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'Reading *YES*. Interpretive Repertoires and Identity Construction in Dutch Teenage Magazines'

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Reading *YES*. Interpretive Repertoires and Identity Construction in Dutch Teenage Magazines

Abstract

Analysis of interviews with Dutch teenage readers of the teenage girls' magazine *Yes* demonstrates various ways in which girls use media content to construct gender identity. Theoretical concepts drawn from a symbolic interactionist perspective and reconstruction of interpretive repertoires illustrate the complex mechanism of identity construction, enabled by the process of reading. The results indicate that reading magazines can be considered analogous to interaction in process.

1. Background: meaning and gender

Sociological interest in the concept of identity has grown exponentially during the past decade. Theories of modernization, globalization or detraditionalization (i.e., Heelas, Lash & Morris 1996) account for several aspects of modern life. This trend has not bypassed the field of communication research either as the work of Meyrowitz (1985), Thompson (1995), Grodin and Lindlof (1996) and Turkle (1997) suggests. These scholars' main assumption is that the media are part and parcel of the dynamics of modernization. My analysis refers to this assumption, concentrating on the process of identity construction and illustrating it by means of interviews with readers of the Dutch girls' magazine *Yes*^[1]. The present study aims to supplement research into the reading of women's magazines which is mainly conducted from the viewpoint of women's studies (e.g., McRobbie & Garber 1976; Winship 1987; Van Zoonen & Hermes 1987; Hermes 1993) with a focus upon the construction of gender identity. For instance, Dutch scholars Van Zoonen and Hermes point out that magazines are particularly important for female adolescents in the process of sex role socialization. Thus before actually entering into relationships with the other sex, girls have already adopted from parents, friends and media numerous ideas about boys (De Waal 1989). Besides magazines, and other media, institutions such as family, school and peer group are important as a life-world and background of definition and interpretation on which this analysis is built.

Several studies of identity construction of teenage girls have shown that girls develop a so-called 'bedroom culture' and a subculture oriented strongly towards relations between

couples. By talking endlessly about boys, girls sharpen their insights into their own identity as girls. In this way they learn how to behave and be prepared for their future role as a woman (De Waal 1987).

My analysis re-examines interviews conducted by Van Knippenberg and De Lange (1995), focussed on the importance of the magazine *Yes* for girls' subculture and daily life. Their results point out that girls discuss the contents of the magazine, they regularly circulate issues among themselves, and many of them are introduced to *Yes* by girlfriends. Their conclusion is that *Yes* enhances the femininity of the reader because the magazine relates to already existing notions of gender originated by other institutions. *Yes* offers assistance in developing ideas about femininity (1995:67).

The difficulty with this and other analyses is that the importance attributed to women's magazines for the construction of gender identity is predicated simply on their popularity or on grounds of their profiles and contents. What lacks, however, is a theoretical perspective to understand respondents' statements in terms of the process of identity construction.

Hermes (1989) attempts such an approach by treating the reading of women's magazines as empowerment i.e. the construction of authority and identity. Hermes says that reading about experiences of other women produces a form of subjective knowledge that contributes to the process of becoming a subject. Reading is a game of comparison of oneself with speakers featured in an article, which produces a sense of identity: 'I am like this or I am more like that.' What we can learn from this conception is that the construction of identity (becoming a subject) is a consequence of comparison. This seems plausible although Hermes does not explain the 'how' and 'why' of this process. Partial explanations, such as 'para-social interaction' (Horton & Wohl 1956), later adopted by Thompson (1985: 218) as 'mediated quasi-interaction', fit naturally in the encompassing and classical theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism on identity construction.

2. Symbolic interactionist perspective

Symbolic interactionism assumes the reflexivity of human thought and (self)consciousness. Its main thrust is directed towards processes of interaction and attribution of meaning. I consider the reading of *Yes* as a form of interaction between reader and text, that is one which generates meaning functional in daily life, for instance in a girls' subculture. I consider identity construction principally as a process of positioning individuals among other community members. This concept of identity emphasizes interrelationships between an individual and society (cf. 'Self' and 'Society', Mead 1934). In this perspective both levels are interrelated: the self is always a social self and a product of interactions and relationships with others (Mead 1934: 140).

