AN EXPLORATORY STUDY: THE PROTECTIVE AND RISK FACTORS OF BARBADIAN YOUTH IN RESPONSE TO POPULAR CULTURE

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ABSTRACT:

Popular culture has become the fabric of our society and plays a major role in shaping the attitudes and behaviours of Barbadian youth. Understanding the role of popular culture in the society is critical for the development of resilience in our youth which in turn can serve as a preventive measure from engaging in risky behaviours. This exploratory study will investigate and analyze whether the protective and/or risk factors have any impact on youth in their response to popular culture. Moreover, this study seeks to understand the linkage between the modes of popular culture and its ability to shape cognitive thought and behaviour. The study will contribute to the discourse on popular culture and its impact on Barbadian youth and the Caribbean in general.
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INTRODUCTION

In a world where culture defines us and society judges us, young people are often faced with conflicting norms, values and popular culture. Barbadian adolescents are coping with the popular culture of their native land and the global community. For them, popular culture has become a way of life. It determines the brands and types of clothing they wear, the type of company they keep and more importantly the image they attempt to project. Popular culture has become the fabric of our society and plays a major role in shaping the attitudes, perceptions, behaviours and cognitive thoughts of Barbadian youth. Therefore, it is imperative that Barbadian adolescents develop coping skills in order to build resilience in the face of popular culture.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Young people are engaging in risky behaviours. These risky behaviours include but are not limited to promiscuity, violent behaviours and substance abuse. Individuals engage in risky behaviours for a number of reasons, popular culture being one of the prime factors. How can popular culture cause individuals to engage in risky behaviours? In our society, adolescents are attracted to what is “in style”. This style appears in the forms of music, fashion or even the desired image that the adolescent wants to project. The desire to be “in style” may result in adolescents attempting to obtain these cultural objects by engaging in risky behaviour. This risky behaviour may manifest itself in the forms of prostitution or robbery.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The conceptual model (Figure 1) guided the development of the research questions and these questions in turn directed the focus of this research. Specifically, this research addresses the following questions:

- What is meant by adolescence and how is identity developed during this stage of the life span?
- What is popular culture?
- What are the modes of popular culture?
- What are the selected risk and protective factors?
- How are these factors related to popular culture?
- How do these risk factors, protective factors, popular culture build or destroy resilience in adolescents?
- What is the relationship between the risk factors, protective factors and resilience?
- What is the relationship between the risk factors, protective factors and Barbadian adolescents?
SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study is exploratory in nature and is four dimensional: It will seek to (1) investigate and analyze whether the selected protective factors and risk factors have any impact on youth in response to popular culture; (2) understand the linkage between the modes of popular culture and their capacity to shape attitudes, perceptions, behaviours and cognitive thoughts; (3) contribute to the discourse on popular culture and its impact on Barbadian youth and the Caribbean in general and (4) address future possibilities of research.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study is (1) scientific and (2) practical. It is scientific because it will demarcate the various factors that have the capacity to build resilience in Barbadian youth, whereby filling unsatisfactory gaps in the literature. A large quantity of data is available on popular culture (Springer, 2008; Shaffer, 2004; Best, 2003) and resilience, however not much focus has been generated on research in the Caribbean concerning popular culture and resilience. In addition, this study explores the power of the conceptual model and explains the influence of the selected risk and protective factors in building resilience in response to popular culture. This study is practical because it will elucidate policies, as well as highlight intervention measures such as programs that could neutralize the trend of risky behaviours among Barbadian youth.

CONCEPTS

Youth, young people and adolescents are used interchangeable

THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The conceptual model (Figure 1) in this study was designed to explain the inter-relationship between popular culture, the selected protective and risk factors and the building of resilience in adolescents in the Caribbean. The model indicates the influence of popular culture on adolescents and its ability to penetrate certain spheres of society.

Risk Factors- the demands of popular culture (to obtain certain cultural objects, such as brand name clothing or electrical tools -latest telephone model, MP4) can cause the adolescent to succumb to peer pressure, thereby causing the adolescent to engage in risky behaviours. Image is also a risk factor that could encourage an adolescent to engage in risky behaviours. Adolescents may want to give their peers or other members of society the impression of being cool, fashionable and “well-off”. Risky behaviours can include violent acts against others (such as robbery) or the adolescent using his or her body (prostitution) as a means of securing the fund to obtain the cultural objects of popular culture.

