ADOLESCENTS' VCR USE: HOW AND WHY

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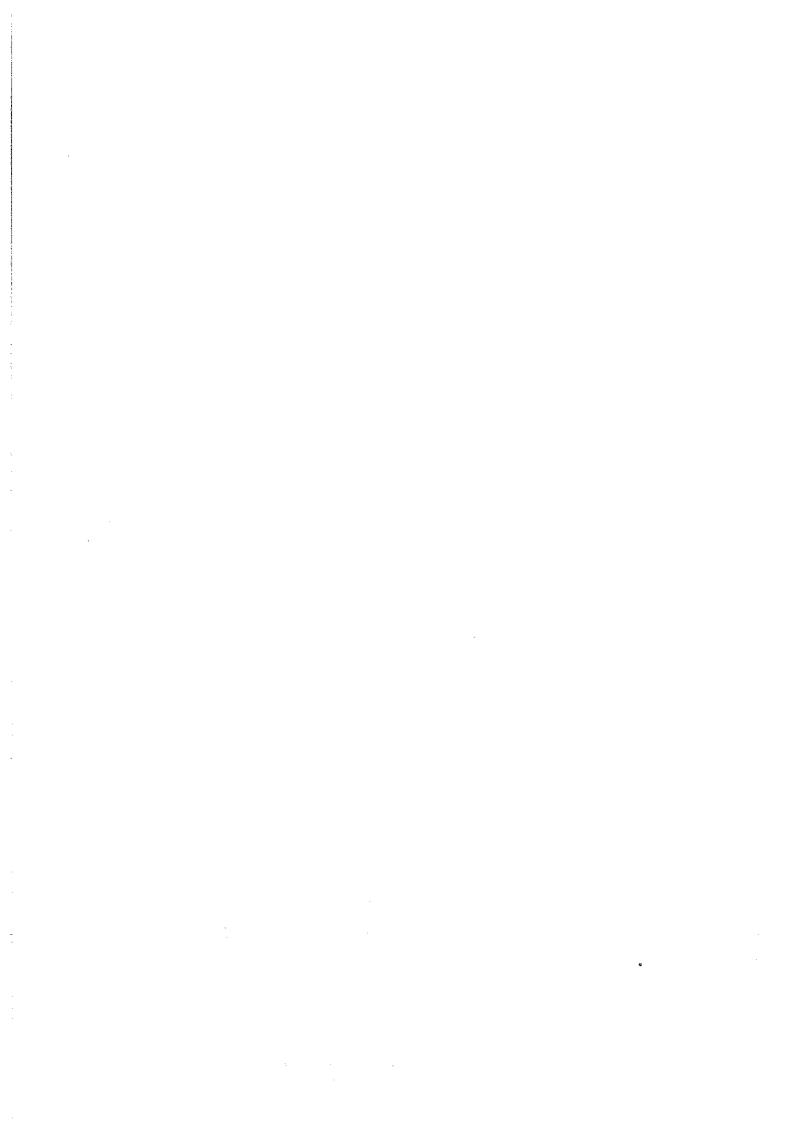
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Are individuals more or less uncritical, passive, recipients of the latent and manifest messages transmitted by the media? Or do people, both individually and in groups, actively select and use media to achieve various gratifications? As Levy and Windahl (1985) have pointed out, these questions encapsulate one of the longest-lived controversies in the short history of communication research. The purpose of this paper is to add (yet another) contribution to this controversy.

The passive audience perspective has its roots in a theory of 'mass society', defined sociologically as, "lacking strong independent groups and institutions...a society dominated from above" (Swingewood, 1977). This view of society, which sees the mass media as dominating and manipulating an undifferentiated mass of consumers, is inherited from the 'mass society' metaphor of the 19th century and slipped easily into the terminology of media research in the 20th.

One of the most telling critiques of the use of the term 'mass' in communication research is that of Williams (1976a; 1976b;). He argues that the mass metaphor has had a disastrous effect on the study of the media, first because it implies an unlimited, undifferentiated audience and second, and perhaps most damagingly, it has had the lingering effect of equating people in 'masses' as being, "inherently stupid, unstable and easily influenced", so that the only thing worth investigating is whether or not they are 'corrupted'. When applied to children and adolescents, this negative effects paradigm tends to appear as a variation on the theme of the massacre of the innocents.

An alternative approach to the passive individual - powerful media perspective is exemplified by the 'uses and gratifications' approach (Katz et al. 1974). This approach sees the audience as composed of active, selecting agents using the media to extract gratifications for pre-existing needs that are defined by audience members themselves (cf. Levy and Windahl, ibid). By opening up new fields of inquiry this change of perspective represented an important step forward for, as McQuail (1972) has remarked, "if the media are more acted upon than acting, it has profound implications for the kinds of questions one asks".

Unfortunately, even the uses and gratifications approach has tended to focus primarily on the individual and as a result suffers from some of the same weaknesses as the 'mass' perspective. In fact, as Roe (1983a) has stressed, there is nothing to prevent us from applying the uses and gratifications approach to the analysis of social groups or even subcultures. Such an operationalization would build a useful bridge between media research and more general structural-cultural approaches (cf. Weibull, 1985).



Recent developments in the sociology of culture (e.g Bourdieu, 1980; Williams, 1981) employ a concept of culture, its production, reproduction and transmission, which is related to the structural relations of society. Such an approach makes it possible to focus specifically on social groups composed of active, selecting, resisting and differentiating media users; and to construct models which attempt to take account of the signifying mediations of family, class, age, gender, education, peer involvement etc.

