the general summary of the research (Biró–Gergely–Kiss–Berényi, 2012: 68, 2013: 71), but a detailed analysis of the open questions has not yet been made. The present study aims to fill this gap, that is, a detailed analysis of issues relating to the role models. It makes a first attempt to point out who could be a role model for these teenagers, whose attitude, outer and inner values appear to them as an example to be followed.

Every language has a lot of proverbs, sayings on the importance of having an example to follow.³ Not only what the person says is important but also how he or she behaves. This is true both for parents and for teachers. This example, however, can significantly help us to succeed in life: by imitating the behaviour of others, we can prevent countless things we would like to avoid (e.g. “When in Rome, do as the Romans do!”). The results of the Hungarian research (László, 1999) highlighted for us the importance of analysing this issue more closely.

Since only half of the 2,122 respondents gave a serious answer to the question and named a person to whom they would like to be similar to, we were obviously curious to find out what kind of pupils have an idol, in what way they are different from the “average”, and how we can describe in socio-demographic terms those who do not have a role model. First of all, we found out that the younger boys (aged 13) who live in urban areas have a more clear idea about who they want to be like, whose model they want to follow. While 51.3% of the total sample is in the seventh grade, among those who named a role model, 58.4% are in the seventh grade. Similarly, regarding to the gender, we can see the same: 43.6% of all respondents are boys, but among those who claim to have an idol the proportion of the boys is 47.49% (see Table 1).

There is an even bigger difference in the teenagers’ residence: 43.6% of the pupils involved in this research live in the urban area of Covasna, Harghita and Mureş counties; however, from among those who have an idol, more than two-thirds live in towns (71.23%).

3 The Hungarian language has many proverbs in this issue. For example, a proverb about the importance of a suitable example: *A good example is better than hundreds of lectures*. Or the importance of behaviour against speech: *The exemplary life of a priest is indeed a sermon*. And another about the importance and gain from observational model following: *In the church and in the tavern, take example from others*. (Hungarian proverbs)

Regarding the educational level of the parents, we could not identify such significant differences; there are only mild differences in cases of pupils whose parents have higher educational level.

While in the case of all respondents 17.21% of the pupils have fathers with a higher educational level and 20.1% of the pupils have mothers with higher educational level, among those who have an idol, these ratios are slightly higher: 18.88% in the case of fathers and 22.16% in the case of mothers were found with higher educational level. The table below shows the differences and similarities between the pupils having an idol and the total respondents.

Table 1. Comparison of the whole sample with the group of those having an idol

		Total		Pupils who have an idol	
			%		%
Age	13 years	1,088	51.3	725	58.4
	17 years	1,034	48.7	516	41.6
	<i>N</i>	2,122		1,241	
Gender	Boy	920	43.6	586	47.49
	Girl	1,190	56.4	648	52.51
	<i>N</i>	2,110		1,234	
Residency	Urban	920	43.6	884	71.23
	Rural	1,190	56.4	357	28.77
	<i>N</i>	2,110		1,241	
Father's educational level	Basic	963	47.2	556	46.45
	Medium	726	35.59	415	34.67
	Superior	351	17.21	226	18.88
	<i>N</i>	2,040		1,197	
Mother's educational level	Basic	778	37.86	431	35.77
	Medium	864	42.04	507	42.07
	Superior	413	20.1	267	22.16
	<i>N</i>	2,055		1,205	

“I Want to Be Like... Because ...”

The students were asked four open questions related to the role model issue: (1) Name one person to whom you would like to be similar to when you grow up. (2) Who is this person? What is he/she doing? (3) What are his/her qualities for which you have chosen him/her? (4) If you do not have such a person, why not? As we have previously presented in the scientific report, the answers to the open questions are highly varied; there are, of course, quite a lot of answers which

cannot be taken seriously (see Biró–Gergely–Kiss–Osváth–Berényi, 2012). After a quick report, a very detailed analysis also revealed that an even bigger part of the answers than we have previously thought cannot be taken seriously. Only slightly more than half (58.48%) of the students answered the question in a way that it could be used for the analysis. However, surprisingly, many people did not write anything here or strongly stated that they have no role model, there is no need for one or they have outgrown this “idol” period. Among those who did not choose a role model, a lot of them justified the answer with the importance of an independent personality, with the will of not being compared to anyone, with the desire of not to imitate, not to copy anyone. They thought their personalities would develop without imitating someone else, they believed they were good as they were and that they did not have to become someone else. This is the message of most of the answers (Biró–Gergely–Kiss–Osváth–Berényi 2012).