Protective Factors- the demands of popular culture can try to invade or erode the adolescents’ protective factors. If the family and the community are not strong social institutions in an adolescent’s life, popular culture can be very influential. For example, the family and the community are considered the primary agent of socialization, if they do not meet the needs or provide the social support for the adolescent, risky behaviours
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Risk Factors and Protective Factors in Response to Popular Culture and the Building Of Resilience among Adolescents.

Figure 1
can prevail. However, if these factors are strong, adolescents build resilience in the face of popular culture.

**ADOLESCENTS AND IDENTITY**

In a world where change is occurring rapidly, adolescents are at their most vulnerable. The adolescence stage typically range from the onset of puberty to maturity (Neufeldt & Sparks, 1995). This period of the life span acts as a buffer between childhood and adulthood and is generally associated with turmoil and emotional conflict (Macionis & Plummer, 1997). Adolescents are not only establishing and defining their roles in the society but attempting to develop a sense of self. The self is the development of the personality which comprises of self-awareness and self-image (Mead, 1934). This personality is impacted by the generalized other who influences and shapes the way the adolescent views her/himself. In essence, the generalized other is the cultural norms and values that are reference when the adolescent is evaluating him/herself (Macionis, 2001). In the development of self, the adolescent is consumed with two important aspects of development: identity and image.

Identity formation is the central issue in an adolescent’s life (Erickson, 1963). Over the years, identity has been socially constructed and described as the “sense of self, of personhood, of what kind of person one is” (Acbercrombie, Hill & Turner, 2000). According to Erickson (1963), adolescents go through a process called identity versus role confusion. Erickson describes this stage as a process where adolescents have an unclear sense of identity, they go through the upheaval of life which he refers to as an identity crisis and at the end of adolescence, evolve with a sense of self (Erickson, 1963). However, as seen by some researchers, some individuals may have traumatic experiences in which they are unable to cope with and as a result they resort to risky behaviors.

Moreover, adolescents are constantly bombarded by a set of images. These images are transferred by means of technology due to globalization. Globalization is the “interaction between economic and cultural factors, whereby changes in production and consumption patterns can be seen as producing new shared identities” (Woodward, 1997). Also, Globalization has the capacity of promoting cultural diffusion. Cultural diffusion is the spread and adoption of cultural items from one culture to another, such items include but are not limited to ideas, technology, and fashion. This has caused a shift in popular culture in the Caribbean. As a result, Caribbean popular culture is starting to resemble that of the Western hemisphere. It is believed that the greatest change agent has come from the United States (Duff, 1993).

**POPULAR CULTURE**

It is believed that popular culture is stealing young people’s childhood and consuming their whole world. It is described as “a celebrity-driven popular culture - i.e., culture that has mass appeal and serves to divert from the seriousness of a child’s life-surrounding our children and influences not only the family budget, but how the children
behave” (Broody, 2003). In essence, popular culture for the youth is mass merchandising, where the youth is transformed into a submissive vessel for shallow consumerism and is “filled with violent narratives lacking in imagination, fattening snacks, crudeness as well as non-playing, scripted storytelling” (Brody, 2003).

“Griswold’s analysis of culture indicates that cultural objects make up the culture of the society. It is the “shared significance embodied in form...a socially meaningful expression that is audible, visual or tangible or can be articulated” (Griswold, 1994). In Griswold’s explanation, cultural objects are made by either a single or multiple creators. In order for these objects to become cultural objects, they must be transferred to a receiver and entered into the public domain (Griswold, 1994). In addition, the receiver must also participate, enact or remember these cultural objects.