Any meaning is always a social meaning. This means that so-called '*significant others*', 'reflexivity' (self-objectivation) and '*role-taking*' (taking the perspective of the other) are the core of identity construction. In this perspective interaction with significant others is of vital importance for the evolving identity. During socialization, the number of significant others increases until an individual has incorporated the 'generalized other', that is all socially relevant knowledge that a competent member of society needs to survive.

Because identity construction is an outstanding example of a social and relational process and because magazines can only be a distant (mediated) resource in this process, I want to explore whether the magazine *Yes* is of any importance for identity development, for instance by functioning as a symbolic significant other.

Secondly, my analysis of identity construction will be confined to relations of similarity and difference. In fact identity is a multidimensional phenomenon that can be analysed from different points of view, for instance from a historical or interactionist point of view, and be understood as a social or personal identity. I consider an awareness of 'similarity and difference' between the self and other as one of the central issues of identity construction.

Interpretive repertoires and meaning

In relation to reading a girls' magazine and processes of meaning and definition, Hermes and Schutgens (1991) and Hermes (1993) use the concept of 'interpretive repertoires' (systematically recurring terms) that readers use to convey meaning and that can be reconstructed in order to discover underlying structures of meaning (Hermes 1993: 59).

This seems to be an appropriate starting point for analysis, but contrary to the linguistic approach adopted from Potter and Wetherell (1987), my approach is directed to the content of meaning. In this way I refer to the symbolic interactionist concept of 'perspective', in which the 'definition of the situation' is the focal point (Shibutani 1955; Becker et al 1961; Hijmans 1985). This implies that individual and shared meanings are the point of interest rather than linguistic aspects of the discourse.

3. Research goal and design

My aim is to find out whether symbolic-interactionist perspective provides clarity into the question of whether and how reading of *Yes* contributes to identity construction.^[2] I have searched for an answer to this question by means of two sub-questions which, given the limited scope of the research sample, can provide tentative but interesting answers:

1. How is *Yes* read? Which interpretive repertoires can be distinguished?
2. What is its relation to identity formation? Does *Yes* fulfil the function of a symbolic Significant Other?

Social scientific research into the production of meaning belongs to the interpretive or qualitative paradigm, which since the nineteen-eighties has enjoyed increasing popularity also in media studies (Servaes & Frissen 1997). In a qualitative paradigm the central idea is that social action is based on meaning production ('constructions') or 'definitions of the situation.' This type of research requires that the researchers' analysis and interpretations are grounded in acting subjects (the so called 'actors perspective').

In keeping with this, comprehensive semi-structured interviews were performed with 21 girls from the target readership. The girls were asked to reconstruct their reading experience, using copies of the magazine as a point of reference. This sample is not statistically representative but contrastive enough in order to cover sufficiently concrete variations of meaning. Both 'faithful' and former female readers, individual girls and small groups were interviewed. ^[3]

The analysis was performed by means of transcripts of interviews and largely followed the initial phases of the Grounded Theory of Glaser and Strauss (Wester 1995). Qualitative analysis is a comparative study of meanings found in the field, objectivated by constant comparison into substantive and formal meanings. I grouped substantive meanings of the reading experiences into interpretive repertoires^[4].

4. Repertoires

Previous research on repertoires makes clear that one particular magazine can be read in a variety of ways, that is, different readers assign different meanings to it and even one individual reader may assign several, sometimes even contradictory meanings to reading a particular magazine (Hermes 1989; 1993; Van Selm 1995). Repertoire-research is aimed at discovering and designating differences and similarities in the attribution of meaning, the most common similarity in this case being the image of *Yes* cherished by female readers, the youngest included. They see it as a magazine addressed to a particular age group of girls, and one which responds to 'needs and problems of girls of this age.' As one fourteen-year-old said: 'You know, each generation grows up with *Yes*.' This idea of generation can be roughly detected in two different groups of female readers. On the one hand, there are 'marginal' readers who mostly tell their stories in retrospect, and on the other, 'faithful' ones, for whom reading *Yes* is an integral part of life. Differences between the two groups, however, coincide neither exactly with age differences (some older readers belong to the 'faithful' group and some younger ones to the 'marginal' group) nor with particular repertoires. Rather, repertoires that we have distinguished are (or were) applied to both groups.