Coding the answers was a serious challenge. The answers given to two or three, but mostly to four questions had to be analysed parallel to each other, constantly projecting the questions onto one another in order to filter out the non-real answers and to be able to identify the person that the pupil identified as a role model.⁴

By analysing the answers, after a long deliberation, we created 17 categories according to what could be found out about the idol. The list leaders are the parents: more than one third of the teenagers wants to become similar to their mothers (20.06%) or fathers (17.89%). There is a group of pupils who want to be like their brothers or sisters, while others want to be similar to their grandparents (in one case, to a great-grandparent) or to some other relatives, godfather or godmother (see Table 2).

Table 2. Idol categories

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Mother	249	20.06	20.06
Father	222	17.89	37.95
Brother/sister	70	5.64	43.59
Grandparents	31	2.5	46.09
Relative	90	7.25	53.34

⁴ For example, there were cases where we found the name of a movie actor, but the name was not spelled correctly, not even close. So, we needed to see what the pupil wrote about this person in order to identify the right person and to know whether he/she messed up the name or it was about another person. It also happened that the pupil wrote down the name of his/her idol but did not tell anything more about this person, so we do not know whether that person is an acquaintance, a friend or a hero.

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Teacher, priest/pastor	65	5.24	58.58
Acquaintance	63	5.08	63.66
Best friend	26	2.1	65.75
Actor	107	8.62	74.38
Musician	92	7.41	81.79
Football player	73	5.88	87.67
Athlete	66	5.32	92.99
Famous person	33	2.66	95.65
Formula 1 pilot	18	1.45	97.1
Top model, movie star	14	1.13	98.23
Superhero, movie character	14	1.13	99.35
Writer, artist, theatre actor	8	0.64	100
Total	1241	100.00	

Every twentieth (5.24%) teenager aged 13 or 17, who named a role model, would like to be like his/her teacher. The same number of pupils wants to be similar to an acquaintance, an adult who lives in their environment, whose behaviour and activities they know, whom they chose because of their profession or professional success, who seem to be adroit, courageous and skilful. Some examples: medical assistant, doctor, hairdresser, manicurist, flower shop owner, university student, girl next door, café shop owner, dance instructor, attorney, entrepreneur.

The table above also reflects the fact that most of the idols chosen by the students are persons from their everyday lives, persons with whom they have physical contact: two-thirds of the teenagers identified a role model who they knew personally. The remaining 34.25% (every third student) chose a model known only from the media. Every eleventh teenager wants to be like an actress or actor (the favourites are: Angelina Jolie, Maite Perroni, Chuck Norris, Bud Spencer, Brad Pitt, Vin Diesel, Gabriela Spanic). In the category of singers, the most frequent idols are: Rihanna, Shakira, Beyonce, Gabi Tóth, Vera Kovács, Veca Janicsák, Laci Lukács, Katy Perry.

A lot of students, especially boys want to be like a well-known athlete or sportsman when they grow up. Because of the large number of answers in this category, we created three other role model categories: athletes, football players, car drivers or motorcycle riders. Every twentieth pupil wants to be like an athlete or a football player. Of course, this is more typical among boys. In the football player

category, Lionel Messi is on top of the popularity list, but he is followed by names like Cristiano Ronaldo, David Beckham, David Villa, Iker Casillas and Fernando Torres. Among the athletes, there appears Michael Jordan, Maria Sharapova and the first Hungarian names, as well. Especially the members of the Hungarian Handball National Team, such as Anita Görbicz, Katalin Pálinger, appear as idols for teenagers. The name of a local athlete, Éva Tófalvi, also appears here.⁵

It seems that the media celebrities do not have a very significant impact on the pupils' role model choice. In this category, there are very few candidates. We can enrol TV presenters like Balázs Sebastyén, Nóra Ördög, top models like Palvin Barbara, famous, rich people like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs or the writer of the Harry Potter novels. An interesting category is that of the fictional idols: some film characters or super heroes were chosen as idols. Dr. House's arrogance, insight geniality seems to be a model for a couple of pupils. Others found an example to follow in Batman's sense of justice, his fight against evil, while others would like to copy the resourceful, adroit MacGyver.

