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We Are What We Are

It sneaks up on you when you least expect it. One second, your parents are a stable, supportive team who never left you in need of anything. The next moment, one of them is gone and you're suddenly raising your own mother. Although I appreciate her never letting me see her cry, I grew up before I started puberty. It's a common tale: single Latina mom moves from home to home with two daughters. Sometimes, she would get involved with men who wanted to hurt not only her, but her daughters as well. I grew up wanting to break out of the mold created for me, but often found myself manipulated by the media, specifically social media, and my peers. One memory, in particular, would be a group of girls in my cafeteria asking me why I was so quiet and boring. I realized that I had internalized my trauma and silently evaluated why they were so loud all the time. Furthermore, I had spent all my social energy on reconnecting with my mother again after years of emotional isolation and blogging. Tumblr was a huge part of my adolescence and helped me determine my interests and how I wanted to be presented as. There was a trendy "anti-social Tumblr famous kid" culture that I felt myself identify with. Consequently, each moment and each person in my upbringing played a part in who I identify as today.

We do not choose the way in which we represent ourselves due to the extensive influence surrounding us each day. Although we, as individuals, believe we are "our own people" and autonomous in our decision-making skills, we often fail to acknowledge the profound effect those around us have on the formation of our identities. According to "Media's Influence on

Social Norms and Identity Development of Youth on Applied Social Psychology”, “it [identity] is a socially constructed attribute” (Lea). Since it is determined by outside factors in our society, we have virtually no control over our identities. It is often said that our identities come from a place of insecurity, for instance, in *The Mask You Live In*, Joe Ehrman recalls how a particular confrontation with his father led to him pursuing a career in football. He painfully reflects, “Football became a tremendous place to hide. You can hide inside that helmet...the epitome of what it means to be a man in this culture. I thought if I could manifest as a hypermasculinity, that would somehow validate who and what I was. I ask every man to think what age they were, what was the context when somebody told you to be a man.” This same situation where the family members tear the child down can apply to many abusive households and is not considered unusual. Over the years, it has become a cultural normality to raise boys who fit into the “man” mold. The documentary as a whole illustrates the violent language and expectations men are forced to face each day, which forms their identities to the world. Now, this problem is finally acknowledged by mainstream culture, which may lead children to develop genuine identities of themselves in the future.

Our identities may also be formed through the type of media we consume. As a continuing theme in *The Mask You Live In*, due to their societal expectations, men are more likely pursue career interests that prove their masculinity. Several teenagers stated they wanted to become athletes because of the association with strength and aggression. Films, such as *Whiplash*, *Rocky*, *The Wolf of Wall Street* and countless more, advocate hypermasculinity as the epitome of identifying as a man. Likewise, we see this pattern to a larger degree in how women are represented as hypersexualized objects, for instance in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, *Transformers*, and *From Dusk Till Dawn*. As a result, women who do not identify with this

male-oriented expectation tend to feel subpar compared to how they are “supposed” to be, leading to the formation of an opposing identity controlled (and criticized) by the media. Another media realm, social media, specifically in this day and age, play a large part in the way in which we represent ourselves. Instagram Stars and Youtubers often express their sentiments towards certain trends, as well as political affiliations and sexuality. Hundreds of thousands of teenagers and adults form their identities surrounding whichever celebrity or character they find most appealing. Within fictional and non-fictional figures in the media, we use aspects of their personalities to make our own.

It is incredible to think that people we have never met can contribute to such a large part in how we identify. From the music we listen to, to the shows we watch, we see the potential in ourselves to become more like these figures. Although the media burdens us with negative stereotypes and portrayals as demonstrated above, there is also a positive side to its power of influence. For instance, the media enjoys depicting the underdog character rising to the top of the social hierarchy through genuine means (e.g. Soundcloud artists, *Remember the Titans*, etc.). Personally, I have always admired characters with a significant growth and honest becoming over characters who cheated their ways through their endeavors. Although media underdogs often have all the odds turned against them, their struggle to overcome their situation is often resonated by audiences, leading to an influence in identity. As the viewers, we may begin to portray certain aspects of the character, for instance, a stronger sense of independence or a development of long-term goals. Through this influence, the media is proven to play a large part in the way we identify.