The question 'how' the magazine is read is given a literal answer: 'alone' or 'in a group of girlfriends.' In the latter case particular repertoires surface, such as for example 'malicious joy repertoire' which reveals the group dynamic of a teenage girls' culture. Reading in a group intensifies mutual bonds, and since *Yes* certainly functions as an

incitement to conversation, its socially and substantially mediating role is obvious. Social mediation is visible in the 'go-between repertoire', whereas in 'encyclopaedia' and 'romantic-ritual' repertoires the subject matter of *Yes* comes to the foreground. Readers make ample use of the five repertoires. Each reader applies several repertoires, although not necessarily all five. Repertoires make it clear that *Yes* is significant but not exclusively for its cognitive aspects. Besides, the magazine is preoccupied with daily concerns. We will see that *Yes* can be used in an instrumental manner. It serves as a material for conversation and is functional as a source of easy entertainment, as a form of amusement and as a social binding agent.

The (malicious) joy repertoire

Both individual respondents as well as group conversations mention a collective reading experience. Although this repertoire is formulated upon reconstructed experiences, this way of reading is first of all functional in groups. Especially letters to editor and agony columns give cause for jokes and gossip about other people's problems. The function of (malicious) joy for the group becomes clear in the extract of a group interview below in which a 13-year-old girl answers the question whether other members of the family also read *Yes*:

R2: 'Yes, my sister and my sister's girlfriends do too. My sister's boyfriend also. And then they will make jokes and laugh if they read about a problem'

I: Do you never talk about what they write in *Yes*?

R2: 'Yes, we do, about how stupid these problems are. For example we'd sit in the hall and name all these problems one by one, and then I am 'Dear Abby' and then we sit and discuss it (laugh).' ^[5]

Later on in the same interview it appears not to be the only repertoire with which this 13-year-old girl reads and interprets *Yes*. In other examples of this repertoire I discovered an ambivalent attitude towards the magazine contents, both distance and involvement. *Yes* is thus read in various ways at once or in various ways changing in time. Marginal and less interested readers seem especially prone to draw from this repertoire. Interestingly, these readers began the conversation by stressing this repertoire as if to convince interviewers that reading *Yes* was but a stage in their life they had already passed. Those readers also emphasise its limited scope and insufficient response to their interests.

Present first of all in groups, this repertoire works to intensify group cohesion. Jokes have also this function of making it emphatically clear for readers themselves and others that in the meantime they have already gone 'further' or, to the contrary, that they are not so advanced. This repertoire expresses thus emotional distance.

The girlfriend-repertoire

This repertoire is the opposite of the previous one, and expresses affective engagement. It is quite diffuse and not confined to specific columns but relates to the magazine as a whole. Readers have an affective bond as an individual with *Yes* and the way in which matters important for girls are introduced. The repertoire is coloured by positive feelings, as *Yes* ideally responds to girls' intimate problems. Needless to say, especially faithful readers in the sample draw from this repertoire, although marginal readers also recognise it from the past. The extract below presents a 24-year-old former reader:

R: 'I have a feeling that it serves a specific function.

I: What function is it?

R: For this target group it's a confidante. Or how should I put it, well, you see familiar things in it; you say I know that too. You learn about problems others have. It is also nice to read about your own problems, it's gives you a nice feeling. It's like talking about such things with your friends, you talk like that with *Yes*. I would find it a pity if something like that disappeared.'

Respondents feel a confidential, personal bond, as expressions connoting feelings and affections suggest. They call *Yes* 'pleasant', 'relaxing', 'attractive' and 'simply nice' or 'funny' and 'cute'. A sense of familiarity, relevance, and confirmation seem to be common denominators that raise confidence in readers. Calling *Yes* a genuine partner for conversation, suggests that my starting notion of reading as a form of (indirect) interaction with the text was justified.

The go-between repertoire

Individual reading of *Yes* can also contribute to collective girls' culture, providing material for conversation or, which is quite common, as a latent manner of signalling one's own problems towards friends or parents. *Yes* functions then as a safety switch between an individual and a group. Just like in the example below, where by means of *Yes* an 18-year-old vocational medical school student tries to say something about herself:

I: 'Are there also any subjects in *Yes* about which you don't talk with anybody or only with certain people because they are too personal?

R: Yes, only if it concerns me. But in *Yes* it is about others, so you can talk about it ...

I: You said it was about those girls, not about you. Do you ever make yourself a subject of conversation after you read *Yes*?

