

## Notions of civic engagement and leadership in adolescents <sup>1, 2, 3</sup>

### *Noções de engajamento cívico e liderança em adolescents* *Civismo, Liderança e Adolescência*

### *Nociones de compromiso cívico y liderazgo en adolescentes*

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#### **Abstract**

This research aims to discuss civic engagement among teenagers based on their own conceptions about politics and leadership. The theoretical perspective is at the intersection of Education and Moral Psychology, bringing studies on the education of values, as well as concepts of political philosophy. We evaluate the responses of 219 teenage students from Baixada Santista-SP, of both genders, aged 10 to 13 years, from two questionnaires produced for the investigation. One questionnaire on the perceptions of the political scenario, and the other on anti-hero characters from cinema and TV, the answers to the questionnaires were inter-related. The results show that civic engagement emphasizes the important role that teenagers can and should play as participants and agents of change in the construction of qualities that promote the common good and citizenship.

**Keywords:** engagement, leadership, civism, adolescence, identification

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## **Resumo**

*Esta pesquisa tem como objetivo discutir o engajamento cívico em adolescentes a partir das concepções que eles próprios têm sobre política e liderança. A linha teórica se insere na intersecção entre Educação e Psicologia Moral, trazendo pesquisas e estudos da educação em valores, assim como conceitos da filosofia política. A avaliação das respostas de 219 adolescentes escolarizados de ambos os sexos, da faixa etária de 10 a 13 anos, da região da Baixada Santista, SP, se dá a partir de dois questionários organizados para a investigação— um deles sobre as percepções do cenário político e outro sobre personagens anti-heróis de filmes de cinema e TV —, que se relacionam a partir das respostas. Os resultados mostram que o engajamento cívico enfatiza o importante papel que os adolescentes podem e devem desempenhar como participantes e como agentes de mudança na construção de qualidades promotoras do bem comum e da cidadania.*

**Palavras-chave:** engajamento, liderança, civismo, adolescência, identificação

## **Resumen**

*Esta investigación tiene como objetivo discutir el compromiso cívico en los adolescentes con base en sus propias concepciones de política y liderazgo. La línea teórica se inserta en la intersección de la Educación y la Psicología Moral, trayendo investigación y estudios de educación en valores, así como conceptos de filosofía política. En la evaluación de las respuestas de 219 adolescentes de la Baixada Santista-SP, de ambos sexos, de 10 a 13 años, educados, a partir de dos cuestionarios organizados para la investigación, uno de ellos sobre las percepciones del escenario político, y otro sobre personajes antibélicos de películas de cine y televisión, que se relacionan con las respuestas. Los resultados muestran que el compromiso cívico enfatiza el importante papel que los adolescentes pueden y deben jugar como participantes y como agentes de cambio en la construcción de cualidades que promueven el bien común y la ciudadanía.*

**Palabras clave:** compromiso, liderazgo, civismo, adolescencia, identificación

## **Introduction**

In the last two decades, the increase in the interest for civil engagement, related to the development of teenagers has been characterized as an important field of research, as it articulates areas of Moral Psychology and Education. Several studies have been pointing out the intersection between developmental psychology and political socialization, describing civic actions as an independent variable that can lead to an ethical commitment (Damon, 2008; Davila & Mora, 2007; Lerner, 2004), and others related to school factors (Flanagan et al., 2007; Kahne & Wetheimer, 2006; Youniss et al., 2001). They focus their attention in the

individual structure of the subject, which includes civic knowledge, cognitive abilities, and disposition for civic participation (Patrick, 2003).

By civic engagement, we understand the idea of a process in which people undertake collective actions to deal with questions of public interest (Boyte, 2005), together with the concepts of “civil abilities” of developmental psychology, such as the structures of family and social life, built by children and teenagers, and that have mutually influenced the formation of identity, values, and bonds with people (Flanagan, 2003). In the literature review on the theme, we recover one of the first works of political scientists Verba et al. (1995), who deal with civic volunteering in the United States and define a series of civic abilities incorporated in the structure of people’s political participation. Moving from the field of political sciences to the educational sphere, “civic abilities” would be related to the areas of education for citizenship and political learning.

Thus, there is the concept that civic abilities do not exist without a purpose. They are part of a large framework of ideas on what is believed to be needed for citizens to engage in public life, that is, the notion that some types of abilities are required aiming to, effectively, allow social participation, together with the acquisition of meaningful knowledge.

Such civic abilities go beyond those needed for political exercise (Colby et al., 2003), which are associated with civic engagement. But what happens when the participants are young, when the community is seen as multicultural, or when the process operates in metropolitan areas that become more segregated and adverse?

