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Q1(d)

Can Merton's reference group theory be relevant in understanding 'identity making' in digital world? Explain.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- **State Merton's reference group theory:** membership, non-membership, **anticipatory socialisation**, **relative deprivation**
- Show how digital platforms supply comparative others for identity making
- Give online illustrations, including an Indian one if natural
- Keep Merton central, not a free essay on social media

Revision summary

Merton distinguishes membership groups from **non-membership reference** groups used as standards.

Anticipatory socialisation is rehearsal for a group one hopes to join.

Relative deprivation is discontent from comparison, not from absolute want.

Digital feeds supply global, curated others for identity performance.

Indian caste and coaching publics online show membership and aspiration at once.

The theory stays relevant because platforms multiply comparative audiences.

Introduction

- **Robert K. Merton's reference group theory asks a simple question:** with whom do people compare themselves when they judge who they are and what they deserve? The group need not be one they belong to. In a digital world the comparative other is often a feed of strangers, influencers and curated peers. Identity making online is therefore a Mertonian process of selection, anticipation and **relative deprivation**, not only a story about gadgets.

Body

Merton's kit

- A membership group **is one the person actually belongs to:** a college, a caste association, a workplace. A **non-membership reference group is one used as a standard anyway: the civil-service batch one hopes to join, a global lifestyle class seen on Instagram.** **Anticipatory socialisation** is the rehearsal of that group's tastes and morals before entry, which Merton linked to mobility. **Relative deprivation**, developed with the American soldier studies and later with W. G. Runciman, is discontent produced by comparison, not by absolute

lack. Positive reference groups attract; negative ones are the "not us" against which identity is drawn. George Herbert Mead's significant others and Erving Goffman's presentation of self sit beside Merton: identity is always audience-facing.

Digital identity making

Platforms multiply audiences and collapse them. A student in a small town can take a Korean pop fandom, a Delhi coaching-centre aesthetic, or a Silicon Valley founder as a **non-membership reference** group. Filters, follower counts and "stories" are props for **anticipatory socialisation** into a desired class or gender performance. **Relative deprivation** becomes chronic when the comparison set is global and edited. Caste and religious WhatsApp groups work as membership references that police honour, marriage and rumour. Hashtag publics can be negative reference groups for those who define themselves against "woke" or against "tradition".

- **Merton already warned that the wrong reference group can produce anomie:** goals are copied without the legitimate means. Digital identity making shows that pattern at speed. The theory remains relevant because it names the comparative mechanism; the platforms only enlarge the menu of others.

Flow diagram

Self -> Membership group
Self -> Non-membership reference
Non-membership reference -> Anticipatory socialisation
Non-membership reference -> Relative deprivation
Digital feed -> Non-membership reference

Conclusion

Merton's reference groups, **anticipatory socialisation** and **relative deprivation** travel well into the digital world. Identity online is made by choosing audiences and measuring the self against them. The screen did not abolish the social psychology of comparison; it intensified it.

Facts & figures

Anticipatory socialisation

Merton's term for adopting a reference group's norms before one belongs to it, often in mobility situations.

Relative deprivation

Felt lack produced by comparison with a reference group, familiar from Stouffer's soldier studies and Runciman.

Non-membership reference

A group used as a yardstick even when the person is not a member, now routinely an influencer or online public.

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