R: Yes, sometimes. Most often it starts like, "Have you read in *Yes* that...", and that I've experienced something like that too. It does happen.

I: Is it easier then to talk?

R: Yes, it is, because then I can say: "I've read it in *Yes* and I've experienced that myself too."

I: Does it happen often after you've read *Yes*?

R: Yes, it does, quite a lot'.

The magazine appeared to be socially mediating for faithful readers. Its authority is then strategically employed for example about such issues which might be controversial for parents as the age to go out or to solve tricky problems without exposing oneself to criticism. The latter seems touchy for most girls in the sample. Girls anticipate mutual critical looks, and *Yes* plays an intermediary role enabling them to avoid direct criticism.

Apart from the discussed repertoires which betray quite common meanings and social uses of the magazine, we have distinguished two repertoires which quite substantially rely on information value of particular columns. Yet *Yes* is first of all perceived as an 'advice magazine', as Van Knippenberg and De Lange (1995:66) conclude. Together these repertoires form the 'hard core' of its reading. I term this core 'hard' because both these repertoires have been noted with almost all studied interviewees. The core consists of two complementary parts. Opposed to the realism of 'encyclopaedia', there is the idealism of 'romantic ritual.' Together they constitute a large part of the 'socialising potential' of *Yes*.

The encyclopaedic repertoire

Practical and informative aspects of fashion journalism, physical care and trendy life-style products ('girls' stuff') are highly appreciated. Readers who distance themselves from *Yes* seem to hang on to this repertoire. As a 15-year-old reader says, it provides directly usable knowledge: 'Yes, but about those looks, I find it really useful. You learn things about what to do'. In the following another 15-year-old tells about the most interesting column:

R: 'Those questions and such a story at the end, and stories about things that really happened, for example about a girl whose mother died; I always like such stories ... Now, I know a girl who also lost her mother. And then I think I'll read a bit first, you know... I think because I know such a person ... and then you look how they describe these things and how they explain these problems ...'

An agony-column aspect oriented towards solving problems is a supplement to practical-informative aspects of this repertoire. Questions from the agony and advice column can function not only as a source of (malicious) joy but can also raise sympathy for and curiosity about described cases. That column also constitutes part of the 'hard core.' It attracts the interviewees and is mentioned often as an occasion to exchange ideas with

others. Readers are interested not only in advice but also in the variety of opinions and want to confront their opinions with those of others.

Yes plays an obviously important function in the construction of girls' culture. By providing a forum for exchange of ideas and an occasion to laugh and talk together, Yes consolidates them as a group. As a variety of culture, girls' culture differs from other cultures, and especially from that of boys even though the two groups are strongly oriented towards each other. It is striking that girls' and boys' cultures are two separate worlds; even girls who have brothers are still curious. At least, these girls seem to absolutely distrust their own practical knowledge and remain interested in opinions in Yes. Only when they have had a boyfriend for some time, can this curiosity decrease although it can just as well intensify, as the following example suggests:

R: 'Recently I've read: "Boys' sensitive spots". Then I kept on reading.'

I: What do you think about it?

R: I like it. It's useful because I have a boyfriend and then it's good to know such things. And when I have problems with my boyfriend, I can read: do this, or do that ... I try things out.'

(15 years)

Boys are different, and in Yes you can read *how* different they are. The magazine functions as an expert intermediary between the two cultures, in this way cultivating differences between them. The opposite sex's mystery seems a strong motive to read Yes as one of its functions is to provide knowledge about the world of boys' experience and the practice of dating. Many faithful readers appeared highly curious about boys' ideas and opinions and build their genuine knowledge in the way as described below:

R: '... Fantasising about boys, you know something about how they feel. "When they act rough, they like you" and so on. Or: "When you tease them, they like you", and that's what I wasn't aware of, but I learnt that from Yes.' (23 years)

This repertoire is amply represented in the interview data, and it seems an important way of reading it. Both marginal and faithful readers draw from this repertoire a wide range of facts about physical appearance, health and lifestyle. Besides, they learn about themselves and others by empathising with people described in particular situations and by confronting their own opinions with those of others.

