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Social visions of skinhead subculture members

Skinheads are among the oldest contemporary subcultures. While for many years this subculture has undergone numerous changes and experienced numerous splits, the contemporary mass media continue to present a uniform image of this formation, namely as groups of young males with close cropped hair who wear paramilitary outfits and are responsible for acts of hooliganism, punch-ups and muggings. The media dehumanise skinheads by comparing them to machines of hate.[1] The stereotype of a "bad skinhead" is also reproduced by publications on youth subcultures, which most commonly focus on the pathologies, aggression, delinquency or extreme political views of skinheads – therefore, only on the negative aspects of how this group works.[2] This image is consistent with the popular understanding of this subculture: one that is associated with the rejection of certain cultural patterns, rebellion and behaviours that go against fundamental societal values. This is not, however, the only image of this subculture, nor is this the only and correct understanding of it in the social sciences (Zdulski, Zdulski & Wrzesień, 2011).

When exactly the skinhead subculture originated is difficult to pinpoint. While its beginnings are commonly dated back to around 1968, the first skinheads were actually seen among mods as early as in 1964. The word 'skinhead' is derived from the characteristically short haircut through which you could see the scalp (Marshall, 1991).

In the early 1960s, in the London district of Soho, the mod subculture began to emerge. The mods paid special attention to their attire: they went for classic, elegant suits, with an emphasis on subdued colours and a smart look. Like the Teddy boys, they were fascinated by the American mass culture, especially rock music and "black music". In contrast to the Teds, however, mods did not participate in attacks on immigrants from the Caribbean (Zdulski, Zdulski & Wrzesień, 2011). In 1964/1965, the mods seemed a milder variety of the youth subculture. It was suspected that their hidden personal model was that of a middle-class dandy. However, the frustration caused by unmet material aspirations turned into aggres-

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[1] This image of the skinhead can be encountered in such films as *The Believer* (2001, directed by Henry Bean), *Romper Stomper* (1992, directed by Geoffrey Wright), *Rossiya* (2009, directed by Pavel Bardin), *Teste Rasate* (1993, directed by Claudio Fragasso, and *Teraz Polska* (2005, directed by Michał Biliński).

[2] It can also be exemplified by Heidi Hassenmüller's young adult novel *Schwartz, rot, tot*.

sion, expressed in fights with antagonistic youth groups. Around 1966, as a result of clashes between the rockers, who derived from the lower classes of society, and the mods, a more aggressive faction emerged, referred to as the hard mods, who are considered the direct predecessor of the skinhead culture. They gathered at clubs, where the Black soul music, later followed by ska, bluebeat and rock-steady music imported from Jamaica was played (Wilk, 1994). Jamaican music was developing in Great Britain thanks to the immigrants from the Caribbean. Younger mods and hard mods interacted with black youth, rude boys, and tried to copy their black peers in everything they did (Marshall, 1991). The simple and easily infecting rhythm of reggae music made it become very popular among the skinheads (Marshall, 1991).

A nearly parallel process involved copying the style of white skinheads by black immigrants. The mixing of these styles shaped the initial external image of skinheads (Janicki & Pęczak, 1994).

In addition to the shared musical interests, the first skinheads also sympathised with Caribbean youth in terms of using political riots for acts of blind vandalism and fights with the police. This is confirmed by the existence of gangs formed on the basis of a within-district solidarity. Both white youths and young immigrants were members of these gangs (Wilk, 1994).