In discussing this type of structural-cultural approach Levy and Windahl (ibid) observe that, while at first sight implying a highly determined and hence less active audience, closer examination indicates that position in the social structure is as likely to make individuals (and groups) active with regard to media use as it is to make them them passive. The aim of such an approach is not to postulate culture as mechanistically determined by structure but, rather, to attempt to account for the dynamics of these fields. As Bourdieu (1984) has shown, while the cultural space as a whole is structured by sets of ready made choices, objectively instituted possibilities, traditions, rules, values, equipment and symbols, there is space within the objectively defined spaces within which subjects may themselves create meaning. The result is a 'diversity within homogeneity' expressed as manifold fields of preferences and stylistic possibilities. Nevertheless, significant as this diversity is, it must always be borne in mind that tastes and cultural practices are structured by the distribution of economic and cultural capital. (cf. Roe, 1987a).

Applications of this type of structural-cultural perspective have shown its heuristic value. An interesting early hybrid of subcultural analysis and the uses and gratifications approach, which has been found to be relevant to the study of video and youth was provided by Dembo (1972, 1973 and by Dembo and Hewitt (1974). They argue that it through their negotiations with family, peers and demands for achievement that adolescents acquire the bases of their social world, including a structure of gratifications needs, which influence social action and selection of media. Differential experiences lead some adolescents into a search for the self-esteem and identity not provided by legitimate social agnecies and, by association, a search for alternative gratifications is stimulated. According to this view, media use should be seen as the dependent variable and the sociocultural structure as the independent variable.

Before proceeding to an analysis of Swedish adolescents' VCR use, a very brief sketch of the overall context of the advent of Video in Sweden will be provided.

Sales of VCR's began to increase in 1980 and then accelerated rapidly in 1981, in which year the percentage of households containing a VCR increased from 3.5% to 8% (Hultén, 1985). Subsequently, household penetration reached 16% in 1983, 23% in 1985, and 41% by early 1988 (Gahlin and Nordstöm, 1988). The main explanation for the comparatively early market take-off of VCR's in Sweden is probably to be found in the media structure



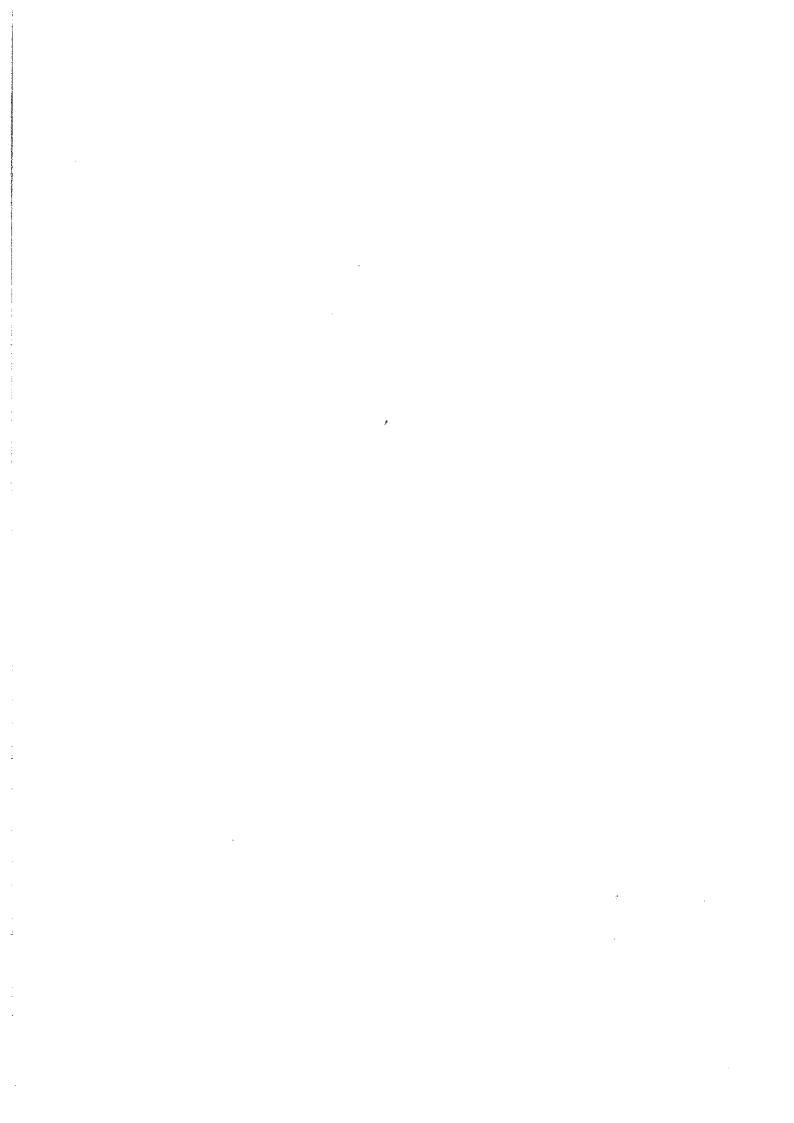
of the country. Swedish television consists of only two channels of the public service type and cable-TV introduced in 1983, still reaches only about 13% of the population (Nordisk Medie Nyt, 1983:3)

The advent of the VCR was accompanied by an intense public debate. As sales increased the disquiet of the critics grew, along with the number of articles in the press condemning both the new technology and the uses to which it was apparently being put. The fact that the VCR facilitated the circumvention of TV and cinema censorship led to its utilization for viewing hired cassettes potraying explicit violence and pornography. In this way the VCR came to symbolize the negative aspects and consequences of new media technology and the threat being posed to traditional culture. In particular, the VCR was purported to be a threat to children and adolescents and a stimulus to aggressiveness and violent behaviour. A major campaign developed which embraced parent-teacher associations, academics, moral campaigners and politicians. In due course, virtually all of the criteria for a 'moral panic' (Cohen, 1980; Roe, 1985) were fulfilled, and the VCR became something of a 'folk devil'.

