

## The Role of the Media in Shaping Cultural Representations of Street Gangs – A Presentation of Models –

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### Abstract:

The phenomenon of neighborhood gangs is one of the complex social issues linked to economic, educational, and cultural factors. Today, the media contributes to spreading and broadcasting such phenomena by highlighting the main factors behind their emergence, as well as the cultural references (the family, the school) that serve as tools for creating a hidden class and cultural conflict manifested in the form of symbolic violence. This is the focus of our article, in which we address the role and importance of the media in raising public awareness and finding effective solutions to combat this form of crime, through the presentation of models of neighborhood gangs as depicted in some Algerian television channels.

**Keywords:** media, cultural representations, neighborhood gangs.

### Introduction:

In recent years, the phenomenon of neighborhood gangs has witnessed a wide spread, creating problems that extend their impact to institutions and schools in nearby areas. It is observed that a gang typically consists of unemployed youth, individuals with low income, or newcomers who find themselves in conflict with the mentality of the neighborhood community. The proliferation of gangs is often due to the negligence of neighborhood representatives, families, and schools in fulfilling their social roles. Therefore, it is necessary to coordinate community mobilization strategies and social support within the framework of social control to suppress gang activities.

This study aims to address the phenomenon of neighborhood gangs and highlight the main reasons behind their emergence—particularly family conditions and the role of the media, which promotes ready-made content for public consumption—within the context of a cultural reference struggle that has become vulnerable to penetration by Western cultural models. To this end, the study presents several examples of this criminal phenomenon as portrayed by various Algerian television channels.

### Axis One: The Conceptual Framework 1 – Neighborhood Gangs:

According to Article 02 of Ordinance No. 20-03, dated August 30, 2020, concerning the prevention of neighborhood gangs, these are defined as “any group, under any designation, consisting of two or more individuals belonging to one or more residential neighborhoods, who come together to commit one or several acts aimed at creating an atmosphere of insecurity within residential areas, or to impose control over a community by means of physical assault that endangers the lives and safety of individuals or damages their property through the use of visible or concealed bladed weapons.”

In addition, *moral assault* may constitute the *material element* of neighborhood crime, defined as any verbal aggression that instills fear or terror in others, such as threats, insults, slander, intimidation, or deprivation of rights (Saad, IlhamHouria, 2020, p.148).

Frederic Thrasher (1943) introduced the concept of a “gang” as primarily a *play group* that provides an important source of

social support during the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, particularly in environments characterized by social and economic marginalization and social disorder. Rather than standing in opposition to family and community, early studies viewed the *gang* as a supportive social structure based on clearly defined and shared roles—essentially, a set of rooted commitments within the community itself (Whyte, 1943).

## 2 – Cultural Reference:

This concept encompasses the totality of cognitive, intellectual, and cultural backgrounds and dimensions. These backgrounds usually reveal the ideology and culture of a given nation or society within a specific continent. They shed light on people's customs, traditions, language, and modes of thinking (HakimaSebai, 2019, p.257).

## 3 – Representations:

In his well-known work “*Key Concepts in Sociology*,” John Scott defines *representations* as “*the totality of shared intellectual phenomena that constitute essential components of any culture.*” The term was first introduced by Émile Durkheim to refer to one of the social facts that sociology is concerned with—namely, the set of ideas, values, symbols, and expectations that shape modes of thought (John Scott, 2009, p.123).

## Axis Two: Main Causes of the Spread of Neighborhood Gangs

### 1– The Hidden Symbolic Violence of the School:

Pierre Bourdieu emphasizes that both school and family culture play a crucial role in shaping students' future orientations. On the other hand, the school tends to deny the existence of differences among students—particularly those resulting from inherited cultural capital. The school presents itself as “*neutral and non-discriminatory*,” yet in reality, it reproduces and reinforces unspoken, implicit structures that only the “*inheritors*” (the privileged) can truly perceive. In this sense, Bourdieu speaks of a “*pedagogy of the absence of pedagogy.*” The implicit dimension revolves around values, such as student

autonomy, where motivation and the appreciation of knowledge are regarded by the school as *natural* attributes rather than socially conditioned ones.

