

## **Using the example of Mods, How did different subcultures distinguish themselves in Britain during the 1960's?**

In the 1960's, young people questioned Britain and America's materialism and cultural and political norms, much as they've always done. Seeking a better world, some used music, politics, and alternative lifestyles to create what came to be known as the counterculture. Britain's in that era faced many controversial issues-from civil rights, female equality, nuclear arms, and the environment to drug use, sexual freedom, and nonconformity. Many members of the counterculture saw their own lives as ways to express political and social beliefs. Personal appearance, song lyrics, and the arts were some of the methods used to make both individual and communal statements. Due to this reason many different subcultures formed, each with very different views and also very different taste.

It has been argued that structural conditions, especially persistent, structural contradictions, often experienced as class problems, are a basic generating force for subculture. Cultural conditions, particularly those generated by social class, may interact with the apparent middle class consensus and, when assisted by neighbourhood traditions and specific historic circumstances, act in shaping the cultural form of a subculture.<sup>1</sup> One cultural form common in a subculture is fashion and its style. Cohen notes that an important aspect of a reference groups such as a subculture group is the symbolic use of a style. "An actor learns that the behaviour signifying membership in a particular role includes the kinds of clothes he wears, his posture, his gait, his likes and dislikes, what he talks about and the opinion he expresses".<sup>2</sup>

Gangs, by definition, each have their own character. It is a structure sharing the same ideas, attachments and solidarity. The interests, activities, membership, and status differ according to each one. They usually have a particular hangout or meeting place where they mark their territory. Conflict usually occurs when there are clashes with other gangs, although conflict can also occur within their own group. "The gang is an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behaviour: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict and planning"<sup>3</sup>. Developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Mods and The Rockers were two groups that were closely related to the work of author S.E. Hinton who wrote the novel, "The Outsiders".<sup>4</sup> Each group represented opposite tastes with regard to a number of social conventions such as clothing, grooming, music, and so on. These cultural differences shaped the two different groups and also provided the conflict of interests which led to their famous clashes in 1964.

It is the intention of this essay to explore the ways in which these two groups distinguished

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<sup>1</sup> Brake, Mike (1980) *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures* p. 11

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, Stanley (1992) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. p. 1

<sup>3</sup> Trasher, F.M. (1927) *The Gang* p. 17

<sup>4</sup> Hinton, S., (2003 reprint) *The outsiders*

themselves and to establish whether this distinction was due to the culture of the two groups, such as varies music for instance, or whether outside influences, such as the press, were of equal or more importance.

Before the 1950's, teenagers did not exist as a separate consumer group. They were classed as either children or adults. By the early 50's, school leavers were earning better wages. As they did not have any responsibilities it meant they had a lot of money available to spend as they liked. However, at this point there was not a market catering specifically for them. They had generally been buying the same clothes, seeing the same films and listening to the same music as their parents.<sup>5</sup>

It did not take long for these people to latch on to music that they could call their own and that their older generations did not like. The craze grew and grew and the group was established as juvenile delinquents and was soon named 'teddy boys'. The teddy boys established a teenage market and a fashion which was totally working class in origins. They also made it acceptable for males to dress purely for show. The teddy boys paved the way for the establishment of the Mods in the early 1960's and though fashion was a large part of the teddy boys culture a large part of the establishment of teddy boys was due to consumerism and the growth of advertisement. In the late 1950's hire purchase was introduced. This made it possible to buy essential items associated with both the culture of the teddy boys and also the Mods. For example, it was possible to buy portable record players to play the new smaller records, that had been introduced in the early sixties, that played at 45r.p.m.<sup>6</sup> It also meant it was possible to purchase essential items of Mod culture, such as a Scooter, which could then be repaid over a certain amount of time.

Certainly the presence of new items and the availability of credit had a massive effect on teenagers in the 1960's as Joan, who was a teenager in the 1960's expresses "I had this pair of white stilettos that came out on nights out to clubs. I got the out of a catalogue and I was buying them over the usual 20 weeks, or how ever many weeks it was you could have. Anyway this pair of white stilettos had square toes, which were quite the thing then, and I put that white stuff on them to keep them clean. Ooh and I thought they were lovely! I was only 14 and I could barely walk in them but fashion had a big effect on me back then "Had it not have been for this consumerism and the availability of goods it is possible that subcultures such as the Mods and Teddy Boys may not have formed and certainly the availability of credit and new goods was also paramount to the formation of these groups.