In these cases, civic engagement can take different shapes. For example, people are able to organize group actions, local activities, advocate in civic agencies, raise awareness on ethical issues, or serve the community. There is no unique form of civic engagement, but many manifestations and interfaces (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Zukin et al., 2006).

However, as the meaning of citizenship is essentially controversial, the *general aim* of this article is to bring to the discussion the conceptions that teenagers have on politics, on individual and collective instances, delimiting their projections regarding civism and political leadership.

For political sciences, according to Díaz (2008), leadership is also not an easily identifiable phenomenon. There is no defined *locus*, but a socially constructed concept and

very difficult to be precisely explained; hence, we will adopt the perspective that the concept is lacking in most manuals of social science and has not been systematic dealt with but, on the contrary, is still elusive.

Thus, the discussions resulting from this research intends to establish a relation between the concepts of leadership and citizenship, by its etymologic characteristic that takes back to discussions on political philosophy, the idea of government and of rulers.

## Method

A critical point that the research also intends to observe is how teenagers understand the nature of their rulers; the way they, themselves, can participate in the political and electoral life; and the relevance of their participations. It is fundamentally important and needed, for the development of critical and ethical thought in participative youngsters, to open up the dialogue to build an education for civism as a formal or electoral type of politics that involves public positions, political meetings, or electoral offices, or that seek to define themselves by a party or another.

Besides alerting on these issues, we have the following specific objectives:

- this study intends to verify the concept of “politics” among teenagers;
- identify the projections that teenagers have (or not) about a political leader;
- and, finally, permeating all the findings and analyses, the research discusses moral values of civism and citizenship in the perspective of teenagers that have witnessed the international and national political scenario in the last two years.

We investigated 219 teenagers of both sexes, between 10 and 13 years old, attending a private institution<sup>4</sup> in the region of *Baixada Santista* in the state of São Paulo. The data collection took place at the end of 2018, when the presidential elections were underway in the country. We choose this age range for its very peculiar characteristics, taking into consideration the cognitive development pointed out by Piaget (1994) in his studies on moral

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<sup>4</sup> This large-sized institution has a partnership with the authors of the article, who, for the last 3 years, have been developing with students, teachers, and managers themes about interpersonal relations and psycho-pedagogical consultancy.

development. This age range corresponds to the moment of heteronomous moral transition – that, according to Piaget (1994), is characterized by the moral realism that arises as a consequence of operational egocentrism and lead children to consider the contents of consciousness as if they were material – to the autonomous moral that arises from the individual him/herself as a set of justice principles, based on equality, mutual respects, and cooperation relations.

As investigation instruments, we used a Values Questionnaire and a Characters Questionnaire. The first is based on the instrument created by La Taille and Harkot-de-La-Taille (2006), in which we selected only the issues on the subtheme “Politics”. It has five questions with statements and/or questions for respondents to choose one of the alternatives identified to complete the statement or the question.

The second questionnaire aims to identify aspects and characteristics of the so-called anti-heroes in television and films which call teenagers’ attention. It is composed of only two questions, one to select one character in a list and the other to justify their choice. The question asked in the questionnaire is translated into a double character: an investigative and a reflexive-educational one, serving as a self-guidance because it, fundamentally, consists in a question to reflect and reveal about what is more meaningful to them, so that respondents can chose amidst the list presented.<sup>5</sup>

This instrument was created especially for this study. We used research through fictional characters because it is a symbolic element that can allow respondents’ direct projection. When watching a movie, the audience feels some type of empathy by the narrative and this is reached through the characters, whatever their form. Spectator are interested to see themselves projected in the characters, that is, a film is, in a way, a reflection of a reality that raises certain emotions in people.

Thus, with this instrument, we intend to establish meanings to the answers to think about the several possibilities of projections and conceptions that teenagers elaborated regarding the main axis political-civism and the way this relates to the process of personality construction. The characteristics of anti-heroes pointed out by teenagers reflect what can be,

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<sup>5</sup> We chose for the questionnaire famous characters from fictional and adventure stories in the last decades. They are: Joke, Thanos, Voldemort, Negan, Darth Vader, Rumpelstilkin, Loki, Ramsey Bolton, Lex Luthor, and Apocalypse.

in fact, interesting for a leadership figure: attributes such as force, power, and independence attract them (Damon, 2008), to the point that they identify themselves with these characters, portraying what they wish for their future life and to conquer their independence. Thinking about these projections, we can associate them to the expectations to choose a political leader, when we remember that the age range of the sample indicates the initial moment of building moral autonomy (Piaget, 1994).

