

## CHILDREN'S FASHION AND IDENTITY

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### Abstract

*This article attempts at exploring the identity formation through children's fashion, in particular adjusted to famous characters on cartoon movies. By 'children' means that they are also subjects to whose identity fashion presumably contributes to shape, which is continuous and has the future. By using some theories about fashion and identity from traditional, modern, and postmodern, supported by the awareness of media's role on constituting consumerism culture amongst children, the fashion's role in constructing children's identity is in details scrutinized. As a result, children's identity formation through fashion is mostly due to their liking on certain characters on cartoon movies. This liking is influenced by media's role on constituting their consumerism towards the movie and fashion adoration. However, the influence of media power can not represent completely the 'truer' identity since it has history as well as future, which will always revolve in such a never-ending cycle. If it is not a direct contribution, it aids to support the 'idealized' identity construction, which is worthily appropriate to postmodern societies.*

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**Key words:** *children's fashion, identity formation, cartoon movies, consumerism culture, truer identity.*

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### Introduction

As a mother of two children—a seven-year-old-boy and a four-year-old daughter—I often feel amazed and proud of seeing my children's wonderful growth, which is, to tell the truth, different from my-far-from-high and fashionable technology-childhood 35 years ago. I mean it 'wonderful' due to their intensity of consuming such fashions, technology, movies, and other trends of lifestyle, which, then, makes me quite covetous to think of how wonderful it is to become children born in this wide-open era. Everything is a sort of exposure through which they are keen to explore their mind, imagination, and experience. Perhaps, this could be an example, when, at certain times, I have to share my children to use our computer, with such reasons like, they want to play games, watch *Bernard Bear* movies, or draw something—whereas I am under due-date for my works. At another chance, I have to accompany my sweet daughter to a shopping centre to get her favorite shirts or accessories, and what usually happens is that, I am often at bewilderment

to understand her fondness of the cutie Minnie Mouse pictures. And, what usually happens next is that I am at tiresome of searching for what she really wants and loves: A pinky-cutie-Minnie Mouse-pictured-shirt, and it is not easy to find it in such a small town, like Purwokerto – I mean that shirt must be pink. Therefore, I am truly at exhaustion sometimes, but my love to her is much deeper than it. Whenever I see a pinky-cutie-Minnie Mouse-pictured-shirt, I must buy it. Then, I can only wonder sometimes how such a little girl can have such a determined taste of fashion. This really comes into my mind like a flash of thunder and puts me into a shock, because she never wants to wear another model, but pinky-cutie-Minnie Mouse-pictured-shirts.

In truth, my daughter's Minnie Mouse-pictured-shirt is one of the phenomena of fashion, in particular amongst children, which, we sometimes ignore and regard it as a child's common want. We rarely notice it as a certain way of constituting such identity. For example, *do we ever question why does this phenomenon occur?; or, how does this phenomenon relate to and set their identity?* The fact is that, my four-year-old daughter really loves pinky-cutie-Minnie Mouse-pictured-shirts since accordingly, Minnie Mouse is very cute, and it is absolutely not wrong. She starts to identify her 'self' by the cuteness of Minnie Mouse in the movies she often watches. Similarly, other male children would possibly reply that they were very proud of the Indonesia *Garuda* Team when they struggled in the AFF championship. That was why they were very enthusiastic to support the team by wearing the same costumes.

Minnie Mouse-pictured-shirts, *Garuda* Team uniforms, Spiderman T-shirts, and the like are, if I may say, all fashion phenomena, through which we may question and discuss the representation of identity, in particular personal identity, by which modern societies conceptualize it as the necessary point of reference for all that goes on. (Larrain, 1994: 143) In postmodern societies, this concept has undergone such change through which individuals assume different identities at different times which cannot be unified. (Hall, 1992: 277 in Larrain, 1994: 150). These concepts are inherent to each other, and are expected to enable us to examine the relationship of fashion and identity, particularly, amongst children. By 'children' means that they are also subjects to whom the fashion presumably contributes to shape their identity, which is continuous and has the future. In addition, there should be, in my acceptance, such awareness of media's role in constituting consumerism amongst children, and continuously their identity. This assumption relates to children's adoration to certain public idols that they often watch and follow every day. That is why they like to wear fashions with their idols' pictures on them, such as *Spiderman*, *Minnie Mouse*, *Upin-Ipin*, *Dora*, and the like. Hence, some theories about fashion and identity from traditional, modern, and postmodern are of importance to comprehend

the discussion, particularly relating to the fashion' role in constructing children's identity.