In response to these developments, the government instituted an official inquiry; a tax was imposed on the purchase of VCR equipment and measures were taken to enable prosecution of dealers purveying cassettes containing explicit violence. The results of the official inquiry have now been published (Ds. U 1987:8; S.O.U. 1988:28) and recommend that the penalties for illegal distribution of violent content be stiffened and that the distribution of pre-recorded home video cassettes be supervised by the National Film Institute. However, a proposal to subject all pre-recorded home video cassettes to censorship control was rejected on the grounds that such a measure would be ineffective.

Research indicates that the diffusion of VCR's in Sweden has been uneven. Households with childrens are most likely to possess a VCR. By 1988 over 60% of 14 year olds had home access to one. Use also varies widely. Older children and younger adolescents are the heaviest users; males view more than females; low achievers more than successful students; and city dwellers more than those living in smaller towns and rural areas. For most ages there is a positive correlation between amount of TV use and amount of VCR use. Evidence of curvilinearity has been found in the relationship between VCR use and social background, with use greatest among those whose parents are either private enterpreneurs or working class; and least among the children of academics and farmers (Höjerback, 1986; Roe and Johnsson—Smaragdi, 1987; Gahlin and Nordstöm, 1988).

Overall, detective/police stories, adventure films and horror films are viewed most frequently, although there are large differences here according to gender. Social background is also significantly related to what is viewed, and the interaction of these two variables has been identified as a particularly strong determinant of viewing patterns. Of all films hired, 57% are action/adventure films, and 96% are of non-Swedish (mainly American origin). Among some groups of adolescents the viewing of



pre-recorded video cassettes has displaced TV-viewing as the most common media activity. In one study of 12-16 year olds, 67% of the film titles named as having been seen on video were classified as only permissible for (cinema) viewing for those aged 15 or over; while 7% were banned from the cinema altogether. Horror films and films characterised by significant amounts of explicit violence constituted 39% of all the films named as having been seen. Males tend to watch age-certified or banned films much more than females. Furthermore, 12% of those aged 12-13 stated that both their last seen, and their favourite video film, were 15+ classified or banned films (Roe and Johnsson-Smaragdi, 1987; Gahlin and Nordström, 1988; Wall, 1988).

Early studies among adolescents (e.g Roe, 1981) found that the VCR was being used largely to facilitate peer group interaction. In this respect it appears to have differed from the British and U.S. pattern of VCR use which is characterised by comparatively privatistic, individual behaviour (Gunter and Levy, 1987; Levy, 1987). Furthermore, only a small percentage were found to be using VCR's with any frequency for time-shiftin TV programmes. Instead, the 'home cinema' type of use predominated. More recent studies confirm that, while the incidence of time-shifting has increased substantially, Scandinavian adolescents continue to use VCR's mostly for viewing pre-recorded cassettes in the company of peers (Höjerback, 1986; Svendsen and Vilsvik, 1987).

It is essential to locate Swedish adolescents' VCR use during the first half of the 1980's in the wider context of the moral debate which accompanied the advent of the VCR. As we shall see, the negative connotations attached to VCR use during this period were essential ingredients of the meaning which this use assumed for some adolescents.

In a study of 13-15 year old VCR users Roe (1983b) identified five major motivations for VCR use:

- The VCR is 'available' and provides a comparatively cheap form of entertainment.
- The VCR provides a focus around which the peer group may organize its activities.
- 3. VCR use is relatively free from adult and general cultural policing. It is admirably suited for the purpose of exercising autonomy.
- 4. The use of the VCR to view films of an extremely gory and violent nature may operate as a 'test of manliness' in the male peer group.
- 5. For some students experiencing difficulty at school VCR use provided a 'negative identity' and a means by which to demonstrate their disapprobation with adult authority.