Therefore, the content analyses are supported by reflexive and imaginative data, which we can evaluate from subjects' own conception, and are classified according to their personal development, the interpersonal relations, the social and/or political activities, the relation with nature, the philosophical, creative, and ethical manifestations. The connection between the two questionnaires designed for this investigation is done through the evaluation of the answers, inferring that the teenagers with more consistent conceptions on politics may also present more solid notions on political leadership.

We treated the data collected from the overall calculation, in percentage, of the answers and choices, highlighting the most significant numbers to be discussed in the analysis of teenage profile. These quantitative analysis are not presented by gender, boys and girls, because generally there were no significant evidence.

This contextualization grounds our research question: *How do young people perceive political leadership in current society and develop notions of civism?*

We propose three hypotheses to answer this question:

1. There is an ethical/non-ethical projection of political leadership that allows the *identification of moral values* (dignity and respect) and *material* (power and goods), which is triggered by interactive media.
2. The notion of civism is given by the *symbolic projection* to establish a social insertion that highlights citizenship, the common good or the quick enrichment and the rise to power.
3. There is a charismatic identification with a person by their supernatural gifts, magical powers, and exaggerated heroism, intellectual or rhetorical powers that leads to a personal devotion to the warrior hero or the great demagogue (cinema and/or TV *villains*).

## Results

When registering the numbers of the Values Questionnaire, we could see that teenagers consider politicians and judges very important to society: 42.34% of participants consider politicians to be *important* and 40.40% consider them *very important*, adding up to 82.14% in total for this question. And 53.19% of teenagers consider judges to be *very important* for current society, added to the 40.14% of subjects that affirm judges are *important*, resulting in 94.38% of the sample.

Most boys who considered politicians and judges *very important* (49.16%) chose the character *Thanos* as the most interesting one. The girls who considered who considered politicians and judges as *very important* mostly (48.18%) chose the character *Joker* as the most attractive.

Though teenagers recognize the importance of these two professionals, the degree of trust placed in the National Congress and political parties have opposite indexes: 52.21% of the general sample has *little trust* in the Congress and 13.57% *do not trust* it, a total of 66.2% for this question. Regarding the political parties, 54.74% have *little trust*, and 32.42% *do not trust* them, making up 86.16% of teenagers for this question.

The indexes are relatively different regarding the Judicial Power: 43.83% say they *trust* it and 36.16% of teenagers have *little trust*. We can conclude that the organs and institutions that involve people, politicians, and judges, despite being considered *important* by the interviewees, do not raise the necessary trust on them, resulting in very different perspectives. The entity Judicial Power, which can project a transcendence (power as something abstract) to teenagers, holds their trust more significantly.

From the total of boys that have *little trust* or *do not trust* the National Congress and the political parties, and *trust* the Judicial Power, 98.17% chose the character *Thanos* as the most interesting one. Out of the girls in the same conditions, *no trust* in the National Congress and in political parties and *trust* in the Judicial Power, 97.15% chose the character *Joker*.

Normally, the government is defined as an activity related with decision-taking on topics of public interest for a society. Governability is a concept that defines a modality of government carried out from an action, management, reflection, and citizen deliberation,

which start from the active commitment of society members for equity, justice, and prevalence of human rights (Quiroga, 2006).

We should say that governability implies the structuring and development of public life, which seems to suppose that the teenagers in the research have noticed, even if intuitively, that the proactive definition of “political subject” in decision-making and the exercise of power based on the surrounding reality, because they consider politicians and judges to be important. We can observe that the characteristics of personality have a relevant role, as parallel agendas to the governmental one can emerge, which develop governability and can express deeper social interests, such as the mobilization to guarantee educational and ecological rights, among others; or, even, citizen actions to modify social and economic establishments, through legislative and judicial acts of rulers, or other forms of participation in the public life.

Most teenagers in the research trusted the Judicial Power in the country: 44.64% of them say they *trust* it and 9.43% *trust a lot*, in a general total of 53.19%. Together with the judges, as commented, the representation of regulation by part of the teenagers can have a moralist character and focus on only one person (judge), converting into a juridical norm. That is, teenagers seem to trust people and not the institutions.

Regarding the Character Questionnaire, 24.48% of the sample chose the character *Joker*, 23.16% elected the character *Thanos* and 13.51% indicated *Voldemort*. These were the three most selected ones. The justification for those choices will be discussed in the following analysis.