In addition to music, football was another very important factor that contributed to the growth of the skinhead subculture. The winning of the World Cup by England in 1966 increased interest in football, also among skinheads. The press was gaining popularity by describing, in a sensational manner, fights at football stadiums, and these condemnatory articles in fact contributed to the promotion and popularisation of football hooliganism (Marshall, 1991). There is no consensus among the authors on the role of skinheads in unleashing the wave of violence at and outside football stadiums. It is, however, a fact that certain items of skinhead clothing, such as the heavy boots (because of which English football supporters were later called "boot boys"), became an inspiration to members of football clubs. As a result, many football supporters started to look like typical skinheads, although they did not fully identify with them. They were more of a hooligan stadium-based subculture whose aim was to cause "bovver" with supporters of other clubs and the police (Zdulski, Zdulski, Wrzesień, 2011)

The skinheads of this time also fought with the descendants of the rockers and with hippies. It was, however, violence against Asians living in the United Kingdom that generated the greatest interest in the media. "Paki-bashing" became such a loud issue that it was included among the most important topics in the talks between the British and Pakistani governments. However, these were not regular racist attacks, as the media painted it, as among the skinheads, in addition to the native British youths, there were also young Greeks, youths from the Caribbean and other immigrants of different skin colours. The large influx of people from Central Asia or Uganda caused panic among the native Brits about the labour market. Asians were perceived as competitors who might take away their jobs and homes. There were massive layoffs in heavy industry, and the traditional working class communities were threatened by urban planners, who intended to give up the building of cheap tower blocks. The skin colour of immigrants was the reason why

this group of people began to be quickly blamed for the problem Britain was facing. At this time people from the Caribbean had already been absorbed into the British lifestyle. Gangs of black skinheads, often called Afro boys, would occasionally fight with white or even multiracial gangs, but it was always a fight about the territory, not because of racism. The formation of districts inhabited solely by immigrants heightened the impression that the riots were racist in nature (Marshall, 1991).

Because of the smear campaign against skinheads in the media, their problems with the police, difficulties in finding jobs due to the society's aversion, and the damaging effects on the image of this subculture exerted by the most aggressive members, the skinhead subculture started to fade around 1974 (Bąk, 2005).

In 1976, during the full bloom of the punk subculture, skinheads re-emerged. It was then that the second phase in their history started, which brought them popularity around the world (Bąk, 2005). In the first wave of the punk subculture, skinheads were almost seen as something closely resembling hippies: young people creating a new, artificial and pointless fad. Despite everything, however, skinheads took to punk rock, and with time, the punks' anti-hippie attitude reconciled both subcultures (Bąk, 2005). At about the same time, the skinhead subculture spilt into the younger generation, who supported punks, and the older members of the subculture, who played the role of the personal guard to the conservative Teddy boys. The racist factions of the skinhead subculture most likely emerged from the skinheads who supported the Teds.

Garry Bushell, of the music weekly magazine "Sounds", integrated skinheads briefly by promoting the shout "Oi!" as a placating watchword shared by skinheads and punks. Even though this was still followed by a split on political grounds, punks gave up street punk and the shout "Oi!" to skinheads and turned towards a new music genre: hard core (Bąk, 2005). The very politically and socially involved lyrics of Oi songs started, with time, to draw the attention of various political parties and factions, which were seeking support among the frustrated youths. While this led to the political surveillance of skinheads by both right- and left-wing parties, this subculture was not yet interested in politics at this time (Bąk, 2005).

When Britain was hit by another wave of immigration, which caused a rise in unemployment among native Brits, skinheads, who most commonly originated from the working class, responded to the incoming population with reluctance. Some of them started to propagate the idea of racism and develop an interest in such parties as the British National Party or the National Front, motivated by the idea of national socialism (Bąk, 2005).

The increased numbers of right-wing skinheads and neo-Nazi organisations resulted in an equally heavy growth of left-leaning and apolitical factions and antifascist and anti-racist ones, such as SHARP (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice), which not only fought against racism but also with the perception of skinheads as Nazis (Filipiak, 1999).

At this time, Nazi skinheads were still an internally cohesive group, and due to the brutal attacks on representatives of other nations, they were also controversial, through which they focused the media's entire attention. By acting in this way, they distorted the image of the skinhead and created, in the awareness of society,

the image of the skinhead as one of a Nazi, which has still been maintained to today (Bąk, 2005).