Therefore, cultural objects are a part of popular culture. What is popular culture? According to Madden (1972), popular culture is seen as:

“anything produced or disseminated by the mass media or mass production or transportation, either directly or indirectly and that it reaches the majority of the people” (Browne & Madden, 1972);

In essence, popular culture is the assimilation of media products, all art forms, ideas, beliefs, customs and artefacts that are produced and dispersed in the society. Media products can be printed, audio or in visual format. Examples of printed, audio, visual products and art forms are as follows:

Printed: photographs, magazines, books and newspapers.
Audio: Radio, CDs
Visual: Television, Theatre
Art forms: poetry, dance

In addition, Madden (1972) gives a wonderful synopsis of the characteristics of popular culture. He states, popular culture

Is mass produced and immediately accessible, sometimes unavoidable; its products often spawn many by-products; it sometimes equates quantity with quality; or sets standards for quality that differ from high culture’s; it makes the impact of advertising and/or packaging an almost primary experience; it sometimes emphasizes the personality of the maker or promoter, or performer over the product; it even uses a high culture personality or element to authenticate a product; there is a tinge of something-for-nothing on much of it; it is a-moral, a-political, non-denominational even when it sells moral, politics, or religion; it is neutral by nature rather than by conviction; its appeal is calculated, but success is often unpredictable; it appeals to impulses and weaknesses in human nature such as tastes and ingrained ideals; consumers delight in repetition-more of the same—enjoying a familiarity that breeds sentimentality; paradoxically it claims to offer newness, which proves on close inspection to be the old formulas in new combinations or packages; even as it exploits stock responses of one audience, an entirely different audience may find it appealing; it cuts across age, race, nationalities and geography; it produces ephemera, which is sometimes
revived often, ironically by high culturalists who rejected it on first appearance; it one dimensional in its implication or effects.

To be regarded as popular culture, the product has to appeal to the public audience and the message must convince the receiver that the product will benefit them. This benefit can come in the form of pleasure or beautification and provide some fundamental value for the receiver. If the receiver does not engage the cultural object, it is rejected and does not evolve into the arena of popular culture. In examining popular culture, the consensus for any item to be transformed into popular culture must (1) be adopted by the society; (2) be accessible to all; (3) transcend all social classes; (4) have the capacity to be distributed and consumed; and (5) evolve over time.

RESILIENCE

Over the years there have been various definitions for resilience (Kumpfer & Summerhays, 2006; Gunnestad, 2006, Carbonell, Reinherz, Giaconia, 1998 & Rutter, 1987). However, the general consensus in the literature is that resilience is the ability to maintain growth and development in the face of adversity. Uger et al., (2007) indicate that it is the protective factors that play a major role in the development of resilience. These factors serve as buffers to combat the effects of risk factors and build resilience in the individual which in turn foster certain processes in the adolescent (Gunnestad, 2006). These processes were created by Rutter (1990) in his analysis of resilience and supported by Gunnestad (2006). They believed that protective factors (1) build a positive self-image; (2) open new opportunities for the child and break down negative circles and (3) reduce the effect of the risk factors.

In a study conducted by Gunnestad (2006) resilience was examined from a cross-cultural perspective. This analysis scrutinized whether various cultures generated resilience in different ways and how culture influenced resilience. In his analysis, he examined culture from the Latino, American Indian and African perspectives and came to the conclusion that each culture contains certain strengths which are transferred to the society. However, Gunnestad noted that some cultural practices can expose its people to vulnerability, making them less resilient. In an example of such vulnerability, Gunnestad (2006) states, that a “dissolving culture can lead to increased vulnerability; e.g. a strong family cohesion may lead to increased problems for children if the parents are violent or abuse alcohol”. It is therefore vital for youth to develop coping abilities in order to develop resiliency (Huber, Frommeyer, Weisenbach & Sazama, 2003).

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Protective factors are elements that act as buffers and protect individuals from conditions that increase their vulnerability (Norman, 2000). These buffers serve as preventive tools that assist in deterring youth from indulging in risky behaviours while developing resiliency. The degree of resilience is often determined by the strength of the protective factors and the individuals’ ability to adapt to the situation. According to Norman (2000), “individuals differ in their exposure to adversity, the degree of protection
afforded by their own capacities and by their own environment.” Therefore, protective factors are elements “within the child’s environment and the interaction between these factors that give the child strength, skills and motivation to cope in difficult situations and re-establish normal life” (Gunnestad, 2006) In this research, the selected protective factors that were examined in building resilience in Barbadian youth are the family and the community.