## Discussion

It is important to highlight, from a psychogenetic perspective, that the social knowledge assumes itself as a predominantly self-referenced construction of meaning, hierarchical, continuous, complex, progressive, and accumulative, determined by the neurobiological maturation of individuals due to their cognitive development (Piaget, 1972). Objects of various social knowledge, such as social classes, wealth and poverty, the forms of government, the notions of authority and power, would be submitted to periods of individual cognitive development (Delval, 2006) and would be independent from external influences.



Furthermore, this study can confirm other studies conducted on mental representations of government among teenagers (Barret & Barrow, 2005; Furnham, 2003), showing that they understand the notion of politics as an organized institution that acts in society through positions and standardized functions, and that they considered this performance as the result of various juridical laws that allow the organization of the country and solve their social, economic, and political problems, within constitutionality. The representation of government assumes, then, a hierarchical structure to organize the country in the public sphere to solve such problems. When thinking about the characteristics of empowerment in society and the new ways of organization and reality, we can infer that the representation of government idealized by the interviewees would be associated with the concept of governability.

Several studies in the field of democracy, citizenship, values, and cultural practices have been pointing out the need for an analysis of values, for example, justice, as well as the relation of society with law: Araújo-Olivera et al. (2005) describe that the good conviviality is based on the practice of certain values. A study conducted by Romo-Martínez (2005) on moral behavior reports that teenagers stated that the reasons to do good would be centered on the need to be a good person and show a concern for others. That is, teenagers have a notion of life in a democratic environment and understand that rulers are responsible for this context, these leaders must be representatives elected by the people, must be fair, and have a sense of equality.

Finally, the importance of understanding what teenagers think about political organizations helps to create a civic identity that, added to the participation in organized groups during adolescence, introduces to young people the roles and basic processes needed to their civic engagement as adults. However, we observed that the teenagers interviewed have incipient conceptions, supported by the social context in the moment (example: *judges are important*), in family values and/or in discussions in schools or influenced by them. They do not believe in politics and perpetuate the “present”, because the future is characterized as a veiled threat, as a lie.

There is a sector of political values, the permissiveness, especially perceived in this investigation, which has its origin in the relativist ethics of post-modernity and highlights the triumph of individualism, relativism, cultural pluralism, freedom, and changeable conviction. It

is what, in the moral field and civic culture, involves social disorder that will appear in the profiles of characters in the second research questionnaire.

Referring more specifically to the Character Questionnaire, the results obtained were used for the profile analyses. The characters listed on table 1, below, were built for the movies in this century, called post-classic, and were protagonists in highly-impact films, not only because they welcome heroes and superheroes, but because they were conceived with that determination.

**Table 1: Profiles of villains and antiheroes (written by the researchers)**

CHARACTER	PROFILE	FILM/SERIES
Darth Vader	Born as Anakin Skywalker is one of the main characters of the Star Wars films. Considered the greatest villain of the 20th century, he represents the dark side of the Force, a powerful, cold, and hedonistic character. He is a posthumous antihero in the sequence trilogy, but his actions still affect the Star Wars universe, for good or bad, mainly, regarding his grandson, Ben Solo, or Kylo Ren, who holds a blind admiration to Vader, wishing, more than anything, to be like him (or even surpass him).	<i>Star Wars</i> – Abrams (2015)
Apocalypse	The mutant Sabah Nur rules ancient Egypt in the year 3.600, but was betrayed and imprisoned by some admirers. When raising in current times and believing that, without him, humanity has lost its path, he decides to purify the world, turning it into a new order. Thus, he starts recruiting new Horsemen. He represents the power of force and goes until the last consequences to reach his goals.	<i>X-Men</i> – Singer (2016)
Thanos	This fictional character is a supervillain from the comic books published by Marvel Comics inspired by Thanatos. For the last 4 decades, Thanos stands out in the Marvel Universe and has a series of comic books. The character is generally described as a mad Titan, as, despite being powerful, he was rejected by other due to his appearance and ambition.	<i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i> – Gunn (2014); <i>Avengers: Infinity War</i> – Russo (2018)
Loki	Loki is based on the God of Mischief in the Nordic mythology. Envy is one of the most important psychological characteristics of Loki, which could be seen since he was a child, due to the attention and love received by Thor. Thus, Loki started to create a rivalry and hostility against the God of Thunder.	<i>The Avengers</i> – Whedon (2012)