Bourdieu also assumes the existence of certain forms of “*free culture*”—such as music, literature, and other cultural assets—that are not explicitly taught in the school environment. This kind of culture, however, is tacitly expected and valued by the educational system, and only the *inheritors* have access to the means of acquiring it within their family milieu. Consequently, these students transform their familial cultural resources into scholastic advantages, as the school institution recognizes and legitimizes them as such.

The interaction between different cultural systems leads to *acculturation*, which can have negative effects. The lack of similarity between the culture of the underprivileged classes and that of the dominant groups—stemming from unequal cultural inheritance—produces a specific type of acculturation among the dominated classes. Although the concept of acculturation is often used to describe relations between developed and developing societies, it is also highly relevant to describe the cultural changes resulting from interactions between social groups with distinct cultures.

Unlike the *inheritors*, children who are distant from the educational institution are required to *learn everything from scratch*. To succeed, they must undergo a genuine process of acculturation. A clear example of this is found in linguistic differences: *bourgeois language* reflects a particular relationship to speech, characterized by abstraction, formalism, and intellectualism—all features valued by the linguistic norms of the school. In contrast, *popular language* tends to emphasize particular contexts, emotional expression, and concrete situations, relying less on abstract reasoning.

Therefore, acquiring the school culture represents a form of *symbolic violence*: members of the dominated classes are, in effect, compelled to learn a *foreign language*. A genuine process of acculturation—implying the loss of one's original culture—becomes necessary to survive within the educational

institution; otherwise, the *academic judgment* will eventually exclude them.

However, the most powerful mechanism that distances disadvantaged groups from school is the *habitus*, which results from the internalization of objective social conditions. This habitus leads to a form of *self-exclusion*, as individuals learn to anticipate their future based on their present experiences and thus refrain from aspiring to what their social group perceives as unattainable. Consequently, the belief that school can serve as a means of controlling one's social trajectory is primarily held by those who have reasonable chances of success. Working-class families, therefore, tend to be less inclined to place their hopes for upward mobility in the school system, as their children are often labeled as "*unmotivated*."

In 1987, Duru-Bellat conducted a study involving 2,500 students enrolled in 17 middle schools under the Dijon Academy. The findings revealed that *working-class families practice a form of self-selection beginning at this educational stage*: approximately half of the children of workers leave school at the end of the eighth grade, compared to less than 10% of the children of executives. The study showed that deficits in knowledge account for only a quarter of this difference. The remaining two factors are the *absence of educational ambition* among working-class families and the greater *strictness of teachers* in middle schools located in working-class neighborhoods when it comes to students' promotion to the ninth grade.

This analysis challenges the widespread common-sense explanations that attribute the exclusion of underprivileged groups either to a lack of intellectual ability or to the absence of economic resources. Instead, it takes into account the *different strategies* of social classes toward schooling (AbdelkrimBazzaz, 2006–2007, pp. 99–101).

Hence, the school can be considered one of the mechanisms contributing to the emergence of *neighborhood gangst* through the *hidden violence* it exercises over the dominated social classes, directly influencing students' future trajectories. Many students either drop out before completing their studies or follow weak academic paths that fail to

secure a stable future, leading them into the specter of unemployment—one of the main factors driving deviant behavior. This dynamic operates within a context where the culture of the dominant class aligns with that of the school, while marginalized students experience cultural dissonance. Consequently, the *cultural reference* and the *cultural capital* of the family play a decisive role in generating a *socio-cultural conflict* that can give rise to numerous social problems.