The romantic ritual repertoire

Placing oneself in an imaginary way into a (fictive) situation of others is emphatically present in this repertoire, in such a way that this manner of reading can be termed a form of idealism. This repertoire makes it clear that the fictive character of romantic stories in

Yes is alluring for both faithful and marginal readers, even if they read it but sporadically. In fact very few readers show no interest at all. For this reason, this repertoire, apart from the 'encyclopaedia', makes part of the reading 'hard core' of reading Yes. Readers in the research sample find narrative form interesting and exciting, and even though they realise it is not totally true but exaggerated and 'made more attractive', they experience this imaginary quality as crucial in the sense that it can happen to them as well.

Stories are read in bed, in the intimacy of one's own room and are regarded as 'something really for you' so that you can nicely dream away while reading. Just as in the quotation below, it becomes clear that 'meeting' is an often-mentioned topic especially for girls who have no boyfriend and who enjoy drifting away in a fantasy world. In the example below a 24-year-old explains why the romantic short story column is her favourite:

I: 'And what do you like so much about it?

R: That they meet and that it has a happy ending. You know simply before that happy ending but it is always exciting to read anyway. I simply like those stories when there is a story to tell in it. That's why I like those columns, it's really a story to tell; it started so and so, and then it ended so and so ... The story develops, there are exciting things in it. It begins, and then I read how it ends ... I always like to read about what those people experience, I like to read those stories.'

Other examples manifest that not what 'is' but what 'could be' really matters. Imagination, (day)dreaming and fantasy are ways to anticipate the domain of love relations and problems that belong there. Romantic relations, love and intimacy, according to Illouz (1997), form the main part of what is called 'the romantic utopia', one of foundations of contemporary culture. Part of it is learning the 'vocabulary of feelings', which seems to be one of the functions of this repertoire.

The underlying idea of the 'ritual' element of this repertoire is that respondents indicate that what really matters is not a particular content but rather repetition of a certain form, an exciting love story in which a handsome young man must conquer a heroine's heart, or the other way round. Re-reading of old Yes issues while staying overnight at one's friend's place, on holidays or in other circumstances is always a pleasant way to spend time. As one marginal reader put it, 'feelings and human relations are interesting anyway.'

Thus this repertoire relies on exaggerated human emotionality, the not real but not totally impossible either, projected onto future scenarios. We can describe it as a form of future-oriented, anticipating socialisation that can take group forms, and as such is related to the already discussed girls' culture.

5. Repertoires and identity construction

The repertoires show that *Yes* can be read simultaneously in a number of divergent ways. We could see a combination of distance and involvement, as well as one or the other predominating. Analysing identity development as a social process, we have seen *Yes* first of all as fulfilling the role of positive or, possibly, negative instruction. In this sense *Yes* is a symbolic resource used for identity construction. The magazine provides material for conversation and analysis, and information about facts and people. We have defined its reading core as a combination of realism and idealism, as a double source of knowledge and imagination from which to draw. *Yes* mediates not only thematically but also socially. The authority attributed to *Yes* suggests that it can be treated as a symbolic Significant Other.

As a form of openness, emotional involvement with Significant Others is a condition of identity construction. All repertoires reveal the various degrees to which the readers bond emotionally with the content of the magazine. With the 'malicious joy' repertoire the bond is negative (which, however, can be constructive in identity construction), whereas with the 'girlfriend' it is obviously positive. Being open towards the content of *Yes* provides space for the construction of one's identity, or the process of identification. In symbolic interactionism identification means both a process of acquiring identity as well as ascribing identity to others. In the field of media Donders (1989) discusses affective bonds between viewers and television programmes contents, and reaches the conclusion that identification is an assumption that accounts both for learning and conformity of the media audience. Fuss studies identification from the psychoanalytical perspective, surprisingly close to symbolic interactionism, saying that: 'Identification is the detour through which the other defines a self' (1995:2). In my concept, identification is a process of comparison, a play of similarity and difference between a self and others, between one's own and other groups, in order to define one's own place among others. As realisation of 'similarity and difference', and realisation of uniqueness, identity is a (temporary) result of a process in which we always relate and situate ourselves towards and between others. In this sense Hermes' definition of reading as 'comparing' with the feeling 'I am this and that' or 'rather that' (1989:289) should indeed be interpreted as an expression of identification.