Not only are we products of our experiences and the media, but it is not possible for us to be in full control of our identity because most of it rests in a reaction. We often become known

for certain characteristics that we may or may not have been aware were so distinct. An example of this would be the labels young adults associate with within a high school environment in *High School's Secret Life*, "The computer geeks look up at the natural helpers as if they are angels. The rowdy boys, the fat girl, the boy swatting, the arty girls, the pale orchestra kids, the boy with a T-shirt that says Pornstar," (White 17). Such social groups may have been brought together by a particular interest; such interest is now an integral part of how they are viewed by the world. An identification is first and foremost a distinction to tell someone apart from another, which adds to the author's notion that cliques are tools to feeling like we belong. The development of our identities serves as an oxymoron: we want to feel different only to feel the same. Each person has their own unique schemas over each identity, allowing them to overlap at times.

It matters that we do not choose our identities because it allows us to be aware of our actions and interests and their societal impacts. We may not realize one of our interests is problematic or offensive, which is why it is important that our identities are not inevitably determined by our own minds. Upon realizing a certain aspect in the media influences us in such a way that hinders our personal growth and relationships with others, we have the choice to change what we view. Similarly, with life experiences, we decide whether we internalize them or learn from them. By not choosing the way in which we represent ourselves, we are able to reflect on how our identities affect society and decide whether to continue to pursue our interests. Although we have essentially no control over how we're represented, we do decide the core of our character.

Merriam Webster's first definition for character is "a conventionalized graphic device placed on an object as an indication of ownership, origin, or relationship." Since each person's indication is unique, this implies that a person's character is what determines how we identify

them because it is distinguishable. Consequently, character and identity are correlated and dependent, but not necessarily interchangeable. For instance, someone with a cynical character is identified as a striking contrast from someone with an optimistic character. Through this distinction, our sense of schema comes into play, and as a result, sorts them into categories within our brains. Within these categories, we are able to make expectations in our minds that guide us on how to treat said person (e.g. speaking to a professor differently than you would with your cousin). These expectations are important because they either encourage the way we identify, or discourage it and compel us to change. By our character determining our identity, continuous differences in perception by people are what shape us through our lifetime.

This leads to an interesting array of identity crises through the entirety of our lives. Ironically, an identity crisis contributes towards a large part of who we are. A lack of security and submission to societal expectations, although it feels it may be, is not a sign we are approaching the end of our lives. Like an existential crisis, an important part of our functionality is stripped away from us, allowing for room for growth in our identities. Accordingly, losing a part of who you are makes room for a new one. A lack of a sense of identity does not lead to a creation of an identity designated by ourselves, but instead a new one influenced by the media and society. This “new” identity formed is a result of a loss and discovery, which explains the extreme reaction perceived by peers and oneself during an identity crises. The fall and rise of a new identity could be compared to a butterfly’s metamorphosis: having a sense of who you were before but with newfound revelation, which is the epitome of an identity crisis itself.

The ultimate question would be: If we are defined by our experiences, then who are we before we experience anything? Studies have shown that at birth, we are born with each possible capability we’re supposed to have throughout our lifetimes. This includes our sexualities, gender,

physical abilities, and physical characteristics. It may be that seemingly hereditary components, or things we can't help, are what we're born with. However, our substantial interests are developed over our lifetime. As stated prior, teenagers and adults are interested in surrounding themselves with aspects of whichever celebrity or character they find most appealing. We are influenced by this throughout our lives, allowing our identities to evolve. The gaps between these evolutions are what we consider identity crises. In retrospect, we are born into our first identity crises and spend the rest of our lives figuring ourselves out.

As a whole, the movies we watch, the music we listen to, and the family members that guide us throughout life contribute towards the forming of our identities and character. Since we are also identified and supported by the reaction we receive from society, we can recognize what aspect of ourselves should be changed and what stays. Similarly, our character assists in this concept of a reaction forming our identities because it determines how people may treat us, as well as how we may treat people. Today's exposure of different identities has allowed for the recognition and respect of previously ostracized peoples, which is why it is important to discuss the impact our peers and media have on ourselves. Through unique upbringings and heightened intersectionality, such identities are beginning to be realistically portrayed in the media, resulting in a continuation of the cycle geared towards creating our identities and determining our character.