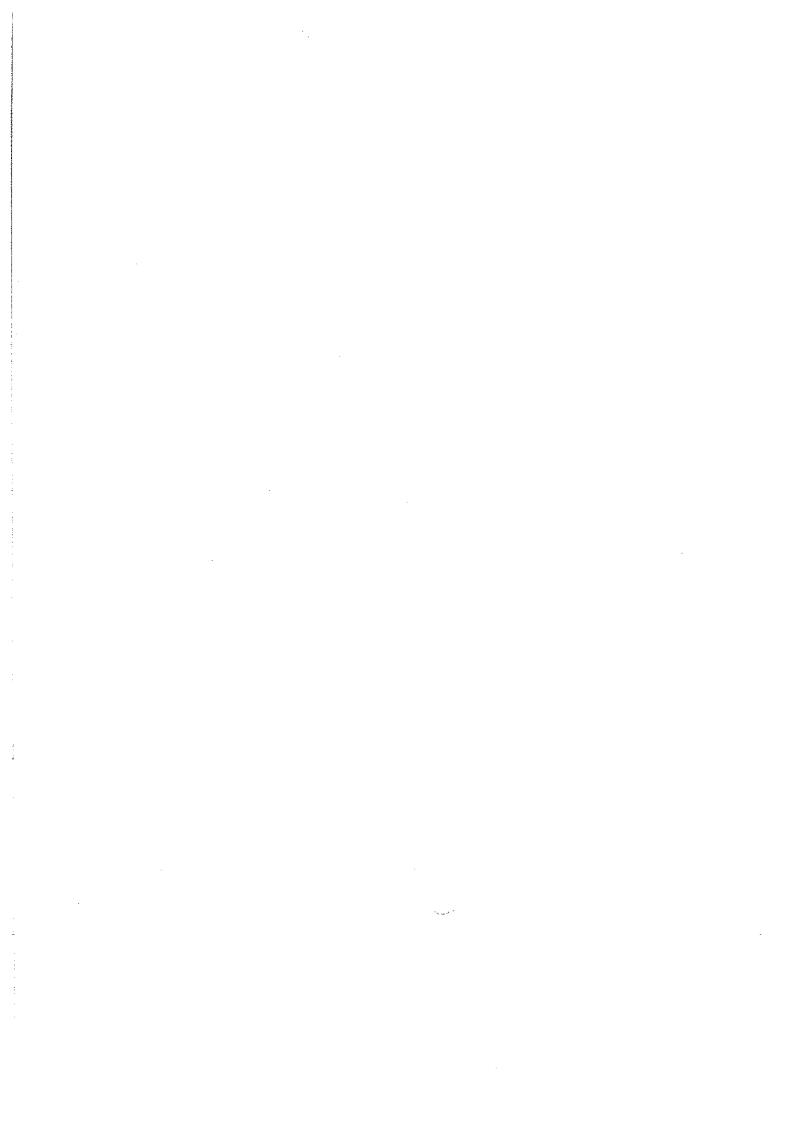
Low cost was an often cited motive for VCR use. Given access to a VCR, the cost of hiring pre-recorded film cassettes is comparatively low, especially if split four or five ways between members of the group. Relative cost was stressed particularly in relation to the cinema. In most cases cinema going was preferred to VCR use but many, especially among the younger adolescents, found the cinema too expensive to visit as often as they wishes.

The question of availability and cost is an important one, prosaic as it may at first appear. As Clarke (1980) stresses, while leisure is often represented as the realm of 'free' time and 'free' choice, and indeed remains an area of relative freedom, for many people leisure is neither free nor unconstrained by structural and cultural determinants. In particular, the relationship which working class adolescents have to leisure is disciplined by the cash relation of what is available.

In mid-adolescence the problem of leisure is especially acute. It was clear from the interviews that many respondents experienced themselves very much as in an 'age between', too old for childish pursuits and youth clubs, too young to be allowed entrance to more adult forms of enetertainment. Moreover, this problem cannot be solved merely by the provision by adults of greater facilities. Adolescence is a phase characterised by strivings for greater autonomy, strivings which manifest themselves not least in shifts in leisure patterns. Nowhere is this more evident than in adolescents' relation to traditional TV. In Sweden, TV use falls from a life-time high in the years immediately before puberty to a life time low in mid-adolescence. TV content becomes largely uninteresting (cf. Weibull, 1985); while TV viewing is an activity firmly rooted in the family-home context, which is where adolescents increasingly choose not to be. However, outside there are few realistic alternatives, with the result that they tend to occupy those areas and social spaces which are available e.g the parks, the streets and the arcades.

Results indicate that adolescent VCR users were almost universally critical of Swedish television, and were using VCR's as a cheap and exciting alternative to TV use. The VCR is very well suited to the purpose of increasing viewer autonomy, both at the individual and the group level. It greatly facilitates user choice and control over the place, conditions, time and content of viewing. This makes it difficult for parents (or anyone else!) to control effectively and increases its attraction as a focus for and generator of peer group interaction. In this respect it is analogous to the uses made by youth of popular music.

A further aspect of increased viewer choice and control is that it makes censorship and cultural policing much more difficult. As Willis (1978) has pointed out, all existing media are likely to be 'policed' by the dominant culture. Even rock is subjected to such policing by e.g the exclusion of records from the vital radio (and increasingly MTV) plays which are often the basis for success. However, a new medium always provides opportunities for certain groups to appropriate and use the