The knowledge of the history of this subculture is an important thing for its members, as it is one of the factors which shapes their subcultural identity. Earlier, this knowledge was drawn by the youths mainly from older friends, while at present, thanks to the better access to information, the main sources of knowledge are the internet, television, literature and films, whose main characters are members of subcultures.

The aim of the study was to determine the contemporary social notions of the skinhead culture and how they are shaped depending on the sources from which people draw their knowledge about this subculture.

In connection with this aim, the following questions were posed: What sources do people use to draw their knowledge about the skinhead subculture? What do they know about the skinhead subculture? How does the society receive members of the skinhead culture?

An interview questionnaire including multiple-response, multiple-choice and open-ended questions was used (Plich & Bauman, 2001). The form was developed in a way that allowed the respondents to respond as freely as possible and to avoid suggesting anything. The study was carried out online in order to reach the highest possible number of respondents. The questionnaires were completed anonymously. The respondents were aware of the purpose of the study. The results were coded (Plich & Bauman, 2001).

The questionnaire was completed by 160 subjects, including 94 women and 66 men. Most of the subjects (55%) were aged 18 to 25 years. The age structure of the subjects is depicted in Figure 1.

In the question about the knowledge about the skinhead subculture, a multiple-response question was used, so that the respondents could select more than one source of their knowledge. The study showed that the most commonly declared sources of knowledge about skinheads were: representatives of this subculture, stories told by friends and the internet. The least popular source of knowledge was educational classes. Figure 2 depicts the declared sources of knowledge about the skinhead subculture.
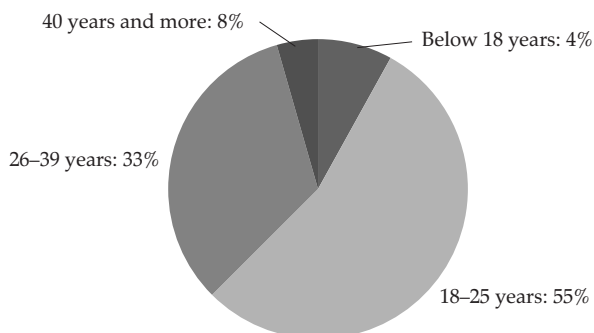

Figure 1. Age of respondents.
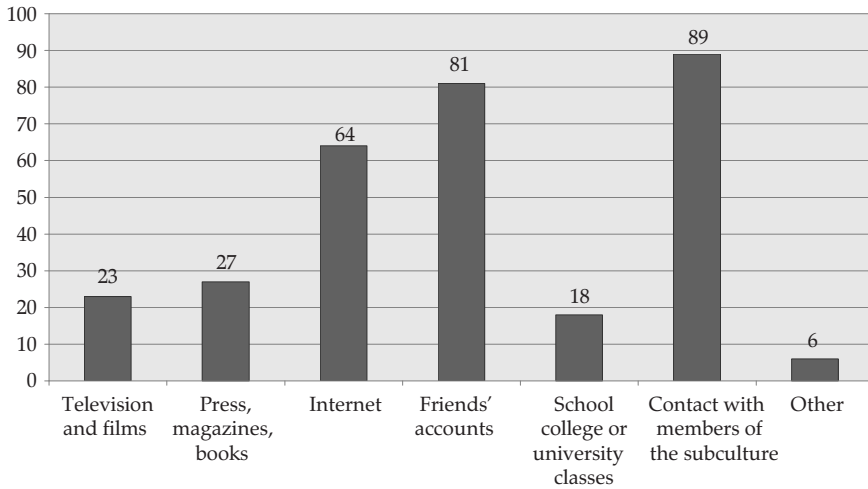Source: author's own research.

Figure 2. Sources of knowledge about the skinhead subculture.
Source: author's own research.