Lex Luthor	The character is a powerful corrupt billionaire, tycoon, inventor, philanthropist in the city of Metropolis, and one of the most intelligent people in the world. A well-known charismatic figure, he aims to get rid of the alien superhero, who he sees as an obstacle to his megalomaniac plans and a threat to the existence of humanity.	<i>Batman X Superman</i> – Snyder (2016)
Joker	A character that transmits all the characteristics of a such mind. He is a sadist, eccentric, and cruel. He became the greatest homicidal maniac of the cinema and comics, and could stand out among the Batman characters because of his comic side, a type of bloody sarcasm.	<i>Batman: the Dark Knight</i> – Nolan (2008)
Negan	He is narcissistic and antisocial. His personality is marked by a theatrical behavior, the lack of empathy and emotions, as well as sadism and aggressiveness. Negan has a comorbid, having two or more mental disorders.	<i>The Walking Dead</i> – Darabond and Kirkman (2010-2019)
Rumpelstiltskin	The name Rumpelstilzchen has a German origin. Rumpelstilz or Rumpelstilz was the name of an elf-like figure, also called pophart or poppart, which makes noises of rattles on boards. The meaning is similar to rumpelgeist (“ghost rattle”) or poltergeist, a mischievous spirit that makes noises and moves domestic objects. Egocentric, self-interested, manipulative, liar, and cruel. Regarding the scope of his egocentrism in the cognitive sense – the way to think, stands out the distinction between ontological egocentrism and logical egocentrism.	<i>Once upon a time</i> – Horowitz (2011-2018)
Ramsay Bolton	Ramsay is the most problematic character of the series, considered that he had a tremendous satisfaction in hurting people, even when his sadistic behavior did not benefit him in his run for the throne. He has a trouble of sadist personality and sexual sadism because he shows pleasure and no remorse towards the suffering of others.	<i>Game of Thrones</i> – Benioff (2011-2018)
Voldemort	He is unscrupulous and determined. He can be extremely charming and pleasant, if he wants; guaranteeing a broad social network. He is always surrounded by devoted people, but has never created a true friendship bond with any of them. The idea of needing or depending on someone is completely foreign to him. Teachers and authoritarian figures normally admire him, except Albus Dumbledore, who could not trust him since the first day they met. He considers himself “special” since he was a child. Riddle is extremely proud, intelligent, and knows about his abilities.	<i>Harry Potter</i> – Yates (2010, 2011)

We can say that, in post-classic movies, the structure of the classic narrative is inverted. The narrative gets its emotional power and all the suspense from what is being

deconstructed. The spectator is captured in this mechanism in which there is an inversion of the structure of the symbolic account, but, even when changed, is remade. That is, it is always in construction and deconstruction (Sánchez Casarrubios, 2012).

Certainly, the figure of the villain is key in the post-classical narrative, and over him stands all the pillars of the story: false heroes that become villains, villains that behave as protagonists, an intense characterization of the evil figure, among other situations. The villain is, in movies or in TV series today, the key figure to evolve the protagonist and, in some stories, they are even more important than the hero himself. This is the case of many characters listed in the Questionnaire, such as *Voldemort*, *Darth Vader*, *Negan*, and the *Joker* himself (the highest *score* in the questionnaire). It is through them that the whole story unfolds, forcing the heroes to be brave to overcome the conflicts, as much as possible. When justifying the answers, MHEG (name initials<sup>6</sup>), a 12 year-old boy, commented about *Negan*, his chosen character: “the series got more exciting with him”.

The conflict between the hero and the villain encompasses great messages and moralism that we have understood since childhood. It helps us to distinguish *good* and *evil*, to learn the gratifying ways and the self-destructive ones. The villains have the power to clearly show what any common person feels, but that cannot nor should prioritize.

By beating the villain, it is as if the hero redeemed the sins of humanity and made us more human. And, despite the attraction towards the villain, his magical or ancestral power, or his psychopathic personality, he is always beaten by the hero in all these movies. In the end, the narratives resume the classical tale of the hero myth that defeats the villain by cheer luck or divine protection (Campbell, 2020).

It is the obscurity of the characters that currently attracts the public, especially those of villains. According to Sánchez Casarrubios (2012),

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<sup>6</sup> To preserve participants’ privacy, we have chosen to use the initials of their names.

the spectator does not think that the figure of the hero is convincing, it is a bland figure. No doubt, the spectator truly believes in the evil character, the pure evil that embodies himself, bad because he is bad psychopathic. Why does the contemporary spectator believe in evilness? It is the truth of man, which the communication media instigates us to believe, the blind violence, the abuse of the other we see daily in the news (p. 198)<sup>7</sup>

Like the witches in the fairy tales who awaken in the princesses and humble young people the psychic maturation and the conquest of happiness, the figure of the superhero is incomplete without its antagonist (Campbell, 2020). We cannot conceive a hero and superhero story if there is no supervillain to face and confront him. Nowadays called “anti-heroes”— in this post-modern tendency —, the role of the villain is fundamental and many villainous characters are, themselves, the protagonists of the movie, without necessarily a real hero in the narrative. The spectator often follows this protagonist with disgust, but is fascinated with his mishaps. This is the case, for example, of *Darth Vader*, about whom GVM, a pre-teen 13-year-old boy, justifies his choice with the following comment: “involving story, though he is a villain, he has a backstory that justifies it”.