**Family**

Families are the primary agent of socialization and act as a learning environment for adolescents. As a result of this process of socialization, adolescents internalize the norms and values which prepare them for their social roles in society (Evans & Davis, 1997). For many sociologists, family is viewed as the cornerstone of society (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004). There have been many debates regarding families in the Caribbean and whether these types of family structures are functional entities. In this study, the focus is not on if the family is a functional entity but the types of families that exist and if these family structures are capable of building resilience. Within the Caribbean region there are five types of family structures: married, common law, single parent, visiting (Evans & Davis, 1997; Stuart, 1996)) and extended (Stuart, 1996). Listed below are the five family structures as described by Stuart (1996):

- **“Married**: husband and wife sharing a common residence
- **Common law**: man and woman not legally united but sharing a common residence.
- **Visiting**: unmarried couple sharing sexual relationship but not common residence
- **Single-parent**: single woman or man living with their children, defined as no longer living with spouse or common-law partner or never in a union.
- **Extended**: three or more generations sharing a common residence”.

Stuart (1996) asserted that the family is recognized as the primary social institution which has the capacity to provide the necessary social support for the adolescent. Social support is often needed to combat the everyday stresses of life in an adolescent’s life. The ultimate goal of the family is to meet the needs of the adolescent by providing closeness, emotional, advice and esteem support (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). By providing support of this nature to adolescents, resilience is developed (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). Therefore, regardless of the family types that exist, if the needs and the social support of the adolescent is being met then there is a high possibility that resilience can be build and enhanced over time within the family structure.

**Community**

President Bill Clinton in his address to the American people indicated that it takes a village to raise a child. He implied that it is not only the family’s responsibility but the community as well. A community can consist of schools, churches, neighbours, community centres and other social organizations. In addition, a sense of belonging and a feeling of caring is often associated with the community. According to Arnon, Shamai and Il'tatov (2008), a community is defined as “a locality or territory; a social system and
structure with economic, political, cultural, and social institutions, functions and interactions and symbols which provide feelings of solidarity, cohesion, trust, unity, security, identity and significance”. Adolescents typically see their community as a representation of the whole society and important relationships develop with adults in the context of the community (Arnon et al., 2008). In addition, a strong degree of resilience is developed in the community if social capital is present. Social capital refers to the social networks in that community. Arnon et al. (2008) state that “social capital is the central component in community building; it is a quality created between people that consist of three elements: social networks; trust among people, community institutions and community leaders; and norms of reciprocity which enhance solidarity and civil engagement”. If a community achieved these characteristics, adolescents will develop a sense of belonging which in turn develops into resilience.

**RISK FACTORS**

However, as protective factors serve to discourage, there are risk factors that persuade youth to engage in risky behaviour. Risk factors have the ability to expose vulnerable adolescents to risky behaviours.

**Peer Pressure**

Peer pressure in this study is defined as others’ ability to persuade another to indulge in actions that he/she would not do under normal circumstances. Research (Arnon et al., 2008) indicates that adolescents separate themselves from childhood dependencies and develop more extra-familial relationships. As a result of this separation, adolescents are more focus on building friendships. Jaccard, Blanton & Dodge (2005) believe that a strong predictor of adolescents engaging in risky behaviour is friends or peers who indulge in this particular activity. These types of associations increase the likelihood that the adolescent will eventually engage in risky behaviour. Adolescents who have peers that engage in risky behaviours have a tendency to identify with them (Jaccard et al., 2005). In addition, Newcombe (1996) indicates that on the onset of early adolescence to late adolescence, changes occur in family patterns. As adolescents’ cognitive abilities develop adolescents’ perception of their parents is altered, they spend less and less time with their parents and conflict erupts with their parents more frequently (Newcombe, 1996). This indicates that adolescents are spending less time in the family setting and more time with their peers, thereby foresting the risk of succumbing to peer pressure and engaging in risky behaviours. Arnon et al. (2008) emphasizes that peer groups can be an important socialization agent which has the capacity to encourage negative idle behaviours. They reinforced this assertion by utilizing the group socialization theory which emphasizes that it is the peer environment rather than the home environment which have a more lasting influence on adolescents’ psychological characteristics when they reach adulthood.