Subjects who drew their knowledge about skinheads from films and television indicated the following films as the most common examples: *American History X* (1998, directed by Tony Kaye), *Romper Stomper* (1992, directed by Geoffrey Wright), *The Believer* (2001, directed by Henry Bean), *This is England* (2006, directed by Shane Meadows), *Made in Britain* (1982, directed by Alan Clarke), *Skinhead Attitude* (2003, directed by Daniel Schweizer), and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971, directed by Stanley Kubrick). The following were mentioned in the literature category: *Spirit of '69: A Skinhead Bible* by George Marshall and *Krucjata łysogłowych* [Crusade of the Bald Heads] by Ewa Wilk (1994). In the category of other sources of knowledge, the subjects declared: lyrics, members of this subculture, fiction, or that they did not draw their knowledge about this subculture from any sources.

In order to examine their social notions about skinheads, the respondents were asked questions that included the following: Can a person of a different skin colour be a member of this subculture? Can women be, or are women, members of this subculture? Who are skinheads, in your opinion? What is your attitude towards members of the skinhead subculture?

According to the collected material, 46% of the respondents were of the opinion that people of a different skin colour could not be members of this subculture, 22% of the respondents didn't know how to respond to this question, and only 32% were of the opinionthat people of a different skin colour can be members of this subculture, which is in fact the correct answer. These results show a poor knowledge of the history of skinheads among the respondents and confirm the stereotype of the Nazi skinheads spreading the slogans of "white power". The respondents were much more knowledgeable about whether women could be members of this subculture. Seventy-seven percent of the subjects were of the opinion that women could be members of this subculture, 17% did not know the answer to this question, and only 6% said that women could not be members of the skinhead subculture. The results of this study are illustrated in Figure 3.
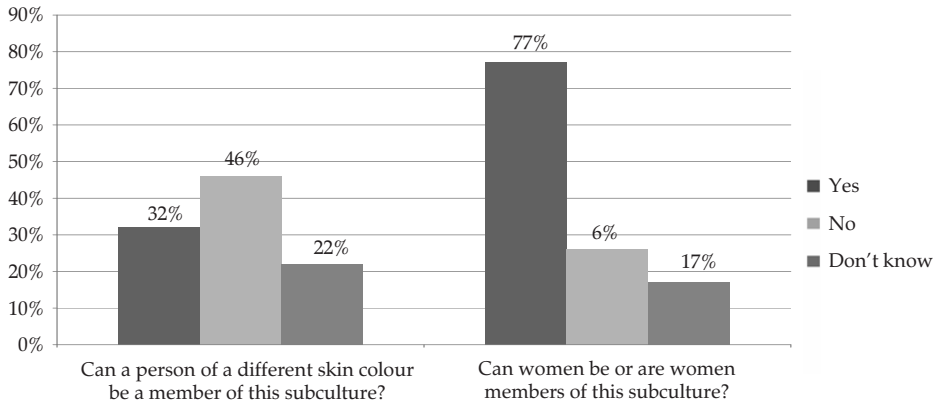
Figure 3. Possibility of women being members of the skinhead subculture.
Source: author's own research.

The study also showed that the respondents' attitude towards the skinhead subculture is largely neutral (44%), with more respondents having a negative than a positive attitude (22% vs 16%). The "other" category included, among others, the following statements: "My attitude towards them is negative, I'm scared of them, but they also interest me", "My attitude is neutral as long as their ideas and behaviours don't take on a fanatic nature", "It depends on the person".

Figure 4 illustrates the respondents' attitudes towards members of the skinhead subculture.

Based on their answers to the question about their sources of knowledge about the skinhead subculture, the respondents were divided in two groups:
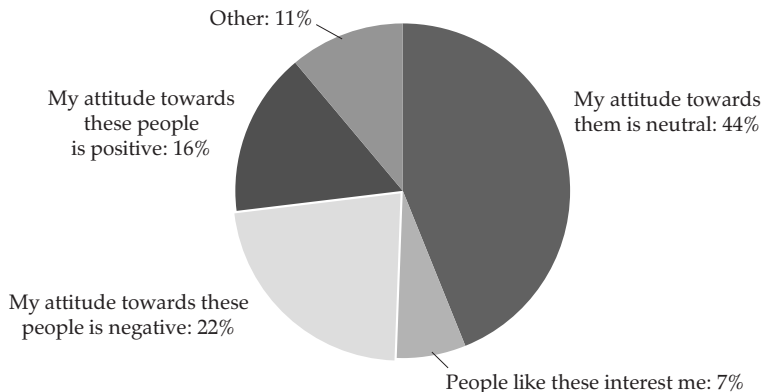

Figure 4. Attitude towards members of the skinhead subculture.
Source: author's own research.