It also seems worth examining if the age, the gender, and residence of the pupils have any influence on the choice of the role model if differences along these demographic variables can be detected. Of course, a part of the answers is self-evident: those who are idolizing their mothers are mostly girls, while those who want to become like their fathers are mainly boys. As well, most of those whose idol is a football player, an athlete or a car racer are boys; girls chose more often an idol among film actors, singers (see Table 3). However, there are small differences that definitely worth taking a closer look at.

Gender, age and residence seem to have a significant correlation to the idol category, the type of idol chosen. Boys and girls have a little bit different types of idols; younger teenagers (aged 13) and the older ones (aged 17) named different types of human examples. The statistical tests⁶ also show that whether someone lives in a town or village has an impact on their choice of idol. For example, among urban teenagers, it is twice more frequent to idealize a grandparent, a godparent or some other relative (11.43% of urban pupils have this kind of model). Among teenagers living in villages, this is less frequent (5.6%). In the case of teachers, it is just the opposite: choosing a teacher as a personal idol is more frequent among teenagers living in the rural area – 7.28% of them wishes to follow the example of a teacher. Among teenagers who live in towns, this ratio is only 4.41%. The same thing is true in the case of the best friend/close friend joint category: every tenth teenager who lives in a rural area has chosen a good friend or a best friend as a

5 Éva Tófalvi: athlete from Miercurea Ciuc, bi-athlete, world champion. She participated several times at the Winter Olympic Games in 2002, 2008, 2010 and 2014: she was the flag bearer of the Romanian team every time. Outside the tight circle of athletes, her sports achievements are not widely known; the situation is similar with other athletes from Romania.

6 Chi-square test.

model (11.2%). However, only every twentieth urban teenager went for the same option (5.41%). The proportion of pupils from rural and urban areas is similar regarding the enthusiasm for the football players. In the case of the singers and musicians, there is a little difference: 8.37% of the urban teenagers and only 5.04% of the rural teenagers named a musician or a singer as their role model.

Table 3. Idol categories by age, gender, type of residency⁷

Idol categories⁷	AGE (p=0.018)		GENDER (p<0.001)		RESIDENCE (p<0.001)	
	13 y	17 y	Boy	Girl	Urban	Rural
Mother/Father	146	76	176	44	146	76
Brother/Sister	46	24	24	46	48	22
Grandparents/Relative	61	60	36	85	101	20
Teacher, priest	36	29	16	47	39	26
Friend/Acquaintance	55	34	43	46	49	40
Actor	57	50	58	48	79	28
Musician/Singer	58	34	29	62	74	18
Football player	44	29	71	2	50	23
Sportsman	48	36	65	19	58	26
Other	28	41	46	22	61	8
Total	725	516	586	648	884	357

“I Want to Look like Me!”

As we reported earlier, nearly half of the students (41.6%) did not define a model, an idol to whom they would like to be similar to when they grow up. However, since they were asked to justify their choice, we can make an analysis of those answers as well and we can figure out why the thirteen and seventeen year olds from this region do not have an idol. Unfortunately, this analysis was not possible in the case of all pupils since a third of the respondents did not write anything to this question, gave no justification in this respect or wrote something just to fill in the questionnaire, but the answers did not serve any purpose and gave us no information whatsoever (e.g. “I do not have an idol and that’s it!”). Thus, only 66.74% of the 971 teenagers tried to explain why they could not name a role model.