Another essential element in the establishment of Mods and Rockers as opposites was the work of the media. In the late 1950's early 1960's, both the Mod look and the Rocker look had

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<sup>5</sup> Powe-Temperly, K., 'The 60's mods and hippies' p. 1

<sup>6</sup> Barnes, R., (1991) 'Mods!' P. 7

emerged, but there was no sense of common identity that embraced the two movements. That was because the press had not yet “discovered them”.<sup>7</sup>

In 1962, Town Magazine printed the first photographs and interview with some Faces (leaders of Mod fashions). The article fused the individual and diverse elements in to one overall Mod style. Certainly magazines were essential tools for keeping up to date with the ever changing Mod fashions as Laura explains, “That was when she (Laura’s friend) got really into clothes and she’d always drag me along on these Saturday morning shopping trips. I’d always been a bit of a tomboy up till then but the pressures of fashion magazines and my friends caused me to start buying these skirts and pointed chisel-toed shoes which were really fashionable at the time”<sup>8</sup> Many people, who look back on the sixties, remember it as a battle between Mods and Rockers. This is because that was the aspect of it presented in the press. Actually the two groups did not waste time abusing each other or fighting. In lots of places (including London) there were mostly Mods. In the rural areas and more northern towns there were mostly Rockers. So the two groups did not bump in to one another too much unlike the representations of the press.<sup>9</sup>

As the Mods and Rockers grew in numbers and popularity, the media began publicizing their activities. The gangs developed a bad reputation through the media, who exaggerated many of their deviant acts. The community began treating Mods and Rockers like serious criminals for small acts of deviance such as sleeping on the beach and speeding on their scooters and motorcycles. Café owners and bartenders began to refuse them service because of the reputation they received from the media. Their newly acquired bad reputations only added to the anger and contempt the Mods and Rockers held toward mainstream society. The persistent media reporting created a sharp division between the Mods and Rockers. On Easter weekend in 1964, the rivalry created by the media between the Mods and Rockers finally boiled over in the town of Clacton. The fight between the two gangs resulted in several broken windows and the destruction of some beach huts. However, the media reported the altercation in national newspapers, suggesting there had been large scale riots and wholesale breakdown of public order. Johnny Moke and Willie Deasey were Mod’s at Clacton during the ‘riots’, “When the pubs closed after lunchtime, there was nothing to do. Kids were just milling around. We went down to the pier. It was 1/- to get on, so a lot of us jumped over the turnstile. Then for a laugh some kids went up the helter skelter the wrong way. It was stupid but just a lark really. The police came and everyone started running. I think that’s called a riot!! That evening it was on the news and the next day it was ridiculous.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Barnes, R., (1991) ‘Mods!’ P. 10

<sup>8</sup> Landau, C., (1991) ‘Growing up in the 60’s’ p. 11

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.stthomasu.ca/~pmccorm/modsandrockers1.html>

<sup>10</sup> Barnes, R., (1991) ‘Mods!’ P. 127

The national press exaggerated the trouble. The Daily Telegraph reported 'Day of Terror by Scooter Groups' and The Mirror's front pages went 'Scooter Gangs Beat Up Clacton' and 'Wild Ones Invade Seaside – 97 Arrests'.



Every national newspaper except, The Times, had the Clacton Affair on the front pages<sup>11</sup>. In actual fact, the incidents were not serious and gained little attention in the local press. The East Essex Gazette reported that "the troubles...were not so horrific as the flood of national press, television and radio publicity suggested. The town was not wrecked, no-one, apart from some of the young hooligans themselves, was really hurt and Clacton housewives certainly did not, as one earlier broadcaster said, spend Tuesday 'sweeping up the glass from broken windows'".<sup>12</sup> It seems that in the absence of other newsworthy material, the national press, focused upon these rather harmless events. Headlines such as "they are hell-bent for destruction" were created as well as feature articles which suggested that the Mods and Rockers had intentionally set out to cause serious trouble. Prior to the reporting, there was no major rivalry or hatred between the Mods and Rockers. Through the media's distortion and manipulation of the event, the rivalry between the Mods and Rockers was amplified and a moral panic was created amongst the public. That is, as a result of the exaggerated media reports, the general public imagined the Mods and Rockers to be deviants, and became outraged at their behaviour. It therefore meant that the identities of both Mods and Rockers became amplified by the reports of the Press. On the other hand, many aspects of Mod culture, were cultivated by there own tastes, as opposed to what the media dictated. The Mod way of life consisted of total devotion to looking and being 'cool'.<sup>13</sup>

From being a scattering of ultra hip subterranean club dwellers, Mod had quickly evolved to take on a definitive culture and structure of its own. At the top, there were the Faces, who set the pace, who wore the hippest clothes and listened to ultra modern music. Richard Barnes assumed