### Theoretical Overview

In truth, talking about identity is always talking about the inconsistency of a never gets solved-conception. Many theorists have been involved in such never-ending debates about that issue and put it in such discursive practices. These debates arise since, in my notion, every theorist starts from different paradigms. Stuart Hall, for example, has described, particularly, cultural identity in terms which can hardly be improved;

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being". It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture, and power. Far from being grounded in a mere "recovery" of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall in Larrain, 1994: 162).

Hence, we may grasp identity as the way we are positioned or constituted by, and position or constitute ourselves, through the history to which it belongs. "Being" and "becoming" are the endings that identity needs to represent. In another word, we may argue that identity is represented through the way we behave, we talk, we do, as well as we perform. The story of Eliza Doolittle in Shaw's *Pygmalion* could be regarded one good example of how appearance is very important to articulate from what social class we are. A non-fashionable florist like Eliza would never be named a 'lady', unless she changed her way of behaving into a lady's, though the way she followed never won her heart to stay as she had to be, the way by which she could represent her total personal identity with all respects.

This Eliza's experience could be compared to the Madonna phenomenon because her work, popularity, and influence reveal important features of the nature and function of fashion and identity in the contemporary world. Fashion offers models and material for constructing identity. Traditional societies had relatively fixed social roles and sumptuary codes, so that clothes and one's appearance instantly denoted one's social class, profession, and status. Identity in

traditional societies was usually fixed by birth, marriage, and accomplishment, and the available repertoire of roles was tightly constricted. Gender roles were especially rigid, while work and status were tightly circumscribed by established social codes and an obdurate system of status ascription. During the medieval period, identities in Western Europe were especially circumscribed and rules even dictated what members of different classes could or could not wear. Modern societies eliminated rigid codes of dress and fashion, and beginning around 1700 changing fashions of apparel and appearance began proliferating (Wilson, 1985 in Kellner, 2003: 264).

These concepts of fashion and identity from traditional and modern societies are, in my view, amid the concept of cultural identity offered by Stuart Hall above. There is a historical background towards the changing of fashion from traditional to modern societies, by which cultural identity is made and re-made. The changing of rigid codes of dress and fashion within traditional societies to more democratic and individual codes shown by modern societies can be, in my acceptance, regarded as, in Hall's terms, the process of 'being' in order to achieve what we might 'become'. In line with Hall's view, yet quite against the modern concept of the individual or 'subject', Baudrillard argues that the position of the subject has become untenable since it can no longer control the world of objects it used to. The objects are now in control, and this must be recognized by what he calls 'fatal theory', which:

in the former the subject always believes itself to be more clever than the object, while in the latter the object is always taken to be more clever, more cynical, more ingenious than the subject, which it awaits at every turn. The metamorphoses, tactics, and strategies of the object exceed the subject's understanding. (Baudrillard, 1998: 198, in Larrain, 1994: 149).

Baudrillard's concept of the subject, or personal identity, if I may say, reflects his wariness about the domination of a certain power that controls the subject, and regretfully, it is beyond the subject's acknowledgement. This concept is regarded to lead us to the awareness of fashion and identity construction, which sometimes beyond our recognition.

Furthermore, fashion or appearance style is a metaphor for identity, a complex metaphor that includes physical features like, skin, bodily shape, hair texture, as well as clothing and grooming practices. Because the latter are especially susceptible to change, they are prone to fluctuating and fluid ways of understanding oneself in relation to others within the larger context of fashion change.

Fashion visually articulates multiple and overlapping identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, age, national identity, and personal interests, aesthetic, and politics. Not all of these identities are consciously present at any given moment; power relations influence one's awareness of one identity or another. Privileged identities (such as whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality) are often taken for granted as being "normal" or "natural." But because identities intersect and overlap, their representation is seldom simple. From a cultural studies perspective, identities have not only histories but also futures: They come from somewhere, they are complex and contradictory, and they enable us to express who we might become (Ang, 2000).