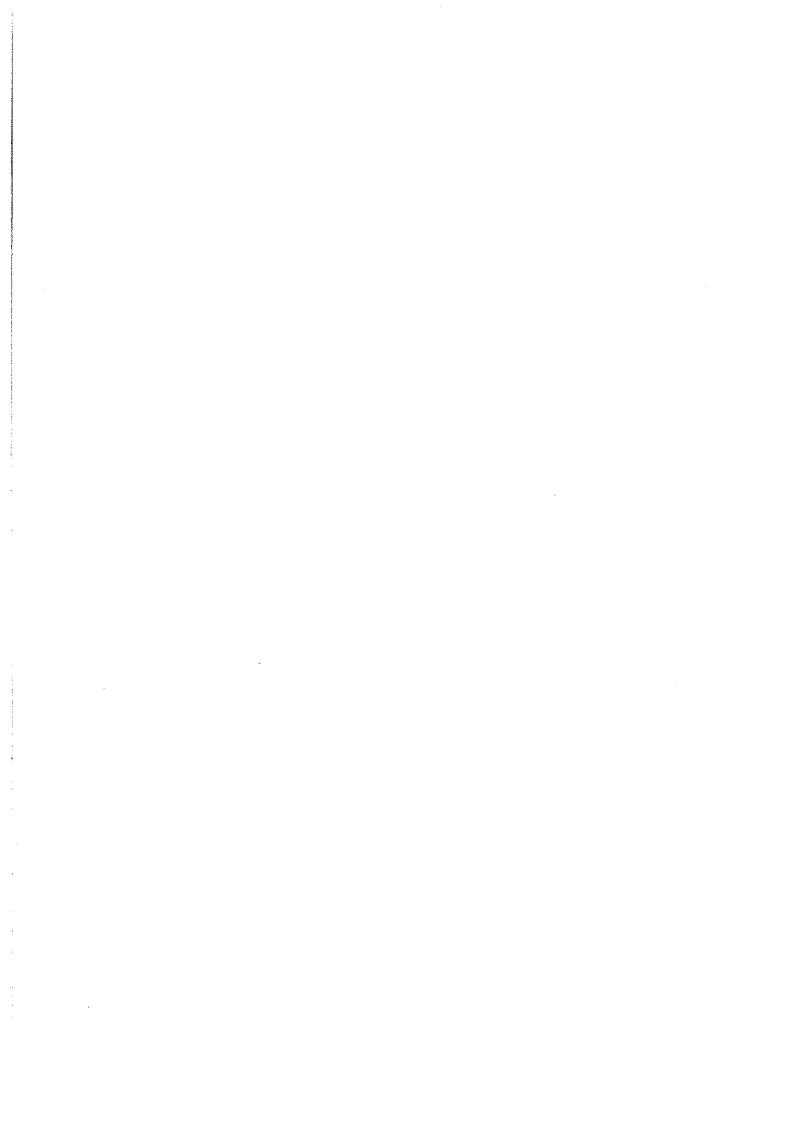
development in ways not anticipated or comprehended by dominant groups; providing a temporary space within which a group may act until the policing agencies of the mainstream culture realize the potentialities of the new form and move to control it more effectively. Some of the uses to which adolescents have put VCR's in Sweden may be seen as an excellent illustration of this process.

Just as music is an important aspect of youth subcultures, so group based VCR use may also develop subcultural characteristics. According to Brake (1980) youth subcultures represent a temporary escape, a free area between the control and authority of the adult world and the freedom amongst ones peers. Young people need an identity which separates them from the expectations and roles imposed by family, school and work.

The crucial condition for the emergence of new cultural forms is the existence, in effective interaction with one another, of a number of actors with similar problems of adjustment (Cohen, 1970). Subcultures arise from attempts collectively to resolve these experienced problems of adjustment, thereby generating forms of collective identity from which an individual identity can be achieved outside that ascribed by class, education and occupation. Empirically, clusters of subgroups are found in specific locations in the social structure (Brake, ibid). Insofar as a new subculture represents a new status system sanctioning behaviour disapproved of by the larger society, the acquisition of status within the new group is accompanied by a loss of status outside the group, which may in turn result in mutually hostile and contemptuous images (Cohen, ibid).

Swedish adolescents' VCR use manifested subcultural characteristics in at least two important respects. As Brake has also remarked, subcultures are basically explorations of masculinity. The display of bravado and tests of manliness are characteristic features of male peer groups in mid-adolescence. They are expressed in various forms of behaviour such as flirting with danger, demonstration of physical prowess and rule and law breaking. Studies have shown that the use made of VCR's for viewing pre-recorded cassettes containing very violent and gory scenes is explicable in these terms (Roe, 1983b; Roe and Salomonsson, 1983). While many young males expressed dislike of such films, they continue to watch them, 'because everyone else does'. Peer group pressure and fear of peer ridicule were recurrent themes in explaining why many adolescents who neither liked nor understood such films actually continue regularly to view them. Moreover, this phenomenon was almost exclusively male; indeed many of the females interviewed clearly perceived the reasons for such contradictory behaviour as merely a male demonstration of acting 'tough' and proving that they 'could take it'.

The use of VCR's for viewing violent and horrific films not otherwise available to adolescents was especially characteristic of underachieving, negative to school males (Roe, 1981). School achievement has consistently been found to be a good predictor of