## 2 – The Decline of the Family's Role:

The changing status of women and their increasing participation in professions once reserved for men have altered the traditional structure of the family. Parents' growing engagement in work outside the home has affected both the *methods and quality of child-rearing and supervision*. As a result, parental control has weakened, and attention to children's educational progress has declined, leading to a lack of responsibility and disengagement from learning among children.

Moreover, this shift has fostered *individualism*, self-interest, and *intrafamilial conflicts*. This situation is often described as a *conflict of roles* between men and women, stemming from transformations in prevailing cultural patterns and the *infiltration of Western cultural models* into local value systems.

## 3 – Media Openness:

Media openness represents a decisive factor in shaping young people's mindsets, as it transmits ideas and activities that often contradict the cultural values, religious teachings, and traditional heritage of our society. With the ongoing technological and digital explosion, we now live in an age of speed and instant communication—an era in which sound and image can easily circulate, promoting diverse cultural models and lifestyles. This reality makes youth particularly vulnerable to these transformations, ideologies, and online platforms that carry various implicit purposes and agendas, capable of framing their thinking within a specific ideological orientation.

## 4 – Social Policies:

This point refers to the shortcomings and inefficiencies in social policies and

development plans. In the Algerian context, the consequences of the current economic situation have generated a severe social crisis, reflected in rising unemployment rates, increasing prices, declining purchasing power, and disparities in access to basic services across different regions of the country. These conditions are further exacerbated by the lack of comprehensive and evidence-based studies needed to design social policies that are consistent with the actual socio-economic realities.

### **5 – Globalization:**

Globalization, through its mechanisms and ideologically driven systems that promote the dominance of stronger cultures, poses a genuine threat to the cultural values of consumer societies. The most affected and targeted group in this process is *youth*. Hence, globalization stands as a major contributing factor to the challenges faced by Arab and Algerian youth alike, as its core essence involves a *reconfiguration of societies* under the influence of an integrated value system with specific cultural and ideological objectives

#### **Major Problems Facing Youth:**

##### **A – Poor Use of Free Time:**

Free time is the period in which an individual can be liberated from daily obligations and activities. However, when this time is abundant—such as for unemployed individuals with no daily routine—it can become poorly utilized. Residential environments that provide such conditions often host groups or individuals without employment, the majority of whom are youth. These young people may spend their time sitting along streets or in corners, exchanging conversations and interests. Yet, when their free time is misused, it can manifest in undesirable behaviors such as sexual harassment, drug use, or loitering in front of apartment buildings—indicating frustration and dissatisfaction with their life circumstances.

##### **B – Social Isolation:**

Youth may feel a gap or distance between themselves and society—between

their own culture and that of the broader community, or between their progressive outlook and the traditional perspective of society. This disconnection often leads to a sense of separation or fragmentation between what young people perceive and what society accepts (*non-normative rejection*), resulting in social isolation. Such isolation contributes to the formation of countercultures within groups, a phenomenon partly fueled by globalization, technology, and social media platforms.

##### **C – Addiction Issues:**

When socialization institutions fail to transmit values in ways that align with the changing times and generational contexts, alternative beliefs and practices may emerge. In the current era, globalization and its accompanying ideas and cultural influences have intensified this process. Consequently, society's increasing dependence on modern technologies has significantly contributed to the erosion of cultural heritage, reinforcing Western cultural models in the process.

##### **D – Unemployment and Exclusion:**

The challenges of youth empowerment and participation in societal progress are evident in the widespread prevalence of negative perceptions about young people. These perceptions often cast youth as unreliable or incapable of assuming responsibility, which exacerbates their social exclusion and limits their ability to contribute effectively to development (Said Ali Moussa&TaherSwakri, 2021, pp. 200–206).

#### **Axis Three: Models of Neighborhood Gangs on Some Algerian Media Channels**

The media has covered numerous issues that have attracted wide and significant attention at all levels, serving as the primary source for shaping collective awareness among the general public. Its tools and channels have become increasingly capable of responding to the realities and challenges imposed by the media environment. Media outlets actively seek to combat the phenomenon of neighborhood gangs by implementing a set of strategic approaches.