In fact, the public identifies more with the antihero than with the hero, because the former does things that everyone would like to do someday. His flaws and conflicts are very close to the spectators, to the common person, and satisfy their more cynical and wild side.

To Konigsberg (2004), the anti-hero

is a protagonist or important male figure, literary or cinematographic, with whom readers or spectators identify, admiring the non-heroic qualities and a debility that is not traditionally attributed to the hero. They are normally alienated and isolated characters, vulnerable to human weaknesses, but that have a private ethical code and, in some occasions, a personal integrity that forces them to face society. (p. 37)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *El espectador ya no considera la figura del héroe convincente, es una figura blanda. Sin embargo, el espectador cree fielmente en el personaje malvado, el puro mal que encarna, el mal por el mal, la psicopatía. ¿ Por qué el espectador contemporáneo cree en la maldad? Es la verdad del hombre, la que los medios de comunicación nos incitan a creer, la violencia ciega, el abuso del otro que vemos a diario en el telediario.*

<sup>8</sup> *Es un protagonista o figura masculina importante, literaria o cinematográfica, con quien se identifica el lector o el espectador, pese a atesorar cualidades no heroicas y una debilidad que tradicionalmente no se atribuye al héroe. Suelen ser personajes alienados y aislados, vulnerables a las debilidades humanas, pero que poseen un código ético privado y, en ocasiones, una integridad personal que les obliga a enfrentarse a la sociedad.*

Thus, the antihero is characterized as a charismatic and attractive character to the spectator. This appears in the discourse of the teenagers interviewed, about the *Joker* (the most chosen): “he is a rogue and funny” (CFO, girl, 11 years old); “his character is full of attitude” (VFA, girl, 12 years old); “he is funny and he has fun in what he does” (GP, boy, 12 years old).

Therefore, the antihero has a task that is not given *a priori* to any lawful figure, because he has his own law. When justifying her choices, a 13 years old girl, LGPCG commented about the *Joker*: “I like him for the freedom and madness to do things, his daring”; another 13 year-old girl, MEGS also commented about the *Joker* “he is very intelligent, follows his duties and makes his own justice”; and a 12 year-old girl MEG justified her choice for the same character: “because he doesn’t care about anything, he is considered mad, but that makes no difference, he wants more and he wants everyone to be damned”.

In the post-classic narrative of cinema, there is a return to the classic myth of the hero, but, in a way, it is altered. Therefore, mainly in the case of teenagers, the figure of the hero is no longer considered convincing, because they are a “lukewarm” figure. Undoubtedly, these young spectators truthfully believe in the evil character, the evil for evil, in psychopathy, because it is more legitimate. As commented by a 12-year-old girl, LFWBOS about the *Joker*: “he is a total psychopath!”. APR, a 12 year-old boy, gave his opinion about the character *Thanos*, stating that he “has a purpose as a villain, he has objectives”.

And why the fascination for evil? It is the truth of horror in the media, the blind violence, and the abuse of others we witness daily in social media. The use of the body and sexuality as aggressive instruments, the banalized death, and the incest are forms of communication that cause the extinction of universal symbols: the mutual respect and dignity. Violence is shown with no retouches. Nothing is considered grotesque any longer in post-classic cinema because, nowadays, all types of corruptions, prejudices, and human ills are clearly explored (Bauman & Donskis, 2014; La Taille, 2008).

After the decontextualization of the origins and the unfoldings of the characters in the popular media environment, we start the discussion on the notion of leadership because explanatory theories on the working of society are needed, as people’s behaviors are subjected to different influences according to the type of social relationship they are related. For example, people behave qualitatively differently in a small group with a leader. Leadership represents a social relation in which the central element is the acceptance of someone by part

of the followers, as commented a 12 year-old boy, NRH when justifying his choice of *Voldemort*: “he is a legend among the wizards, powerful and dangerous, but intelligent, he has followers and has the dementors”.