Expressing who we are and are becoming in words can be a challenge; fashion seems to offer a way of articulating a statement that is difficult to put into words—that is, emerging and intersecting identities. In fact, it is easier to put into words who we want to avoid being or looking like (that is, not feminine, not too slutty, no longer a child) than it is to verbalize who we are (Freitas et al., 1997). Moreover, one identity blurs or blends into another identity (for example, gender into sexuality). And, articulations of identity are often ambivalent. Davis (1992) argues that identity ambivalences provide the "fuel" or ongoing inspiration for fashion change. Fashion-susceptible ambivalences include the interplay between youth versus age, masculinity versus femininity, or high versus low status, among many other possibilities within and across identities.

Although for centuries clothing had been a principal means for identifying oneself (for example, by occupation, regional identity, religion, social class) in public spaces (Crane, 2000), the twentieth century witnessed a wider array of sub cultural groupings that visually marked "their difference from the dominant culture and their peers by utilizing the props of material and commercial culture. (Breward 2003, p. 222). In the 1960s, sociologist Gregory Stone (1965) argues that identity has many advantages over the more fixed, psychological concept of personality, and that identity is not a code word for "self." Rather, identity is an announced meaning of the self—one that is situated in and negotiated through social interactions. He states that appearance is fundamental to identification and differentiation in everyday life. The "teenage phenomenon" of the 1950s and 1960s made this very apparent by fostering an awareness of age identity as it intersected with a variety of musical and personal preferences—all coded through appearance styles. The social movements (civil rights, feminist, gay and lesbian rights) of the late 1960s and early 1970s further accentuated stylistic means for constructing and transgressing racialized, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities.

Dealing with children's interest in fashion, in my view, children could be regarded as the very first stage of identity construction. The way they constitute and recognize their identities is, more or less, determined

by their fashions. According to Sharon Boden (2010: 289), there are, at least, three interlinked issues that need to be examined, in relation to children's fashion and identity. These are contemporary consumer culture and its obsession with celebrity, the children's wear market and its transition from traditional children's clothing to more adult like styling, and the status of the 'teenager' as a significant social actor and consuming force. These issues offered by Sharon Boden quite benefit to the analysis I would like to scrutinize, but rather, I would like to focus on the first issue. In details, I would try to connect it to children's interest in consuming fashion like their favorite idols in cartoon movies.

From various conceptions about fashion and identity above, one most important thing we may refer to is that fashion never gets away from identity. It appears and shapes the history of identity, or exactly, cultural identity. Like traditional societies, modern societies have their own codes of fashion which are more open towards personal identity construction. To some social movements (civil rights, feminist, gay and lesbian rights), modern codes of fashion are apt to more accessible for racial transgression, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities. This aptness towards fashion is, in now-global world, present to represent, in my view, the 'authority of self', or to be exact, in line with the aims of commonly social movements. Personal identity is, then, alleged as the way for appreciating individuals in social relations, which no longer represents certain social classes. On the other hand, postmodern societies remind us of the power of the objects which control the subjects beyond recognition. The objects are regarded to have led the subjects, in my case, children, to consuming culture. Thus, personal identity is constituted by a certain power's influences. Above all, my daughter's pinky-cutie Minnie Mouse-pictured-shirt can be discussed as an example of how fashion can relate to and set an identity, in more details.

### Discussion

To begin with, I would like to start this discussion of children's fashion and identity with the facts that I always find within my daughter's liking in fashion. It began a year ago, more or less, when my sister showed her *Mickey Mouse* cartoon movies. In truth, I myself do not like *Mickey Mouse* since my childhood. Yet, I would not like to contradict to the political tendency from this movie. In fact, not more than a week, my daughter began to like Mickey Mouse, and it happened as it did. What happened next was what I have never thought before, that was she began to identify her 'self' with her fondness of Mickey Mouse, in most particular, Minnie Mouse. This was because she already recognized her 'self' as a girl, sexually different from her brother. In many facts, she did not only like *Mickey Mouse* movies, but also began to like wearing clothes with Minnie Mouse pictures on them. And, at her age now, she likes to

completely dress up herself with Minnie Mouse fashions and accessories: shirts, skirts or trousers, jackets, sandals, shoes, wallets, bags, even hair accessories. All are completely Minnie Mouse.