1. Those who declared the television, films, press, books, educational classes, the internet, and stories told by their friends as the sources of knowledge about the skinhead subculture.

2. Those who declared their own experiences and the occasional contact with members of this subculture as the sources of knowledge about this subculture. This division is illustrated in Figure 5.
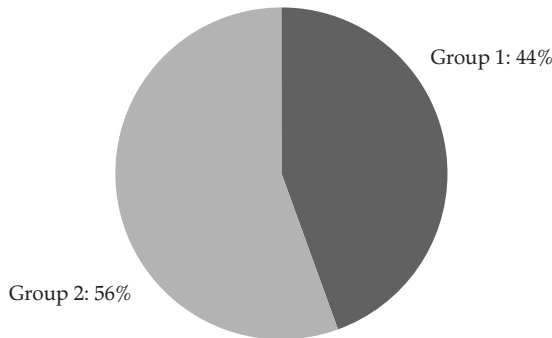

Figure 5. Contact of the subjects with members of the skinhead subculture.
Source: author's own research.

The study showed considerable differences in the respondents' attitudes towards skinheads depending on the group to which they belonged. In both groups, indifference towards skinheads predominated, and the greatest difference was observed between these groups as regards the positive attitude. In the first group, only 2% of the subjects declared a positive attitude towards skinheads, while the corresponding percentage in the second group was 28%. This trend was also observed for the negative attitude towards skinheads. The subjects who had contact with members of this subculture less frequently declared a negative sentiment (17%) than those who drew their knowledge from such sources as the television, the internet or stories told by their friends. This demonstrates that the media create negative notions about skinheads.

The respondents' attitudes towards the skinhead subculture depending on the group to which they belonged are illustrated in Figure 6.

The following categories were identified by coding from the answers to the question "Who are skinheads, in your opinion?":

– I don't know who skinheads are.
– A skinhead is a rebel.
– A skinhead is an extremist (a person intolerant of anything different, a nationalist, a racist, a Nazi xenophobe, an anti-Semite).
– A skinhead is an aggressive individual.
– A skinhead is a man.
– A skinhead is a person with a low IQ.
– Skinheads are (normal) people.
– Skinheads are people with unique views (this category included statements describing skinheads as people with a characteristic outlook on life and specific values without specifying these values and without passing a judgement on them).
– Skinheads are a subculture typified by a characteristic look and interests.
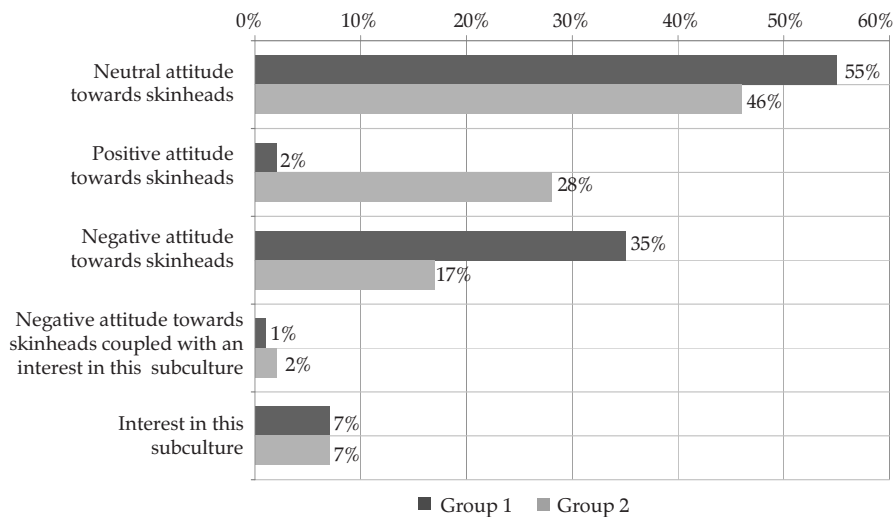– Skinheads are an underclass.