To Weber (1996), people obey because they find themselves in a relationship of dominations, as in the character *Thanos*, who has characteristics of force and power, the second most chosen character among teenagers. Domination is not a simple exercise of power, but the probability of finding obedience to the mandate of certain content among related people. Obedience transforms itself into adhesion thanks to legitimacy, which makes it unnecessary, except in exceptional cases, to use force or threats. Domination can legitimate itself from different sources. About the character *Thanos*, two pre-teens commented: “because he is very Strong, tall, has powers” (RCR, boy, 12 years old); “because he is the biggest and strongest villain of Marvel” (JVEM, boy, 11 years old).

Also according to Weber (1996), the first type of legitimate domination is the *traditional* one. In this category, obedience takes place due to habit, sanctity, or dignity of orders and the lords that have always existed. And apart from this, the norms are completely informal, particular and subjected to the description of the individual. The patriarchal and feudalistic domain are the most adequate examples of this configuration.

A second type of rational domination is the *legal* one, in which obedience is due to a statute. As a political example of this type, we have the domination of State bureaucracy, the armed forces, and the police. Finally, the third type is *charismatic* domination, which is directly related with this research. According to Weber (1996), in this category one obeys due to supernatural gifts, magical powers, revelations, heroism, and intellectual or rhetorical power. A personal devotion to the political boss is dismissed due to their exceptional qualities. The boss is a prophet, a warrior hero, or a great demagogue that, through his revelations, actions, or decisions, respectively, reaches a type of obedience in which there are no rules nor traditions, except the power that is given to him by the belief on him, through miracles, successes in battles, or the prosperity of his subjects. The concept of charism is, however, too broad, but it is clear that it refers to magnetism, the ability of persuasion, and the non-rational appeal of someone, which inspires reverence, fervor, or emotional dependence (Gardner & Damon, 2001).

About the character *most chosen* by research respondents, the *Joker* fits the third type – the charismatic one. Despite populating the collective unconscious of comic book fans and since the film *Batman*, by Tim Burton, of 1989, it is through the characterization of the *Joker* in the film *The Dark Knight*, by Christopher Nolan, of 2008, that the character earns popular preference. When dealing with the eternal fight between good and evil, we can see the essence of the narrative, the film would be dealing with the fight between Heavens and Hell, with the arrival of the anti-Christ. Therefore, the characterization becomes psychotic, highlighting his insane obsession for *Batman*. HELS, a pre-teen 12 year-old boy, projected this idea in his justification for choosing the character: “he is not only a villain, it is as if he were Evil, and *Batman* cannot exist without him”.

The villain’s fixation for the hero is normally exaggerated, depending on each case, personal or circumstantial, because the heroes are always persecuted until the final battle between them. It is as if, since the beginning of the hero’s trajectory, he was designed to reach this end (Campbell, 2020), and so is the villain himself.

Finally, following Weber (1996), despite the fact that, in many historical occasions, social and political domination have been based on a certain personality, leadership or domination are always related and not exclusively unilateral. A person can be effectively superior, but not become a leader, unless others recognize him/her as such or legitimize him/her, to be followed or obeyed. That is, in other words, the personalities of leaders can be important, but not enough. Many people have a striking personalities that can be called leadership, but their actions cause no impact in the world they live or their groups of friends. The impact is key, as justified by LANL, a 13-year old boy, about his choice for the *Joker*: “he is very cool, he amuses the public, his laughter is macabre, and his face painting is also cool”. We should say that leadership depends on macro factors that influence or determine how youngsters from this century will choose their political leaders and project their notions of civism.

According to Díaz (2008), to understand leadership it is better to consider it as a question of degree, distributed at different levels throughout the social system. Leadership would then be a social role, and not only the quality of an individual. It does not matter their motivations, intentions, or actions for themselves, but the structures that determine them. The leaders would thus be the product of a historical development and carriers of goals conceived



by society as a whole. If the institutions are normative agendas that materialize common values and establish a guide for the actions of the individuals, leadership is a central political institution.

By correlating the results of both research questionnaires, we have objectively reached the following conclusion: teenagers who have attributed a *higher* importance to politicians and judges opted in a *higher* number for characters with profiles of aggressiveness, tenacity, hedonism, and a certain degree of psychopathy. Teenagers who showed *less* trust in the Congress and political parties choose in *higher* numbers characters with profiles of force and power, aggressiveness and hedonism.

Concluding, leadership is related to power (Díaz, 2008): a leader is a person able to change the course of facts, and this attracts teenagers when choosing certain characters. Leadership is not conquered by having subordinates, because it is legitimated by the followers. The leader and his followers are in a relationship of reciprocal influence, because leadership is also a transaction relation. Regardless of the case, the relationship between the leader and followers is indispensable in the leadership relationship.