One day, I have ever persuaded her to wear *batik* dress, the same costumes I, her father and brother wore to welcome the Lebaran Day. However, she refused to wear it, and liked the pinky-cutie-Minnie Mouse-pictured-shirt. This phenomenon, in my view, appears since her liking to watch *Mickey Mouse* movies, and she will easily recognize other children wearing the same Minnie Mouse-pictured-costumes, and comment that they also like Mickey and Minnie Mouse.

Compared to my childhood, today's children are more open towards everything around them. They are not in doubt to express their 'selves', and fashion is considered the easiest way for self-expression. This is in line with Freitas's view of fashion that, expressing who we are and are becoming in words can be a challenge; fashion seems to offer a way of articulating a statement that is difficult to put into words – that is, emerging and intersecting identities. (Freitas et al, 1997), though in fact, verbalizing self-expression is easier. Thus, fashion is more appropriate to express who we are and what we might become, a metaphor for identity straightly represents the identity. In the case of my daughter's Minnie Mouse-pictured-shirts and accessories, she really articulates who she is; that she is a four-year old girl who is cute, funny, girlish, confident, and truly female.

Responding to her refusal for wearing *batik* dress, I would relate it to Hall's statement about cultural identity, that it has history, in which, we may reflect our identity through the narratives of the past. (Hall in Larrain, 1994: 162). He, even, argues that individuals assume different identities at different times which cannot be unified. (Hall, 1992: 277 in Larrain, 1994: 150). Thus, when my daughter refused to wear *batik* dress, it could be meant that she was not at the same time as my or her father's childhood, when wearing *batik* was a pride since to buy *batik* dress was a kind of prestige; neither was she at the same period as children from traditional societies, when wearing *batik* was a social rule to show a certain social class. *Batik* fashion is narrated through its history at the past, and changed at the present time. In traditional societies, it could show who we were, and from what social class we were. In modern societies, *batik* dress could articulate every one's self expression. It does not lie any longer on what social class the subject is, but on the sense of the subject. Hence, everyone is privileged to articulate their personal identities through fashion, including my daughter, when she refused to wear *batik*. Again, her identity is different from the very past time, and if she preferred to wear *batik*, it would only mean the way she was, her own 'self', which could not be unified to the traditional societies to whom the *batik* was worthily appreciated.

In addition, traditional societies really determined identity by fashion. Girls were sexually characterized by fashion they were using. Flowers-pictured dresses, skirts, or *kebaya* in Javanese societies, were girls' label. These features absolutely referred to the gender to which the dresses were worn. In my acceptance, this statement is logical because through fashion, we may differentiate girls from boys, female from male, children from adults, and so forth. Yet, modern and postmodern societies allowed a space for individuals to express their 'selves' by fashion, even more freely. Unfortunately, this statement seems to have created such a paradox when referring to sexual difference: *Does it make any sense?*

Let me clarify. Sexual difference is, in my notion, no longer determined by fashion, but by the sense of the 'self', the 'subject', the 'individual'. To support this statement, I would quote Gregory Stone's argument (1965), saying that identity is an announced meaning of the self—one that is situated in and negotiated through social interactions. Accordingly, appearance is fundamental to identification and differentiation in everyday life. When my daughter recognized her sex through the pictures of Minnie Mouse in her dresses, not Mickey Mouse, it was, in my view, accepted. She would also argue that Mickey Mouse-pictured-clothes suited boys. In details, sexual difference is not determined by the 'forms' of fashion, but how fashion can really express the identity, the process of 'being' and of 'becoming'. That is why, my daughter wears not only pinky-cutie-Minnie Mouse-pictured-shirts, but also skirts, trousers, sandals, bags, and Minnie Mouse accessories. These features really show her identity as a girl: cute, funny, girlish, truly female, and more importantly confident. Whenever she wears that kind of fashion, she looks very cute and more confident in social interactions with others. In addition, by 'skirt' or 'trousers' means the sexual difference for female to male, but this concept is no longer appropriate for such difference, because in fact, my daughter likes to wear Minnie Mouse-pictured-trousers, rather than skirts. Thus, fashion does not guarantee any longer the sexual difference. Yet, in my expectation, such typical fashion will not lessen the femaleness of girls or women, because in now global world, personal identity seems to have become the central issue amongst social movements, that we can no longer distinguish female from male, because fashion has been prone to very subjective, very individualistic. Lesbianism, transgender, gay are off the identity construction as well as transgression due to fashion that we may refer to.