**Image**

The black race has often been stereotyped as a race in crisis and the black man described as an endangered species, especially in America (Gibbs, 1988). The literature current focuses on the images of black man in the United States more than in the
Caribbean. However, in terms of the image of blacks in general a relationship can be drawn to both regions. As mentioned earlier in this study, popular culture dictates the type of image adolescents want to project and here is where the similarities are seen. In their book Cool Pose by Richard Majors and Janet Billson (1992) black males try to project a certain image to the society. This strategy is used as a coping mechanism for survival. This cool pose demeanour renders the black man invisible, empowers him, lessens his stress, enhances his self-esteem and allows him to function in society (Majors & Billson, 1992). This behaviour is a reaction to the assault on their masculinity and by applying the mask of aloofness and superiority, black men attempt to convey pride, strength, and control (Futurist, 1992). However, this cool pose has major consequences and contributes to several problems. The black man is unable to maintain lasting and stable relationships, develops emotional detachments and eventually succumbs to mental and interpersonal difficulties (Majors & Billson, 1992; Futurist, 1992). This behaviour is seen in male adolescents in Barbados who try to maintain a cool pose by exhibiting similar behaviours. In trying to achieve the “cool pose” Barbadian youth may exhibit such behaviours as skipping school, indulging in illegal substances and being promiscuous.

The female adolescent on the other hand, tries to achieve or maintain an image as well. However, her image is slightly different from her counterpart. Although trying to be cool is essential, black female adolescents are concerned with attractiveness and appearance. In a world where billions of dollars are spend by corporations to entice a society to purchase products or services that will improve the citizens’ health, bodies and appearance (Smith, Burlew & Lundgren, 1991), it is not surprising that popular culture plays a major role in the perception and behaviours of adolescents. Adolescents are pressure by a society to maintain appearance and this is often reinforced by the male sex. It was shown that “even anticipation of the male gaze was enough to trigger appearance concerns and body anxiety (Caloger, 2004; Poran, 2206). Moreover, “self-concept is inextricably linked to physical appearance” (Spurgas, 2005). It is therefore no surprise that Barbadian females who are viewed by their peers as not attractive may engage in risky behaviours (promiscuity or substance abuse) in order to gain popularity or use these behaviours as coping mechanisms.

DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this research was to examine the relationship between selected protective factors, selected risk factors, resilience and popular culture. Due to its persuasive cultural objects (music, artifacts, fashion, etc) popular culture has the ability to influence and shape attitudes, behaviours and perceptions. In addition, the research indicates that one of the most influential and predictable element of risk behaviours is “whether an individual has friends who engage in that behaviour. Such associations have led many social scientists to conclude that peers exert considerable influence on adolescents” (Jaccard et al., 2005). Moreover, research indicates that adolescents who engage in risky behaviours typically do so with their peers (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005). The community acts as a source of belonging and attachment. This attachment is manifested in the social ties that bind adolescents to the society and more importantly the supportive socialization of that environment is vital for positive development (Arnon et
al. 2008). By providing support to adolescents from social institutions such as the family and community, resilience is cultivated.

LIMITATIONS
Due to the lack of information about Barbadian adolescents in the literature in regards to popular culture and resilience, the study could not draw a definite inference to Barbadian youth. In addition, since this study utilized secondary data, the perimeters of this study was limited in scope.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
As we launch into another era where globalization has become a way of life, it is critical that researchers’ focus not only be centred on the Western hemisphere but also in the Caribbean. This study highlighted numerous gaps in the literature in regards to popular culture, resilience, risk and protective factors in this region-the Caribbean. In addition, since this study was exploratory in nature, the conceptual model in this study should be revised and enhanced as new information is collected from future research. This revision will serve to influence future predictions and develop programs that have the capacity to build resilience in adolescents. The study also realized that there is a need for programs or intervention measures that will develop resilience in the adolescent. Such programs should include:

- **Education** – adolescents should be taught positive behaviours which in turn will minimized risky behaviours and build resilience.

- **Recreational settings**- this type of setting can serve as resilience enhancing experiences. These settings have the capacity to expose adolescents to a wider world beyond their home base. (Gilligan, 2008).

- Cultivate positive expectations – by nurturing positive expectations resilience is built. By encouraging goal setting and planning for the future, adolescents are able to resist the temptations of popular culture and evaluate the ramification of it.
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