Figure 6. Attitudes towards the skinhead subculture: an analysis by groups.
Source: author's own research.

–   Skinheads are stadium vandals, hooligans, chavs.
–   Skinheads are good people.
–   Skinheads are loyal friends.
–   Skinheads are bad people.
–   Skinheads are a diverse group of people burdened with negative stereotypes.
–   Skinheads are people with problems.
–   Skinheads are a closed group.
–   Skinheads are manipulated people.
–   Skinheads are a subculture typified by a characteristic look and interests.
–   Skinheads are an underclass.
–   Skinheads are stadium vandals, hooligans, chavs.
–   Skinheads are good people.
–   Skinheads are loyal friends.
–   Skinheads are bad people.
–   Skinheads are a diverse group of people burdened with negative stereotypes.
–   Skinheads are people with problems.
–   Skinheads are a closed group.
–   Skinheads are manipulated people.

Analysis of the occurrence of these categories depending on the sources from which the subjects drew their knowledge about skinheads showed that the subjects from the first group more commonly made statements about skinheads in such categories as: "I don't know who skinheads are", "a skinhead is a young rebel", "a skinhead is an aggressive individual", "skinheads are an underclass", "skinheads are people with problems", "skinheads are a closed group". Most commonly, respondents from this group described skinheads as people with Nazi and extremist views and as aggressive people. Respondents who shaped their notions about skinheads based, among other things, on contacts with members of this subculture most commonly described them in the following categories: "skinheads

are a subculture typified by a characteristic look and interests", "a skinhead is an extremist", "skinheads are people with unique views". It is also noteworthy that respondents in this group used a wider range of categories when describing skinheads. The results of this analysis are provided in Figure 7.