## Conclusions

The main objective of this article was to discuss about politics, civism, and leadership from the conceptions of teenagers in a study of prevalence, because, if education seeks the realization of the being, we foresee a society in which this development is possible, favoring freedom and spontaneity, understood as the adequacy between the internal needs and possibilities of enactment. Therefore, studies that allow understanding the way people construct their identities, how they promote their social participation and development citizenship, and how they manifest and internalize the values in their personalities, might be a good reference to contribute to the professionals that work with teenagers in school and non-school spaces.

Thus, we expect that this research might help educators to develop a collective work with students, in an ethical environment and a democratic management, to plan and make decisions in the educational community, through discussions and debates on social and

political problems. Besides this, managers and teachers could think of ways for teenagers in their schools to have a space to discuss rules, to participate more in the school community, and to emphasize the coexistence of different types of freedom.

Faced by teenagers' answers, we perceived that the specific objectives of this study were reached. First, to compile a symbolic representation of government and politics. We have seen that, in the perspective of these teenagers, these two aspects are produced by different legal rules, depending on the people placed in specific functions to allow the organization of the country, mainly in the public scope and solve its social, economic, and political problems in a conflict of interests with several social groups and political parties. In their answers, teenagers also showed that they can participate in society, deliberating and deciding on public subjects as a spectrum of empowerment that gives them a new position as agents of change in their reality and allows them to interact with traditional figures and institutional roles, which are associated to the understanding of the concept of governability.

The results, though based in the conceptions of a small sample, call attention to another specific objective: citizenship as an aspect as important for people to live in society as work and family and, for the teenager, it is an indicator of the need to promote a positive development. When we talk about citizenship, we cannot disconnect it from the formative-educational character. Youth can and should act as a participant and as an agent of change, promoting quality actions in the community and in society in general, mainly nowadays, with the conflicting facts in the national political scenario.

On leadership, we conclude that the personal qualities of leaders are, in part, a product of its environment, based on the family they come from and even the country they live. This research has confirmed what some studies (Colby et al., 2003; Colby et al., 2007; Crocetti et al., 2012; Youniss et al., 2001) have already pointed out: increasingly, the qualities required for the formation of a leader cannot be defined abstractly, but should be related with the circumstances that surround it, since its emergence.

The projections respondents made about the presented characters were inter-related with three essential factors in the relation and dependence of leadership with the social context: the position occupied within the structural framework of society, the opportunities drawn, and the historical determinants of each society.

As a study of prevalence, the pre-teens justifications resulted in conceptions about leaders as people who has the ability to transform the environment they are inserted and can lead to important changes in the institutional structures of their environment. However, these structures precede and condition them, determining their own conduct and limiting their capacity of acting. In this sense, the institutional and social framework is established as a factor that truly establishes the characteristics of leadership.

This research also signs for *civism* as a potential of virtues or attitudes that turn a person into a good citizen and a good democrat, which is intrinsically related with Education. Teaching civism is teaching ethics. Civism is transmitted not with theories or rules of behavior, but being a civic model, creating a favorable environment for civic attitudes, which fight against a society that foment a comfortable and easy life, the glory, the power of force, and of personal success at any cost. It is important to educate for civism as the most basic aspect of education to cultivate character and values of responsibility, solidarity, and tolerance, needed for leadership and communities.

Therefore, talking about civic engagement related to adolescence is thinking in the dynamic and bidirectional nature of human development, seeking, besides this, the political development. Civic engagement emphasizes the important role that young people can and should play as participants and agents of change in the construction of qualities that promote benefits for communities and societies. It highlights the reciprocal interactions in the construction of individual, community, and social resources.

The research problem on political leadership and civism notions in teenagers was answered, because we could see that civic formation is not an individual property, but a collective good. It is the pathway that laces subjects in contact with society, so that it is cared for and kept for future generations, as it is the heritage of all. It presupposes that civic engagement takes many forms, besides the political or electoral activities. The study focus the efforts of young people to increase the dialogue and challenge segregation and social exclusion. This is the world they live, in which they are specialists of their own experience, and this is their commitment. *“Beyond our families, we have friends, neighbors, fellow citizens in the communities where we reside. What does it mean to be a good friend, a good neighbor, or a good citizen? The answer is the same in all cases: Service and engagement.”* (Damon, 2003, p. 40). Thus, we find in the

new generations the potential to build a fairer, more equalitarian, and inclusive society, in which engagement and social participation are key points.

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***Submission data:***

*Submitted for evaluation August 2, 2020; accepted for publication on May 17, 2021*

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