After coding the answers to the open question and taking into consideration the results of the Hungarian research (László, 1999), we grouped the answers into

⁷ We group the earlier 17 categories in fewer categories to avoid statistical problems in the case of the chi-square test.

three categories: Undecided, Confident and Individual. In the case of our research – unlike the Hungarian results –, we could not identify four different categories but a very strong, powerful group (Individual), and two much smaller categories with very few items. In the “Confident” group, we included the answers which show that the respondent has a very strong self-confidence, knows her/his capabilities, skills and values, and does not need any personality change. 12.34% of the answers fall into this group. Some examples from here: “I am just perfect without an idol”, “I’m glad that I was born this way and I am satisfied with myself”, “I love myself”, “I don’t have a model, I don’t need it”, “I do not think it is helpful to have one.”

One out of four teenagers (26.39%) had not dealt with this “idol” question before: they say they cannot name a person to whom they would like to be similar to since they have never thought of this issue before. Some examples of these answers: “I have not really thought about this”, “I do not know exactly what I want to be”, “I do not know yet what kind of adulthood I will have”, “I have not thought about this yet, maybe because I do not know anybody to whom I fully look up to.”

The largest category is definitely the Individual category. Although nearly four hundred persons’ answers are included in this category, the answers are very similar and mostly even using the same language, the same words: I do not want to compare myself to anybody, everybody is an individuality, I do not want to imitate anybody.

“I am a special person, and I do not wish to be similar to anyone else, I am what I am”, “I do not want to live like somebody else, I follow my own path”, “I want to be like me!”, “I do not want to become anyone else’s copy because people nowadays want to imitate one another, for example in fashion, career etc.” Concepts, such as “I’m unique, each person is unique, everything is about the individual these days, I do not want to be an imitation”, send us the message that a lot of the pupils made the “Be Yourself”, “Be Who You Are!” type of messages, sent by the American film and pop culture, their own. They do not find in their immediate environment such a powerful personality whom they could accept as a role model, so they give answers which send the message “I do not have any role models and it is not fashionable nowadays to have one”.

Conclusions

We have seen that in 2012 only half of the teenagers from the 7th and 11th grade named an idol. The others did not have one or did not want to have an idol mostly because they did not want to influence their “uniqueness”. Most of those who have a role model would like to become like their parents, siblings, grandparents, relatives or close friends. Among those who have an idol, every third teenager’s choice was influenced by the media, they have not met their

chosen role model personally, they have not talked to him/her, they only know a little about the chosen role model, and there are no valid impressions available for them about the chosen idol. The next survey is planned for 2014,⁸ and it would be an important step in this process: we would be able to identify the direction of the role model choosing practice among teenagers.

Can we conclude that with the new media new idols have arrived? It is hard to answer this question because the answer is multiple. (1.) On the one hand, the answer can be **yes**, the teenagers choose a role model from their physical environment or from the media. Those local “heroes”, historical persons, contemporary talented but not mediated persons, who do not appear in the media, on the Internet, are not well-known. Because of the lack of their media appearance, they will not become popular; moreover, they will not appear in the focus of the teenagers, they can not become a model for them. (2) However, the answer could also be: **partially yes**, the new icons are infiltrated into the teenagers’ minds since one third of them (from among those who have an idol) chose some iconic person known from the media, television or the Internet, perhaps from the newspaper. But only partially yes, because the role and impact of this new model is not as strong as we would expect knowing the practice of teenagers in using the new media. They know very little about these mediated persons, very often they do not even spell their names correctly, so we can say that the idolization, the role-model following is not so strong. (3.) On the other hand, the answer could be even **partially no**: the teenagers can select. Even if the media has an important impact on their lives, two teenagers from three want to become like their mothers, fathers, a relative or a friend. The media has a strong impact on their lives, on their world-perception, but even so they can select what kind of role model is more authentic for them.