In a more complex case, my daughter's liking to wear pinky-cutie Minnie Mouse-pictured-shirts has been, in my impression, influenced by her intensity of consuming *Mickey Mouse* videos. My daughter, as the 'subject', in Baudrillard's term (Baudrillard, 1998: 198, in Larrain, 1994: 149), has been controlled by the object, in this case, *Mickey Mouse* videos, and beyond her recognition, she has been integrated her 'self' to

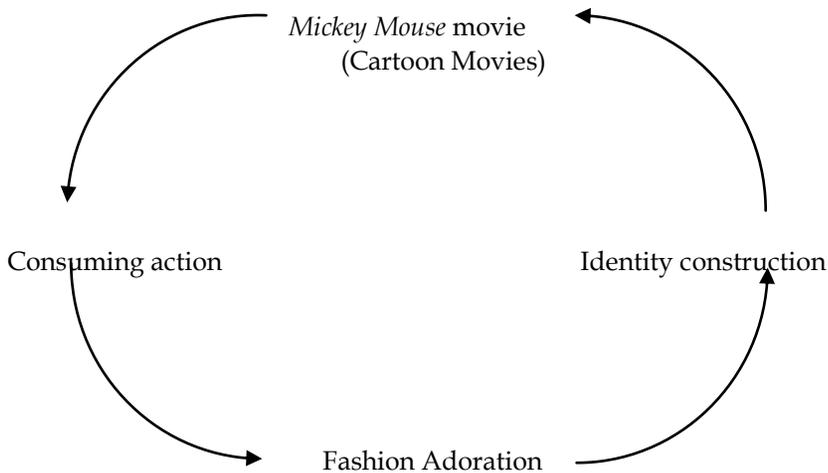
everything within the videos. This is, I think, a common sense in such a global world, where the objects are more ingenious than the subjects, since there is a power controlling them. Thus, personal identity is constructed unconsciously.

To more extent, the unconscious construction of identity is, according to Sharon Boden (2010: 289), due to contemporary consumer culture and its obsession with celebrity. Boden's statement significantly contributes to examine the role of the 'objects', in reference to Baudrillard's term, in personal identity construction. Since the 'objects' – yet, I am in doubt to say it as media, since I do not completely use this Baudrillard's term in this analysis – , are more cynical and ingenious than the 'subjects' (individuals), they persuade the subjects to believe and consume them for the necessity of identity construction. They are performing reality more than real, thus, constituting consumerism culture and obsession for being and becoming like them. Ever since the very first my daughter watched *Mickey Mouse* videos; she began to consume every fashion like the characters in the videos, most preferably Minnie Mouse. Such fashion can cost from IDR 15,000 to more than IDR 100,000. If she can wear such slightly cheap or even, expensive fashion, it does not, in my argument, obviously reflect her social class, but only relate to the need of self expression. Yet, by 'obsession', in Boden's term, does not mean, in my view, such intention for imitating, but rather, admiring the excitement within the movie. This excitement is, then, brought into reality by wearing fashions with the characters' pictures on them, particularly Minnie Mouse pictures, and this is to support and represent her identity as a cute, funny, girlish, truly female, and confident girl.

In order to more specify the identity construction amongst children, in reference to my daughter's identity, I would like to describe it in a picture 1.

The cycle above shows the relationship of *Mickey Mouse* movie and identity construction, in particular, my daughter's identity. It begins from her interest in watching the movie. It, eventually and unconsciously, influences her to admire the excitement within the movie, played by the characters. Baudrillard and Boden describe it as the ingenious object producing the consuming action. The admiration towards the excitement strongly persuades her to, not imitate, but, appreciate it by wearing fashions with the characters' pictures on them, most importantly Minnie Mouse' pictures. This fashion adoration, then, constructs her identity based on the age and the sex she belongs to. Since she is only a four-year-old girl, she does not wear adult-like clothes, but truly children clothes. However, the Minnie Mouse pictures on her fashions show her typical identity as a little girl who is very cute, funny, girlish, and truly female, as well as confident. The latter is evidenced by her refusal for wearing

*batik* dress. It does not suit her and makes her uncomfortable and unconfident in social interactions.