<sup>11</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/classic/A707627](http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/classic/A707627)

<sup>12</sup> East Essex Gazette – 18 May 1964

<sup>13</sup> Barnes, R., (1991) 'Mods!' p.6

that there was “a group of self appointed Mod leaders who controlled the direction of the rest of the Mods” however looking back he asserts that “Their entire look came from within their own undefined ranks. Apart from one or two individual journalists, the press didn’t have a clue as to what was happening until the Bank Holiday riots in 1964”.<sup>14</sup> Therefore it can be assessed that Mods were in control of their own identity rather than it being shaped by outside influences. Clearly fashion was an essential element in shaping Mod culture. In an interview in the aforementioned Town Magazine article Mark Feldon (later Mark Bolan), as well as other Faces, talked about the importance of fashion, “All the faces go to Bolorri.... And John Stephens. He’s very good on trousers” he also spoke of finding cheaper clothes, “some faces won’t wear them because they’re only 14/6d. That’s just ridiculous”.<sup>15</sup> The Town interview became an inspiration to many aspiring Mods and helped to shape their culture with photographs of Mods styles. Johnny Moke gives an insight as to how a Mod fashion craze could begin, “We went to a bowling alley wearing some old plimsoles. We hired a brand new pair of bowling shoes and I walked out with mine. That weekend I was stuck on the back of the bus and was the only guy with bowling shoes on. When I went to Brighton about six weeks later, half the kids had bowling shoes”.<sup>16</sup> Like most gangs of their time, The Mods had a very distinct, yet common interest in music. Mods pursued a different sound. They adopted modern jazz, which was a style of music originated in Black America. Through the jazz music of Black America, the Mods appeared to distinguish themselves from mainstream society. They seemed to be attracted to the “cool” demeanour and elegant clothing possessed by jazz musicians, and strived to emulate their style. The American Jazz records were difficult to obtain, but the Mods preferred it this way. They hated commercialism and were drawn towards obscurity in their taste of music. Joan noted that “it was difficult to hear much black music on English radio, but there were programmes for American forces stationed in Europe and kids used to listen to that”.<sup>17</sup> The Mods sparked a nationwide enthusiasm for Rhythm & Blues music that surpassed Jazz as the music of choice for young adults. They preferred the British bands that played a Rhythm & Blues style of music, such as The Rolling Stones, The Kinks, and The Small Faces.

The most popular and revolutionary band who could be labelled as Mods themselves were the High Numbers, later renamed The Who. They wore Mod outfits, had Mod hairstyles, and sang blues-based songs about being Mods, such as “I’m the Face”. John Waters’s main memories of the era are “mainly concerning music as an ardent follower of Soul music. The Who at St. Josephs Church Hall, Archway just after they hit the charts with ‘I Can’t Explain’ and having a few ‘sherberts’ in The Cat Next Door’ with Moon.”<sup>18</sup> Mods therefore differentiated themselves from other

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<sup>14</sup> Barnes, R., (1991) ‘Mods’! P. 7

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* p. 10

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.stthomasu.ca/~pmccorm/modsandrockers2.html>

<sup>17</sup> Landau, C., (1991) ‘Growing up in the 60’s’ p. 43

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.stthomasu.ca/~pmccorm/modsandrockers2.html>

groups by listening to diverse music. It was important to hear something before anyone else and to be full of information on obscure records. Ron Mitchell explains, “what I couldn’t stand was that I’d say to people ‘listen to this’ and play some great music that they’d never heard of and they weren’t interested. Then the Rolling Stones would do a poxy cover version of it and everyone would say ‘isn’t it great?’ I really like this R&B, Stone’s kind of sound”.<sup>19</sup>

In conclusion it is possible to see that Mods were clearly responsible for their own identities. Through their choice of fashion and music they set their tastes as different from other cultures, such as Rockers who listened to Rock and Roll and wore leather jackets. Leah highlights this by saying “It was very important to have the right kind of clothes – the right shoes and the right skirts and sweaters, up until the Mary Quant thing you had to have a nice tweedy skirt and a Fair Isle sweater with a little circle pin at the neck on a rounded white collar. It was all about fitting in with the crowd back then.”

However it is also clear that if it had not have been for consumerism and the availability of goods in the 1960’s then access to different materials and fashions would not have been possible and therefore Mods would have been unable to distinguish themselves in theses ways. The importance of the growth of advertisement is also important as it meant that teenagers could consult magazines and catalogues to see changing fashions enabling them to keep up to date and therefore enabling individuals to conform to Mods ideal fashions and music.

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<sup>19</sup> Barnes, R., (1991) ‘Mods!’ P. 13

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