



***The Impact of the Social and Media Environment
on the Formation of Role Models Among Today's Youth***
***Środowiskowe uwarunkowania kształtowania się autorytetów
wśród współczesnej młodzieży***

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The aim of this study is to explore the topic of authority figures among contemporary youth, viewed through the lens of pedagogy as a discipline concerned with education.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The main research question is: *What environmental factors influence the formation of authority figures among today's youth?* The study employed a systematic review and analysis of relevant literature, emphasizing a comprehensive approach to the concept of authority and examining the environments instrumental in shaping role models.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The study begins by defining the term "authority" and the term "influencer," which is considered synonymous in this context. It identifies and describes the educational environments that contribute to the formation of authority figures (family, school, and the Internet). The discussion also categorizes types of authority found within these environments (internal and external) and examines the foundations of authority, distinguishing between traditional and modern forms.

RESEARCH RESULTS: In contemporary times, there has been a shift in how the phenomenon of authority is understood. This shift has also altered the perception of personal role models more generally. Currently, considerable emphasis is placed on the qualities individuals possess, as well as the attributes they display, which earn them social recognition.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH: Human social environments are an integral part of shaping the image of authority. The nature of popularized content determines how various phenomena within the social structure are interpreted and perceived. The influence of authority figures can have a dual character – positive or negative – depending on the stimuli that individuals process and internalize. The recognition of authority by

society plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's personality, building their hierarchy of values, influencing their perception of social phenomena, and determining their overall social functioning.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **AUTHORITY FIGURE, VALUE SYSTEM, SOCIAL FUNCTIONING, EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS, DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT**

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Omówienie zagadnienia dotyczącego autorytetów współczesnej młodzieży w aspekcie pedagogiki jako nauki o wychowaniu.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Problem badawczy został sformułowany w postaci następującego pytania: Jakie są środowiskowe uwarunkowania kształtowania się autorytetów wśród współczesnej młodzieży? Metodę badań stanowiła analiza literatury przedmiotu związanego z szersko rozumianym ujęciem autorytetu i środowiskami pełniącymi zasadniczą funkcję w kreowaniu wzorców do naśladowania.

PROCES WYWODU: W prezentowanych rozważaniach wyjaśnione zostało pojęcie autorytetu oraz pojęcie powszechnie uznawane za synonimiczne – influencer. Wyróżniono i scharakteryzowano środowiska wychowawcze uczestniczące w procesie kształtowania się autorytetów (rodzina, szkoła, Internet). Omówione zostały także rodzaje autorytetów występujące w środowiskach wychowawczych – wewnętrzny i zewnętrzny, a także jego filary: tradycyjny i współczesny.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Współcześnie nastąpiło „przesunięcie się” granic pojmowania zjawiska autorytetu, a przy tym zmieniono także postrzeganie wzorców osobowych w sensie ogólnym. Obecnie dużą rolę odgrywają przymioty, którymi cechują się jednostki, jak również atrybuty, którymi fizycznie dysponują i zyskują dzięki nim uznanie społeczne.

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ: Środowiska społeczne człowieka stanowią nieodłączny element uczestniczący w kreowaniu wizerunku autorytetu. Charakter popularyzowanych treści determinuje sposób pojmowania i postrzegania wielu zjawisk mających miejsce w strukturze społecznej. Wpływ autorytetów może mieć dwojaki charakter – pozytywny oraz negatywny, w zależności od napływających bodźców, które jednostki przetwarzają i kodują. Uznawanie autorytetu przez społeczeństwo odgrywa ogromną rolę w kształtowaniu osobowości człowieka, budowaniu jego hierarchii wartości, postrzeganiu zjawisk następujących w strukturze społecznej oraz w ogólnie pojętym funkcjonowaniu społecznym.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **AUTORYTET, SYSTEM WARTOŚCI, FUNKCJONOWANIE SPOŁECZNE, ŚRODOWISKA WYCHOWAWCZE, WIRTUALNA RZECZYWISTOŚĆ**

Introduction

The phenomenon of authority has existed in society for centuries, though its nature has shifted in tandem with broader social transformations. Authority functions as a mirror of prevailing canons, dominant values, and core social norms and conventions, while also reflecting the ever-changing needs of individuals. Changes in the nature of authority are, in fact, an inseparable part of intergenerational transformations, which invariably generate tension and confrontation between members of different generations. To grasp the complexity of authority, it is worth examining scholarly works that shed light on its various facets.

The notion of authority has been examined across a range of disciplines, each seeking to define it with precision and objectivity. Ryszard Stach characterizes authority as

[...] the recognition and respect accorded by society to a person, social group, or institution. The sources of authority may include skills and knowledge, personal traits, and forms of behavior consistent with widely endorsed norms (Stach, 1998, pp. 28–30).