Picture 1. The cycle of identity construction by *Mickey Mouse* movie

Since Hall states that identity, or most importantly cultural identity, has the future, I have such a strong belief that my daughter will continuously construct and re-construct her identity with Minnie Mouse, although it cannot be predicted how long it will surely stay. Yet, we may compare it, perhaps, to some teenagers who also like Mickey and Minnie Mouse, until in their teenage. Most remarks are also the same, that they like Mickey and Minnie Mouse because of their funny characters. In most cases, they like Mickey and Minnie Mouse since their childhood. They, even, do such hobby of collecting Mickey and Minnie Mouse souvenirs, and put them in such display shelves. Although, it is only a minor research, in my view, *Mickey Mouse* movie has obviously contributed in children's identity, particularly through fashion, as the easiest way for expressing the 'self (selves)'.

Generally speaking, children, especially girls, are naturally cute and funny. Yet, articulating the 'self' as 'cute' and 'funny' in words, as Freitas (et al, 1997) argues, is difficult, challenging, therefore needs courage and confidence to express it freely. In truth, I have rarely heard my daughter says confidently such words like, "I am cute", or "I am clever" – though in psychological terms, such verbal expression is of vital to construct 'self-concept' –, but rather, shows her cute expressions innocently, and I believe, that is the way she is.

Furthermore, identity construction cannot be, in my notion, directly forced as what I have ever done by persuading my daughter to wear *batik* dress. In traditional societies, the strong social rules are the

forces towards identity construction. Hence, we may question and argue, *whether the identity construction by forces can represent the 'truer' identity?* To answer this, perhaps, we need to do such a historical research, which also needs such a long time and material supports. Yet, for only arguing this, I would prefer to say that forces can not represent the 'truer' identity, since directly or indirectly the forces influence, the identity is, in my acceptance, exactly 'false', never 'truer'. Perhaps, my argument is less strong since I do not refer to any theory. Still, it is logical to say 'false' because forces can only penetrate something, thus, produce something that is different from the former form. Let me support this by my experience of persuading my daughter to wear *batik*. Whenever I could force her to wear it, and not wear only pinky-cutie-Minnie Mouse-pictured-shirts, I would never know what my daughter was and might become. Would she really become a cute, funny, girlish, truly female, and confident little girl? I am, indeed, in a doubt about it since she has grown up confidently in every step of her due to Minnie Mouse pictures on her dresses. Thus, Baudrillard's theory of the 'object's ingenious influence towards the subject, in particular dealing with the identity formation, tends to, in my notion, contribute to 'false' identity. If it is not a direct contribution, it aids to support the 'idealized' identity construction.

## Conclusion

Identity is simply regarded as the way we see ourselves and the way others see us. To objectively see and relate ourselves to social relations, a certain way is needed. This certain way is also expected to be able to express who we are and what we might become that are attached to the identity construction. "Being" and "becoming" are the endings that identity needs to represent. Fashion is, then, considered the easiest way of articulating self expression, rather than words. Fashion visually articulates multiple and overlapping identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, age, national identity, and personal interests, aesthetic, and politics. Traditional societies had relatively fixed social roles and sumptuary codes, so that clothes and one's appearance instantly denoted one's social class, profession, and status. These roles overtly determined which class could or could not wear the clothes, and thus, constituted their identities. On the other hand, modern and postmodern societies had allowed such a space for expressing identity more freely, especially through fashion, which then, contributed to personal identity construction.

Yet, there should be such awareness of the 'object's (media representing power) role in identity construction. The object, like *Mickey Mouse* movie, seems to be more ingenious on controlling the subject in the process of identity construction. Thus, in most cases, identity is unconsciously constructed. In addition, identity construction cannot be forced by certain powers. What is meant by the 'object's ingenious

influence towards the subject, in identity formation, tends to contribute to 'false' identity. Though directly or indirectly the forces or powers penetrate, identity will never be 'truer', or only be 'false', since it has history as well as future, which will always revolve in such a never-ending cycle. If it is not a direct contribution, it aids to support the 'idealized' identity construction, which is worthily appropriate to postmodern societies.

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