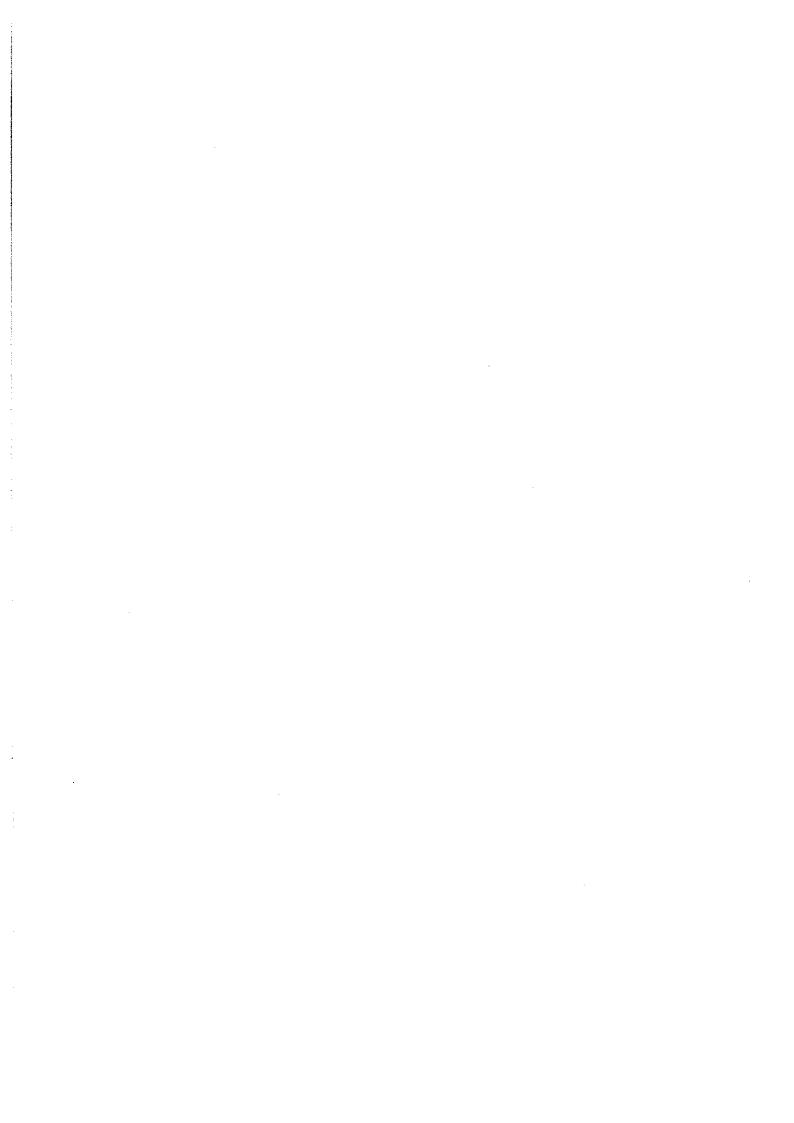
adolescents' VCR use. For example, (Roe, 1987b) obtained significant negative correlations between school achievement and frequency of use of films featuring gratuitous violence, karate, horror, pornography and police stories. In each of the geographical areas studied, low achieving VCR users viewed these categories more frequently than did high achieving VCR users. School achievement was found to be significantly related to home access to a VCR, amount of use, the size of the viewing group, the extent to which time-shifted TV programmes or pre-recorded cassettes constitute the predominant viewing fare, and the amount of viewing of more socially disapproved of types of content. In each case the association was negative i.e. below average achievers tend to have greater home access, view more frequently, in larger groups, and more often watch pre-recorded cassettes containing violent, horrific and pornographic material. School achievement has also been found to be significantly related to music video use (Roe and Löfgren, 1988).

The possibility that the relationships between school achievement and VCR use variables might result from the indirect influence of social background was investigated. However, the results indicated that, while social background is a significant factor in VCR use, an independent relationship between school achievement and VCR use remained.

A number of subcultural theorists have noted that the meaning which the school has for adolescents is an important and often overlooked factor in subcultures. It is significant that most subcultures tend to occur during the final years of the compulsory school career, usually when education is perceived as meaningless in terms of future prospects. The meaninglessness of school for many adolescents is central to any analysis of deviant and delinquent subcultures (cf. Phillips and Kelly, 1979; Roe, 1987d). Often, for these adolescents alternative investment is made in a subculture in which leisure and freedom from restraint are to the fore (Willis, 1977; Brake, ibid).

A causal chain may thus be postulated whereby differentiation by the school leads to the polarization of students, which can lead to the formation of pro- or anti-school attitudes which, in turn, may result in the formation of distinct subcultures (Hargreaves, 1967). These achievement related subcultures may then form distinct orientations to the media in general, and VCR's and rock music in particular (Roe, 1983a, 1987b, 1987c).

In short, there is evidence to suggest that some underachieving negative to school boys appropriated the VCR for socially disapproved of uses. In this way VCR use provided them with an anti-establishment profile whereby they could demonstrate their disapprobation with adult authority in general, and the school system in particular. VCR use, especially against the background of the moral campaign surrounding its arrival, thus became a means of expression for anti-school adolescent subcultures. Other typical forms of expression include involvement with socially disapproved of music subcultures (e.g. punk and heavy metal), drinking, delinquency and vandalism.