From a psychological standpoint, the figure of authority emerges from previously internalized systems of value, which shape the structures crucial for constructing personal or institutional role models.

According to Andrzej Tchorzewski, authority

[...] is a term commonly understood as the prestige or standing of a person or institution that, in the consciousness of an individual or social group, holds particular significance and plays an important role in their lives. By its very nature, authority always exerts influence on someone or something (Tchorzewski, 2018, p. 192).

Once again, it is emphasized that a person acknowledged as an authority figure is, by implication, positioned at the apex of the social hierarchy. This status results primarily from the competencies and skills accumulated over the years that are valued by society and become key to one's standing in the social structure. It is also worth noting that not everyone achieves the rank of authority, only those who display qualities that distinctly set them apart from the social collective.

Ewa Miśkowiec offers an illuminating take on the concept of authority. She argues that

[...] authority is a source of models, examples of behavior, and ways of thinking; it constitutes an important value in interpersonal relations. It becomes, in a sense, a guide through which a young person shapes their personality (Miśkowiec, 2018, p. 255).

Here, the author underscores the formative impact of authority on individuals who admire a particular figure, as such role models often become moral and behavioral reference points for everyday choices. A central feature of this view is the recognition that a role

model may promote not only socially esteemed ideals (a positive influence) but also deeply destructive ones (a negative influence). There is little doubt that authority figure can both reinforce or weaken an individual's convictions, depending on how certain messages are conveyed and what they concern.

As social reality is continuously reshaped by social, economic, and cultural transformations, the very notion of authority has also changed over time. Every sphere of individual experience interacts with others; consequently, aspects of the social structure are inadvertently altered: often simplified or even "degraded" in terms of the values they once embodied. The rapid expansion of digital technologies has further contributed to the emergence of a new, illusory environment, one that both mirrors latent human desires and reveals the more authentic facets of the self. This constructed reality has become a space where, much like in the physical world, varied communities coalesce in pursuit of shared values, and within them emerge new leaders or guides, often regarded as contemporary authority figures.

In the digital domain, the term *influencer* has become a modern equivalent of authority. It is defined as "a person who operates publicly on the Internet and exerts a significant influence on their audience, shaping opinions, purchasing decisions, or perceptions of a given brand" (Charkiewicz & Smolarczyk, 2024, p. 253). Although this definition pertains to a specific category of influencer, it shares many attributes with the broader phenomenon of *influencing*. The word itself originates from the English verb *influence*, meaning "to exert an effect," which underscores that such individuals attract widespread attention through their media presence. The nature of their actions often acts as impetus and invitation for audiences to emulate them: to perceive the endorsed behaviors as legitimate or desirable. To determine whether an influencer can be considered an authority figure, we must ask several questions: most notably, what function these figures fulfill in the social structure and what kinds of content they disseminate.

Social media platforms have become the principal stage for the rise and transformation of media-based authority figures. In this sphere, individuals primarily curate their public personas and share fragments of their self-produced media output with audiences. Influencers, through various social platforms, promote the products of companies with which they collaborate, ultimately securing material incentives in return for such promotion (Sobczak, 2024, p. 287). When we consider the economic dimension of such activity, it becomes evident that these individuals may not always demonstrate the level of credibility and authenticity which is traditionally associated with authority figures. One might argue that the values and opinions conveyed by influencers sometimes stand at odds with their personal convictions and are motivated instead by the material gains derived from promotional strategies.

Equally significant is the matter of self-presentation. In today's digital landscape, every user has access to a wide range of media tools that make it possible to manipulate one's image freely. Put differently, internet users can exploit online functionalities to recast their personas, attributing to themselves particular traits, competencies, or worldviews (Klimczyk, 2021, pp. 44–45). A defining aspect of social media lies precisely in the

impossibility of fully verifying the authenticity of influencers or discerning their true motives. This can be especially troubling for younger audiences, who often consume such content without sufficient critical distance. Among the most serious risks is the unquestioning idealization or distorted interpretation of an influencer's image as that of an authority figure. Taking the above into account, it can be concluded that the notion of media authority diverges markedly from its traditional form. Emerging through new mechanisms of visibility, legitimization, and moral positioning in the social hierarchy, the values and norms disseminated by such figures occupy a fundamentally different register.

The Role of the Family, School and Media Environments in the Formation of Youth Role Models

Educational and social environments occupy a defining place in human development. One of the most fundamental of these is the family setting, where the earliest formative influences of close relatives begin to take hold (Piórkowski, 2016, p. 45). It is in this sphere that numerous essential processes unfold and intersect: processes through which one's personality, awareness, perception of reality, moral convictions, and value system gradually crystallize.