Many Algerian television channels have contributed to addressing this issue through programs focusing on neighborhood gangs. For example:

#### **1 – Echorouk TV:**

This channel provided a detailed report on the current situation titled “*Security Services Threaten the New Neighborhood Gangs*”. The report discussed the emergence of organized neighborhood gangs in newly constructed housing complexes in Algiers, Boumerdes, and Blida over the past three years. These gangs, whether acting individually or in structured groups, have disturbed the residents of these new apartments, prompting some to abandon their homes after a series of thefts and property assaults documented by social media and news outlets.

Given the numerous complaints received by Echorouk TV regarding thefts of vehicles, homes, and private property across various sites in the west and east of the capital—particularly water meters and copper gas pipes—the channel reported the issue to the relevant authorities. The rapid spread of the phenomenon led residents to call on officials to urgently establish security facilities in newly developed housing complexes located far from urban centers. These neighborhood gangs now assert control within defined boundaries, engaging in prohibited trades, theft, and fraud. A recent example occurred at the “500 Housing Units” site in Blouza, Sahawla, where a gang established its dominance according to the number of its members and influence.

During a press conference reviewing the 2022 annual report at the Châtillon Police School in the capital, a channel journalist asked Inspector General Hajj SaïdArzeki, head of operational services at the National Security Directorate, about the proliferation of organized robbery and theft groups in various new residential sites. The discussion referenced Ordinance No. 20/03, dated August 30, 2020, concerning the prevention and control of neighborhood gangs (published in the Official Gazette No. 51 on August 31, 2020), as well as Executive Decree No. 21-123, which defines mechanisms for gang prevention. An agreement between security and gendarmerie authorities, dated August 2,

2022, confirmed that coordinated measures continue to tighten control over gangs through a long-term program, while new security structures are being established to ensure citizens’ safety and protect public and private property (Echorouk Online, [link](#)).

The formation of these criminal and gang groups can be traced to socialization mechanisms and upbringing. The family environment is expected to shape the child’s personality with balanced, positive principles from an early age, preventing them from turning to street environments where delinquent peers facilitate their integration into deviant and criminal groups. Ideally, these new housing complexes or urban neighborhoods should foster social cohesion through shared habits, customs, and traditions among families living in the same area. However, security reports have shown that this is often not the case.

There are clearly identifiable causes that decision-makers failed to notice until it was too late, such as cultural differences and conflicts, as highlighted by the conflict theory of American sociologist Thorsten Sellin. Additionally, there has been a lack of a stabilizing factor that provides security, reassurance, and stability to the residents of a given neighborhood—that is, national security. This absence is evident in many residential complexes that lack police or gendarmerie stations. Criminals have exploited this security and familial negligence to abduct children and commit theft on a daily basis. This phenomenon initially emerged in new urban cities, such as the Ali Mendjeli New City in Constantine, and has even involved the targeting of vulnerable children by offenders.

#### **2 – Ennahar TV (Algeria):**

This channel broadcast a report detailing measures to curb the activities of neighborhood gang members. The journalist focused on a number of gangs apprehended by security authorities in the Skikda province following emergency calls from local residents. Security personnel were dispatched to the scene to conduct field investigations, which led to the identification and arrest of individuals involved in gang-related fights. Confiscated items included bladed weapons such as swords and knives, iron rods, as well

as quantities of narcotics and psychoactive substances.

The suspects were presented before the competent prosecutor at the Skikda court on charges of forming and organizing a neighborhood gang, incitement, participation in gang fights, involvement in gang activities, unlawful possession of bladed weapons, and disturbing public order (Ennahar TV, [link](#)).