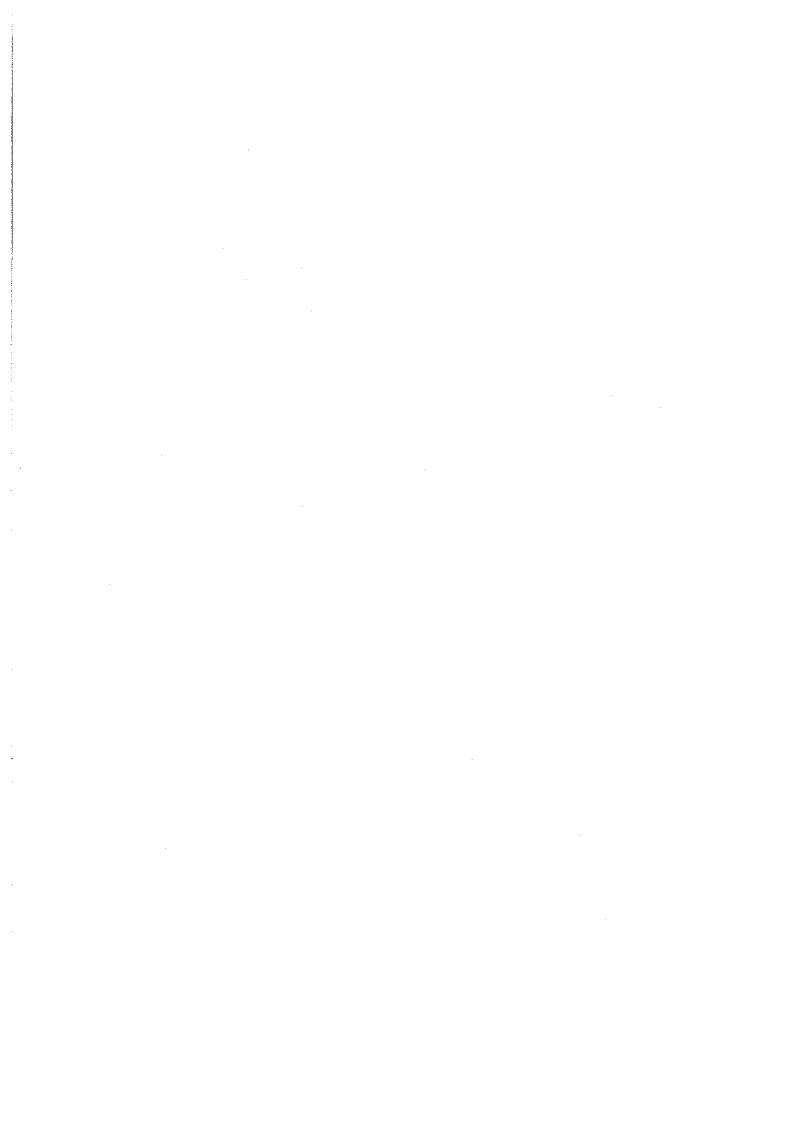
It is hardly surprising that those who have been labelled and rejected by the school often adopt behaviours which lead them into conflict with the dominant value system. In this way the school helps to promote the very phenomena against which it is supposed to be a protection. Hitherto, because we have tended to accept the ideology of schooling uncritically, we have usually taken the correlations between low school achievement and media use as demonstrating the harmful effects of the media (cf. Postman, 1986). However, there is now empirical evidence for the view that those ascribed low status by the school may, in turn, reject the school and embrace other values and cultural patterns, including specific patterns of media use (Roe, 1983a; 1987d).

In their typology of audience activity, Levy and Windahl (ibid) identify a dimension they term the 'qualitative orientation' of audience members toward the communication process. This orientation they then divide into three nominal values, (1) selectivity, (2) involvement, and (3) utility. 'Selectivity' refers to the process involving the non-random selection of one or more behavioural, perceptual or cognitive media related alternatives. By 'involvement' is meant the degree to which the audience member perceives a connection between him or herself and the media content; and, the degree to which the individual interacts psychologically with a medium or its messages. By 'utility' is meant the ways in which individuals use or anticipate using mass communications for manifold social and psychological purposes.

A further important dimension of audience activity defined is the `temporal'. This is concerned with whether audience activity occurs before, during or after exposure (ibid).

The research evidence concerning adolescents' VCR use in Sweden which is summarized in this paper provides clear support for the view that the audience is both active and selective in its media use. The adolescent VCR audience uses the VCR to achieve more or less clearly perceived gratifications and as an aid to group formation and identification. Thus, from using this technology, adolescent VCR users seek and obtain gratifications which go beyond the gratifications associated with content (Levy, 1987).

First, it is clear that the greater part of this VCR use is selective and involves not inconsiderable 'involvement before exposure'. Group viewing of hired pre-recorded film cassettes is clearly a non-random behaviour which requires no little organizational effort. Coordinating time and place for four to six individuals, choosing which film(s) to hire, hiring, operating the VCR, and returning the cassettes to the dealer within 24 hours is a feat deserving recognition. Temporarily, activity may begin days before actual exposure. Furthermore, as we have seen, this pre-exposure activity supports Levy and Windahls' hypothesis that such activity is linked to cognitive, diversionary and/or personal identity motives.



Second, the evidence indicates that adolescent VCR users were 'involved' with these pre-recorded films in the sense of perceiving a connection between their use and the extremely negative connotations which this use had (and to some extent still has) in society at large. Third, this involvement had 'utility' for certain groups of adolescents who wished to express their position vis a vis the dominant culture in general, and the school in particular. In this respect, it was the actual act of viewing certain types of contents which was charged with meaning rather than the specific contents themselves. This kind of use would, therefore, seem to be of the type which Levy (ibid) terms 'topic ritualism', where exposure is highly valued as something good in its own right.