The development of each of these dimensions depends on an array of interrelated factors, including effective communication (both among family members and between parents and children), mutual support, expressions of care, trust, and empathy, attentiveness to the child's developing autonomy, and the creation of conditions that foster healthy development (Leśniak & Leśniak, 2017, p. 66). Such practices undoubtedly contribute to building authority among parents or other family members. Conversely, behaviors that undermine these mechanisms can negatively affect young people who, lacking authentic exemplars in their immediate surroundings, seek orientation and validation in secondary social contexts.

At this stage, various psychological mechanisms assume a formative and enduring significance, including identification, modeling, and imitation (Gizicka, 2024, p. 80). Depending on their mode of influence, these mechanisms may operate on both conscious and unconscious levels. They frequently prove pivotal in the educational and developmental process, as they determine patterns of behavior, influence the perception of social reality, and guide the internalization of cultural and moral values.

As young people grow, another key environment gains importance: the school setting, entered through formal education. School becomes a new sphere of influence, marked by interactions of different intensity and moral weight, both positive and negative. Once again, the individual must adapt to an unfamiliar context with new rules, peers, and authority figures. In this environment, previously held beliefs may change under the influence of others' different perspectives on reality (Kata, 2021, p. 213). At this stage of life, adolescents often start to discover new moral directions and to question the principles espoused by their parents or caregivers.

The broader social environment – and, more specifically, its capacity for moral and educational influence – also exerts a significant influence on the developing individual. When family members fail to establish genuine authority or provide appropriate guidance, young people are often drawn toward external role models (Remiszewska 2016, p. 55). Such figures often emerge within peer groups or the media sphere. What follows is a gradual replacement of authentic authorities with constructed and frequently idealized figures: media idols who project an illusion of integrity and sincerity.

Ongoing cultural and technological transformations have steadily produced subtle yet pervasive shifts in multiple areas of human life. The widespread availability of the Internet and the rapid proliferation of social media platforms have redefined traditional role models, giving rise to new hierarchies of influence. Today, it is the logics and trends of the media system that increasingly determine the hierarchy of values, social norms, and individual aspirations (Wasylewicz, 2016, p. 102). The ideals promoted by these new authorities are often strategically manufactured and imposed upon audiences, who may uncritically absorb them out of a perceived social imperative to conform. Such influences are intentionally crafted to be persuasive and resistant to scrutiny, which ensures that they are accepted rather than questioned.

This process is compounded by the relentless excess of information circulating online, where each snippet of content is imbued with an appearance of significance (Pawełec, 2019, pp. 228–229). Living within this constant stream of mediated stimuli can erode one's ability to perceive reality accurately, to think critically and logically, to distinguish genuine values from superficial ones, and ultimately, to maintain a coherent sense of self. The unchecked consumption of media content ultimately diminishes the mind's reflective potential, as users become immersed in a world of illusions and fabricated narratives propelled by economic incentives.

An insightful interpretation of this issue is offered by Andrzej Zwoliński, who observes that modern technologies disrupt our perception of reality: "a child encounters a natural difficulty in distinguishing between the present and the past, between fiction and reality, responding to both with similar sensitivity and attention" (Zwoliński, 2017, p. 122). Technological tools, when incorporated in the formative process of upbringing, can therefore become profoundly destabilizing. The threat extends far beyond the sheer volume of harmful, sensational, or pathological information. Of equal concern is the psychological attachment that people develop to fictional worlds: imaginary stories, fabricated ideals, propagated values, recommended lifestyles, and prescribed moral standards. In this way, the media environment gradually and often imperceptibly begins to replace the fundamental educational spaces once occupied by family and community.

Consequently, the boundaries of social perception and evaluation become blurred. Interpersonal relationships are reconfigured; notions of morality and value become fluid; and distinctions between prosocial and antisocial behaviors lose clarity, as do attitudes toward social phenomena. The seemingly constructive use of technology as a formative tool often proves to be a short-lived illusion. From a psychological perspective, it often leads to greater isolation and loneliness, and confines the individual within cognitive and

emotional patterns that limit their potential and the very abilities that they ought to be cultivating.

Scholarly literature distinguishes between two principal types of authority found in educational environments: internal and external authority. This dichotomy, formulated by Mieczysław Łobocki, is anchored in two opposing forces that shape and direct human behavior. Internal authority represents a consciously and voluntarily chosen model for imitation, whose system of values, beliefs, and attitudes resonates most strongly with one's own (Łobocki, 1994, p. 7). External authority, by contrast, refers to a relationship in which authority is imposed upon the individual together with the ethical principles and ideological assumptions that it conveys. In such circumstances, the individual is left with little choice but to comply and adapt to the prevailing conditions.