These media reports demonstrate the important role of the press in highlighting this phenomenon. New residential complexes have increasingly become hubs of serious crime. However, thanks to the persistent protests of new residents—who feel marginalized and unfairly treated, facing growing violence and both physical and psychological assaults, including threats with bladed weapons—security agencies have been prompted to intervene and manage the issues in these new neighborhoods to curb the spread of crime, which has recently proliferated across the country.

In response, the Algerian legislature has implemented practical and preventive strategies to confront and combat this demographic and social challenge. This includes the issuance of Ordinance 20-03 concerning the prevention and suppression of neighborhood gangs, which established a tiered system of penalties, ranging from imprisonment for minor offenses to life sentences for the most serious crimes.

### **3 – El Bilad TV (Algeria):**

El Bilad TV has also contributed to raising awareness about neighborhood gangs by broadcasting a report on the apprehension of **ten neighborhood gangs** by security authorities. These gangs sought to create an atmosphere of insecurity, fear, and terror among residents in the affected neighborhoods. The Judicial Police addressed this incident by confiscating a large quantity of prohibited bladed weapons, including large knives, various types of swords, wooden and iron sticks, intended to intimidate the public.

Media reports on neighborhood gangs typically cover their criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, theft, violence, and internal security threats. They highlight the impact of these gangs on local communities as well as

the efforts of law enforcement and relevant authorities to combat these crimes and dismantle criminal networks.

The media can play a **significant role** in raising public awareness and developing effective solutions to address this serious phenomenon. This can be achieved through:

#### **1 – Raising Awareness:**

Media outlets are vital in informing the public about the threats and harms posed by neighborhood gangs. As an effective channel for delivering news, the media can provide accurate and reliable information about the nature of these gangs, their activities, and their negative impact on society. Through broadcasting reports, stories, and documentaries, the media can educate people, encourage public participation in crime prevention efforts, and highlight specific details of the issue, including its causes, consequences, and the social and economic repercussions of gang activity.

#### **2 – Monitoring Criminal Activities:**

Media outlets can play a key role in observing and documenting gang activities, shedding light on their illegal actions. Journalists and reporters can conduct investigations, document cases of crime and harassment, and publish these findings through various media channels to raise public awareness and inform the relevant authorities.

#### **3 – Influencing Public Opinion:**

The media is a powerful tool for shaping public opinion by highlighting the scale and negative impact of neighborhood gangs on society. Through intensive media coverage, it can exert pressure on authorities to implement stronger measures to combat gangs and improve safety in affected neighborhoods.

#### **4 – Communication with the Public:**

Media can help establish communication bridges between the public and relevant authorities. It can provide channels for individuals affected by neighborhood gangs to report complaints, share critical information, and direct these concerns to the competent authorities for appropriate action.

#### **5 – Documentation and Investigation:**

The media can play a decisive role in documenting and investigating crimes committed by neighborhood gangs. Through in-depth journalistic investigations and precise documentation of events, media outlets can reveal gang activities, highlight crime-related issues, and promote transparency and accountability.

However, it is important to note that media coverage and public opinion can vary in their influence on society and government actions to curb this phenomenon and provide security and stability. The media should provide in-depth analyses and reports to understand the causes of neighborhood gang formation and explore strategies for addressing it at local and national levels.

### Recommendations:

- Train journalists to approach social issues from a cultural and humanistic perspective.
- Encourage media productions that highlight the social roots of urban violence rather than focusing solely on sensationalism.
- Support positive youth initiatives within marginalized neighborhoods.
- Ensure the provision of objective information and verify news accuracy before publication, adhering to ethical and professional standards in coverage, and avoiding inciting panic or promoting violence.
- Promote media's role in raising public awareness and contributing to positive social change overall.

### Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it is evident that the media possesses a dual capacity: it can reinforce stereotypes if misused, or serve as a tool for enlightenment and cultural bridging when applied with awareness and responsibility. This highlights the need for more balanced and humane media approaches that consider the cultural and social dimensions of neighborhood gangs, contributing to the promotion of a culture of dialogue rather than perpetuating exclusion.

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