What do these results shed light on? What kind of new possibility, new chance or new challenge do the parents, teachers, local communities have if they know of these role-model practices of their teenagers? **For the parents**, these results could or might be a very strong positive acknowledgement from their children. If every third teenager wants to become like his/her mother or father, then the parents managed to be a strong, characterful, good example, which is iconic in the teenagers’ eyes despite of the virtual, mediated world in which they have an undoubted presence. But beyond the positive validation, they could also be less endangered by the media and be more open to learn new things together with their children, not to prohibit or restrict too much, but to be curious, to be open, to communicate about everything that the teenagers are searching, looking, following in or through the media. **In the case of the teachers**, this might have a moderate positive message and might indicate a lot of possibilities. It would

8 During the period of March–April 2014, another survey was conducted in the same area among teenagers in the 7th and 11th grades. Unfortunately, in this moment, we do not have the possibility to bring in the new results, but in the next few months this will be possible.

be useful to include the “role model” issue in the latent curriculum since, as we could see, a lot of teenagers have an unsettled, improper and wrong idea about role models in our lives or a life period. In this way, the school might become an important actor in forming the role model of the teenagers. **For the local communities**, this could be an important monitor: the teenagers do not know very much about local historical and contemporary achievements, successes or good practices. Communities need to find a way to send messages about this to the younger population, to promote this by the teenagers’ communicational practices. Without this, there is no use in naming a school after someone, making a big ceremony in memory of someone or inaugurating a statue. If this person’s character and achievements are not known, if they are not so important, “fancy” and “fashionable”, they will not become a role model even if the teenagers could learn much more from their lives than from a media star’s life. The life of Zolt Erőss,⁹ the popularity and genius of László Barabási Albert,¹⁰ the achievements of Károly Eduárd Novák¹¹ could be an inspiration for everybody. But they do not

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- 9 ERŐSS Zolt (1968 – 2013) was born in Miercurea Ciuc, Harghita County. He was the most successful Hungarian high-altitude mountaineer, summiting 10 out of the 14 eight-thousanders. He was also the first Hungarian citizen to have climbed Mount Everest. In 2010, he lost his right leg in an avalanche accident, requiring amputation below the knee. Soon after his recovery, he returned to mountaineering, trying to summit the Cho Oyu in fall 2010. The expedition did not reach the top due to bad weather conditions, but later in May 2011 he successfully summited the Lhotse. After successfully scaling Kangchenjunga on May 20, 2013, he went missing in descent (source: www.en.wikipedia.org, www.hoparduc.hu). Although he lived in Hungary after 1988, he was very popular among the population of Szeklerland. After 2000, he attended every year narrative presentation tours – among others – in almost every town of Covasna, Harghita and Maroş Counties. Even so, the teenagers seem not to know about him and not to choose him as a role model.
- 10 BARABÁSI-ALBERT László (born in 1967 in Cârța, Harghita County) is a Hungarian-American physicist, best known for his work in the research of network theory. He was working at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA, and current Distinguished Professor and Director of Northeastern University’s Center for Complex Network Research (CCNR) and an associate member of the Center of Cancer Systems Biology (CCSB) at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute, Harvard University. He introduced in 1999 the concept of scale-free networks and proposed the Barabási-Albert model to explain their widespread emergence in natural, technological and social systems, from the cellular telephone to the World Wide Web or online communities (source: www.en.wikipedia.org). He is appreciated and well known among the Hungarian population in Romania, as in a popularity contest won 3. place (source: <http://boxpopuli.transindex.ro>).
- 11 NOVÁK Károly Eduárd (born in 1976 in Miercurea Ciuc) is a road- and track-racing cyclist and Paralympic champion. Initially a speed skater, Novak lost one of his legs in a car accident in 1996. Subsequently, he switched to cycling and emerged to a professional cyclist. He took part at his first Paralympics in 2004, followed by two more participations in 2008 and 2012. At the 2008 Paralympic Games, he won the silver medal in the individual time trial, thus capturing Romania’s first ever Paralympic medal. At the 2012 Games, he reached further milestones by winning the gold medal in the 1 km track pursuit event – the first ever in the country’s Paralympic history – and setting a new world record time en route to the final. Additionally, he collected a silver medal in the road time trial race. (source: www.en.wikipedia.org, www.tusnadcyclingteam.com).

appear among the teenagers' options. We have local "heroes" who could be a very good example for a lot of teenagers, but if we do not speak about them, do not invite them to the schools, to local festivities, teenagers cannot meet them, and they will "meet" more easily with Rihanna, Lionel Messi or Steve Jobs.

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