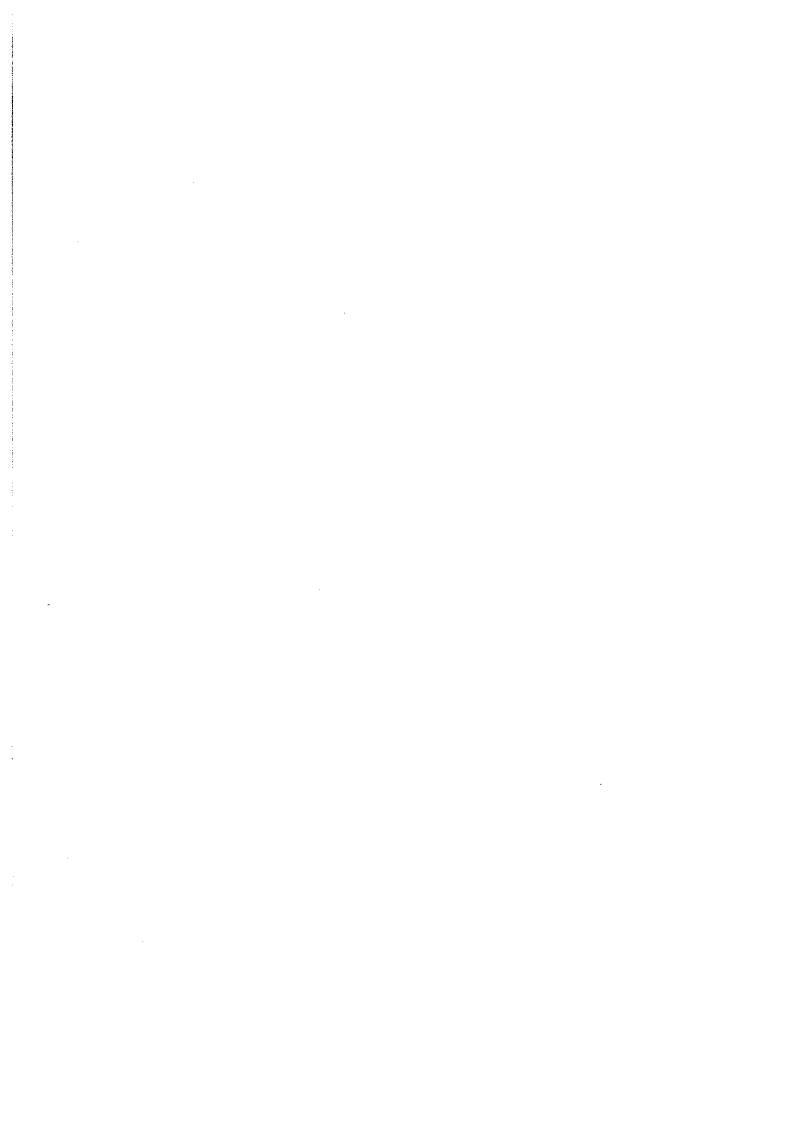
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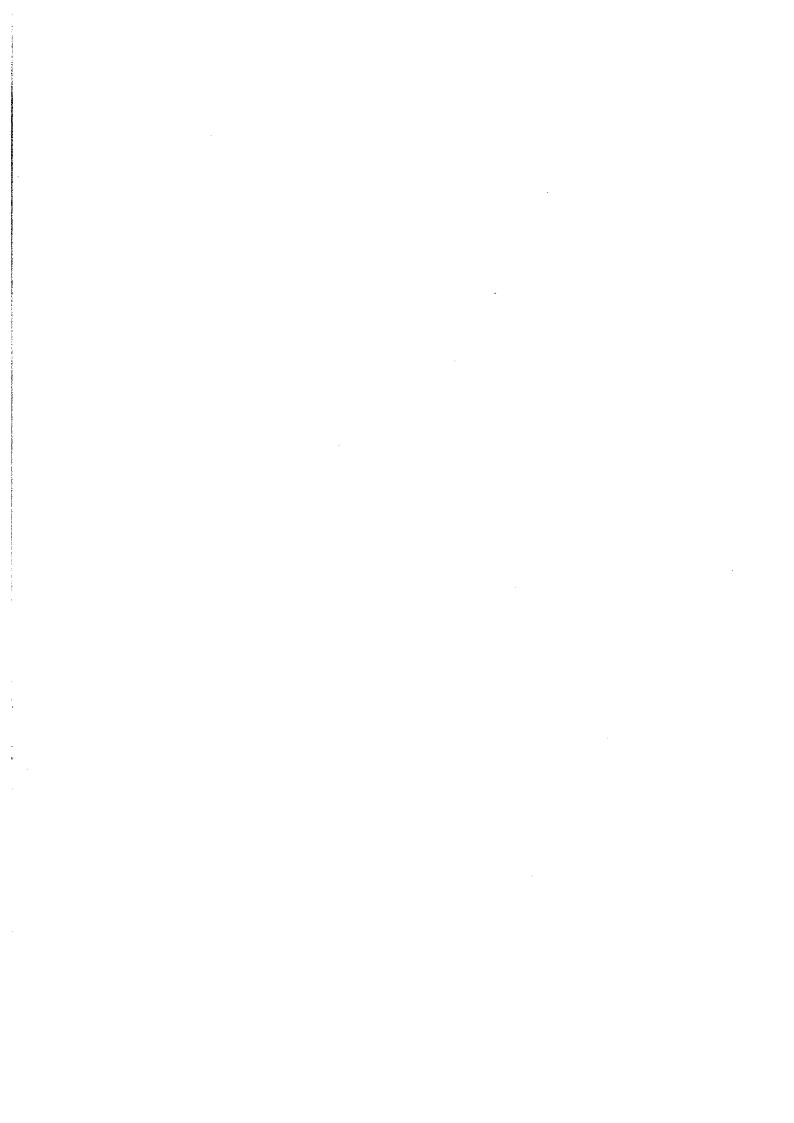


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