Identity construction as a process is visible in the interview data in the *role-taking* mechanism, emphasised by Mead (1934) as the social origin of identity. Identity, just like thinking, consists in cooperation between 'I' and others. In symbolic interactionism *role-taking* is the source of identity as a form of taking over of and placing oneself in others' position. This process is a fundamental human property related to reflection. Being aware of the other produces one's self-awareness, i.e., realisation that you are an other and yet at the same time participating in one and the same culture. A self is always partly a socialised self, endowed with cultural knowledge necessary to survive in a group. Thus identification and *role-taking* should be regarded as learning and teaching processes that involve more than a subjective form of knowing. As Hermes claims (1989:289) from the point of view of socialisation, it is precisely objective forms of knowing that are necessary.

As we mentioned above, reading Yes functions as a source of knowledge and imagination.

In the following part I will illustrate what I mean by identification and role-taking as they appear in repertoires, and give an answer to the question whether Yes can be regarded as a symbolic Significant Other. First, I will concentrate on identification as a manifestation of relations of similarity and difference. Positive identification relies on similarity to the content of Yes whereas negative identification underlines difference to and emotional distance from it. These relations are first of all manifested in drawing symbolic borders and symbolic inclusion and exclusion. Subsequently, using central columns from the core repertoires, I will discuss identification in its cognitive aspect.

Negative identification

Just as in repertoire '(malicious) joy', difference to the magazine content is the main principle. In this case a reader makes it clear what she does not want to be like or what she has already grown out of. Here Yes is no Significant Other (any more) but rather helps a reader in defining her position towards others through drawing symbolic borders between herself and the Yes readership. Precisely by accentuating differences, the reader realises fully and makes it clear to others that her identity is 'different.' See the extract below in which a 13-year-old and a 14-year-old talk about stories which they find too romantic and too ideal:

I: 'Would you like it more if something else was written there?'

R2: I like it as it is.

R1: Yes, perhaps you do because you think it's ridiculous. Perhaps that's exactly why you like it, you get a better feeling because you're not such a romantic person. At least I mean I'm not.'

The above extract illustrates the idea that identity always involves a relation towards others, and in this case this relation is negative. As mentioned above, with this repertoire reader's emotional distance can be a sign of identity construction in process, and symbolic borders can be a symptom that certain realms of meaning are not accepted (any longer). The present identity may be at odds with the magazine content and therefore rejected.

Positive identification

The process opposed to the above can be detected first of all in the 'girlfriend' repertoire, and somewhat less prominently in the 'go-between' repertoire. In a general sense, Yes

functions here as a symbolic Significant Other, to which female – especially young - readers feel positively attracted. As one of them puts it:

R: 'When you look at them in a photo, you think, wow, I'd like that too. Sometimes in stories it also makes me think that I'd react this way myself too.'

I: Do you find it right that...

R: Yes, I do, I think that's what you're in fact looking for because if you get a story about somebody totally different to you, you find it interesting. But I believe it's not that you go and buy *Yes* to see, hey, what a strange person that is.' (15 years)

An 18-year-old Moroccan girl who has been a reader of *Yes* for three years but who is not allowed by her parents to subscribe to it represents a curious case in which positive identification means at the same time acculturation:

R: ... 'Sex and that kind of subjects, we don't talk about it at home. I've been brought up this way. And that's why I love to read about such things in this magazine. Then you simply know everything about sex and that kind of things.'

R: '*Yes* talks about things I like and my parents don't. I am for what they write in *Yes*.'

Recognition and a concomitant sense of similarity seem to be essential as a 15-year-old says: 'You get to read things you recognize yourself in '. Processes of positive and negative identification related to these repertoires represent largely the role reading *Yes* plays for the readers in the sample as a common point of comparison and identification. Through defining similarities and differences in relation to *Yes*, an individual works on her self-conscious identity. Taking all the readings together, as a Significant Other, *Yes* does not have a sharply defined but merely a general profile. An analysis of core repertoires suggests that readers' relation towards columns can quite differ. In fact, *Yes* provides various 'others' scattered over columns which all together represent a 'generalised other' of girls' culture and partly of a larger culture as well. In this way identity construction reaches a different stage. Given their age, teenage girls possess an already developed self-awareness and will be first of all oriented towards internalisation of *gender* aspects as a relatively new element of their identity, especially the interest in relations with the opposite sex .