Taking this into account, the form of authority most consistent with human nature is one grounded in the freedom to choose one's own role model. Autonomy in decision-making compels us to critically examine – and, when necessary, reconfigure – our system of values. Conversely, the imposition of prescribed behavioral norms constrains our ability to engage with the external world, which in turn can hinder healthy social functioning. The unreflective adoption of fragmented knowledge and generalized assertions, as well as their habitual repetition, poses a serious risk, as it strips the individual of authenticity and independence in forming their own judgments on matters on which their views have not yet matured.

Academic discourse also identifies and analyzes distinct forms of authority figures that emerge in various educational and social environments. Two key categories have been delineated: traditional authority and contemporary authority. This distinction stems from the qualities ascribed to various role models, which have been grouped according to historical period and the nature of the ideas that they advance. Additional criteria include the values associated with their existence and the significance assigned to them by society.

Traditional authority refers to figures belonging to the immediate social and educational environment, typically family members, but also extended influences such as family friends and members of the local community. According to Szyszka (2023, pp. 90–91), traditional authority is marked by traits including proper education, a coherent ethical system, a mature and well-formed personality, a commitment to self-improvement, and responsible participation in civic life. In this sense, the authority figure serves as a model of sound functioning in the social structure and as a bearer of positive values essential for the further moral and personal development of others.

As Szyszka also observes, an authentic role model should also demonstrate the ability to set clear goals and, based on them, to make deliberate choices and implement them consistently in everyday life. Such congruence renders the individual credible, elicits respect, and builds social trust (Szyszka, 2023, p. 91). Their conduct should act as a source of motivation and inspiration, cultivating an atmosphere that encourages optimism and the shaping of individual identity and character.

Wojciech Welskop, echoing the views of other scholars, notes an increasingly evident shift away from perceiving close relatives as authority figures, in favor of the expanding

competencies of younger generations and their growing immersion in the cultural sphere of social media and its role models (Welskop, 2014, p. 39). It appears that the pervasiveness of technological media has deepened among older generations a sense of impotence in safeguarding traditional values and cultural legacies. The gradual dissolution of these elements – once the cornerstone of human self-awareness and cultural distinctiveness – has fundamentally unsettled the structural equilibrium of contemporary society.

What distinguishes today's dominant role models is their capacity to adapt to prevailing trends in their social environment and to align themselves with the – often artificially engineered – needs of individuals shaped by social media. Particularly noteworthy is the growing dependence on material possessions, which are increasingly endowed with a quasi-deterministic role in securing one's social legitimacy and sense of adequacy (Ziółkowski, 2008, p. 59). The ascendancy of a consumerist ethos, reinforced by the persistent glorification of acquisition and ownership, poses a tangible threat to contemporary society.

Modern media figures – influencers, celebrities, and pop-cultural idols – construct and disseminate a distorted vision of reality, persuading young audiences that the possession of certain commodities constitutes an indispensable condition for personal happiness and fulfillment (Lajnef, 2023, pp. 1–3). Equally troubling is the promotion of behavioral scripts and cognitive frameworks: prefabricated blueprints for social functioning that ostensibly make life easier but in practice encourage passivity, erode individuality, and dull critical engagement with the surrounding world (Lewicka, 2021, p. 80).

The proliferation of media personalities, their ubiquitous presence on social platforms, and their role in generating trends and aesthetic conventions represent little more than a facsimile of genuine authority. This phenomenon contributes to the homogenization of society, subordinating individuals to a single, allegedly "correct" mode of existence. It reduces them to mechanical repetition, subjects them to subtle mechanisms of manipulation, and imposes ready-made hierarchies of value that dictate what is socially desirable or worthy of pursuit.

These reflections on the nature and evolution of authority suggest that one's primary formative environments continue to play a crucial role in shaping personal identity, social consciousness, and one's orientation toward the social world. The process of human development – from the very moment of birth – is conditioned by myriad familial influences: communication styles, gestures, emotional expressions, parenting models, interpersonal dynamics, and shared systems of value and morality. Collectively, these factors determine how a person will function in society.

Pedagogical theory underscores that upbringing must remain responsive to the expectations and exigencies of the surrounding social context. Educational practice, therefore, should embody socially constructive norms and harmonize with the accepted social order, enabling the individual to perform their role in their community. Yet the progressive distortion of reality perpetuated by mass media and its role models exerts a far-reaching influence on the lives of children and adolescents. It follows that parents, teachers, and

educators bear the responsibility of maintaining vigilance toward the younger generation's activity in digital spaces. The more conscientiously adults participate in the early stages of a child's development, the greater the likelihood of achieving the intended outcomes and of guiding young people toward authentic, constructive role models.

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