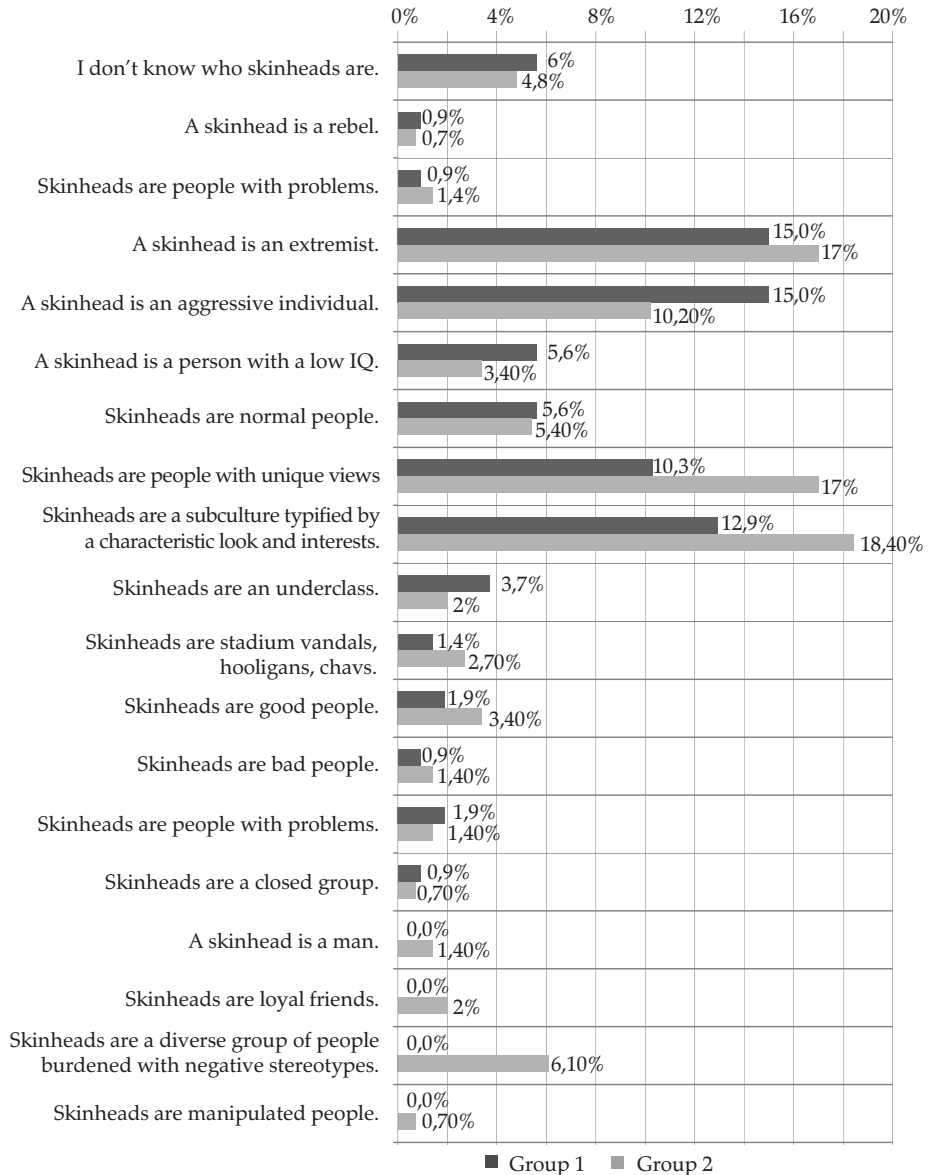|	0%	4%	8%	12%	16%	20%
I don't know who skinheads are.	6% / 4,8%					
A skinhead is a rebel.	0,9% / 0,7%					
Skinheads are people with problems.	0,9% / 1,4%					
A skinhead is an extremist.				15,0% / 17%		
A skinhead is an aggressive individual.				15,0% / 10,20%		
A skinhead is a person with a low IQ.	5,6% / 3,40%					
Skinheads are normal people.	5,6% / 5,40%					
Skinheads are people with unique views			10,3% / 17%			
Skinheads are a subculture typified by a characteristic look and interests.				12,9% / 18,40%		
Skinheads are an underclass.	3,7% / 2%					
Skinheads are stadium vandals, hooligans, chavs.	1,4% / 2,70%					
Skinheads are good people.	1,9% / 3,40%					
Skinheads are bad people.	0,9% / 1,40%					
Skinheads are people with problems.	1,9% / 1,40%					
Skinheads are a closed group.	0,9% / 0,70%					
A skinhead is a man.	0,0% / 1,40%					
Skinheads are loyal friends.	0,0% / 2%					
Skinheads are a diverse group of people burdened with negative stereotypes.	0,0% / 6,10%					
Skinheads are manipulated people.	0,0% / 0,70%					

■ Group 1   ■ Group 2

Figure 7. Notions about skinheads: an analysis by groups. Source: author's own research.

The results of the study demonstrate the diversity of social notions about the skinhead subculture. The stereotype of a skinhead as an aggressive extremist is still, however, the predominant one. The analysis also shows gaps in the knowledge about this subculture. The material presented here is only a part of all the

studies and is intended to draw attention to the sources of social notions and to how they affect individuals' thinking and attitude towards, who are in fact, a group of people that the study subjects do not really know.

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Summary

Social Vision of Skinhead Subculture Members

The aim of the research presented in the text is to show the contemporary vision of skinhead subculture members and how the vision is shaped according to the source of knowledge on this particular social group. Analysis of the response shows that the vision and approach to skinheads depends on the source of information on the group. The given media – according to the research – has a great impact on the vision of this subculture.

Keywords

skinheads, subcultures, social expectations, media

English translation: Anna Moroz-Darska