The core repertoires 'encyclopaedia' and 'romantic ritual' embrace most important sections of the magazine. As mentioned before, through their realism on the one hand and idealism on the other, they cover an important element of *Yes*'s socialising potential. For the interviewees *Yes* is an advice magazine, a source of knowledge and imagery. Specification of the four sections indicates that identification and *role-taking* involve orientation and knowledge acquisition.

The romantic story

This section coincides with the 'romantic ritual' repertoire. Its central mechanism is also positive identification with personages or empathising with a romantic story and identification with its heroine.

Positive identification in this section not only means similarity or recognition but an affective affiliation with an imaginary other, a temporary cancelling of one's self and transcending one's factual situation. These processes of identification are subtle, and the connection between a female reader and a heroine can be precarious as transpires from situations when readers skip a romantic story if a boy in an accompanying picture is not handsome enough (to be their imaginary partner).

Curiosity about and evaluation of those stories suggest that this column provides a pleasant reading experience. Daydreaming in literature is sometimes condescendingly described as 'escapism' but in relation to identity construction it is rather a detour, via an other, towards one's self. One's own life gives temporarily way to a life of a fictive other. Acting 'as if' is a play, an imaginary taking over of a future role of a mistress and a partner. For this reason we can say that this section meets a living need of knowledge of the 'vocabulary of feelings' and the mentioned 'romantic utopia', and various possibilities and difficulties which accompany them. Identification is, as Donders (1989) claims, a condition of conformity and learning, in this case of learning scenarios for the future. In this way this and other sections contribute to the development of a feeling of individuality, along with a sense of affiliation and sympathy for others. In other words, through this section a female reader learns about herself performing an imaginary role-taking and projection of future scenarios.

The 'encyclopaedia' repertoire contains three different sections:

Agony columns

These columns, amongst other things, also partly deal with (love) relations but focus rather on practical sides of being a woman/girl. This can be also seen as a form of knowledge acquisition, and as such, as a form of *gender* socialisation or performativity (Butler, 1990). Its main mechanism here is identification not with imaginary others but with real existing others who send letters or write reportages (about e.g. how it is to be motherless). Interviewees mention: curiosity about others' experiences and opinions, and sympathy for girls who regret their deeds. I recognize a process of reflection taking place in the confrontation of one's own opinion with those of others, which again confirms that Yes can function as a forum for the exchange of ideas. The mechanism of *role-taking* can be reconstructed from the interview data, but it functions in a slightly different way than role-taking in a romantic story. There role-taking consists in the fact that one 'becomes' (temporarily) an other, whereas here a self remains clearly separated from the other. Finally, recognising oneself in others as a form of positive confirmation deserves

positive evaluation. We can understand it as a sign of identity which comes into being in an (indirect) exchange with others.

Fashion and beauty sections

At first sight these seem to be purely informative columns predominated by practical aspects. Importance of knowledge about one's physical appearance should not be underestimated for apparently inner processes of identity construction. The external *appearance*, according to Stone (1962), as a visual presentation, is no less important for a self than verbal presentation. We not only tell others who we are, but we also show it. Natural signs are also functional in identification of oneself and others as specific individuals. The point is thus not so much identification 'with' somebody (unless as an example) but identification 'of' oneself and others as particular types of person.

In Davis' formulation clothes and appearance constitute a visual metaphor of identity (1992:25). Various respondents argue that 'how you look says also something about what you're like', and ascribe considerable importance to sections on fashion and clothes as changing phenomena. Readers in my sample emphasise that is important to know fashion trends and not to differ too much from a group they belong to. Inner uncertainty is thus partly translated into orientation towards outer styling of one's identity, and *Yes* is helpful by delivering material for comparison. Readers usually imagine themselves in place of photo models, try on looks photos suggest, or take a photo to a hairdresser's or a shop, which is a 'physical' form of *role-taking*.

Test or quiz

This section does not come out weekly but despite that is of great importance. We relate this section to the already mentioned need of knowledge, here conceived as self-knowledge. However *Yes* is read, readers will do the test, half-ironically or very seriously, but will not omit to do so, alone or together, out of curiosity or to see what comes out of it, to compare it with friends, to see if the answer agrees with what you think about yourself. Sometimes a weekly horoscope is added to it as well. One way or another, this practice indicates that one looks seriously for information about oneself, for self-knowledge or knowledge of what is 'normal' in order to reduce uncertainty about who you 'really' are.

As a juncture for identity construction the test is relevant for self-identity, self-image and thus for a relation of the 'I' towards others. The 'I' is partly a mystery and has its secret aspects and deeper levels. The test offers a possibility to learn oneself from an unexpected side, which initiates a process of reflection that contributes to identity construction in the sense of self-awareness. Such expressions as 'I like tests because then you can see who you are, and what you don't understand yet' indicate that direction.

Role-taking could not be reconstructed here, contrary to processes of self-identification aimed at giving an answer to the question: who am I ?

7. Conclusion

The answer to the main question is that for my sample of readers *Yes* contributes indirectly to the gender-specific socialisation of the age group which it addresses. *Yes* mediates both in the informative respect, as a source of knowledge and imagery, and socially, especially between readers and their peer group. Theoretically, girls' culture is likely to play a stronger role because processes of interaction are real and mutual. Practically as well, the role of girls' culture seems stronger, because *Yes* functions as a social binding agent and contributes in this sense to preservation of girls' culture. As Van Knippenberg and De Lange wrote: 'Yes fits the already existent gender concepts and ideas generated by other socialising institutions. *Yes* assists in developing ideas about femininity' (1995:67). The impact of *Yes* in the process of gender socialisation cannot be isolated; for precision, we would need another, biographical, model in which textual research would be combined with reception study.

Even if the impact of *Yes* should not be exaggerated, it cannot be ignored totally either. As other media, *Yes* does offer its readers a possibility to expanding their horizon. As the example of the Moroccan girl suggests, there is no way back from that development. Concentration of knowledge and information and a possibility to combine facts and images as one pleases renders *Yes* one of the players in the field of gender socialisation. Anticipation of future roles and possibilities requires self-knowledge as well as knowledge of the surrounding world. In Mead's terms both are interconnected: self-knowledge always involves knowledge of the group to which one belongs. We have demonstrated how the theoretical mechanisms of identification and role-taking are recognisable in this material.

Concluding in terms of the symbolic interactionist perspective the role of *Yes* as a Significant Other is indirect by definition because processes of interaction are mediated and not mutual. In this context, Thompson (1995:218) mentions 'mediated quasi-interaction', which generates a form of 'non-mutual intimacy.' According to him, media are nevertheless an important resource for present-day identity. The fact that in my sample *Yes* is used as a source of knowledge indicates that for its female target group it can really be an aid for identity construction, corresponding to their life-world. The magazine appeared to have different meanings in various phases of the process. As a resource, especially for beginner readers *Yes* constitutes a value, in terms of symbolic interactionism a symbolic Significant Other. For other readers it is also important as they can discern several Significant Others in different sections and they can identify themselves with the *generalised other* of the girls' culture. That this phase is transitional show marginal as well as former readers in my sample. In this sense *Yes* is a stop-over

on the way towards an abstract and encompassing *generalised other* of the larger culture.

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[1] At the time of the data collection the magazine was weekly read by 635.000 girls, and reached 50% of the target core readership (16-19 years). Target group is defined from 15 to 24 years.

[2] I conducted as a solo project a secondary analysis of interviews taken and analysed by two female student members of a small research group. They analysed the importance of the magazine for the girls' subculture (Van Knippenberg & De Lange, 1995). Their work, and my own (Hijmans, 2000) was also exploratory for another member of the group, who analysed the message system of the magazine (Van der Mooren, 2001).

[3] The sample consisted of 21 girls, aged 13 to 24. Range of ages was as follows: age 13 (1), 14 (2), 15 (3), 16 (5), 17 (2), 18 (4), 19 (1), 23 (2), 24 (1). Interviews were conducted by two female researchers, aged 22 and 23, who recruited respondents at work or at school. More than half of the sample selected themselves by responding to an advertisement at billboards of several different types of schools. In total 19 of the girls were following secondary education, three girls were college students and two of the respondents were working girls. 10 girls were interviewed individually, at their home, 5 group interviews with 2 or 3 girls were conducted in a classroom. 6 girls were marginal readers, including 2 former readers, and 15 girls were faithful, regular readers.

[4] This means that the actual reading or identity construction was not observed, but reconstructed from conversational data.

[5] I present one example for each repertoire. Extracts should be read as illustrations, not as 'proof'.

