

It is argued that subcultures define themselves in opposition to the dominant culture. In what respect is this true of youth culture, and what role does the media play in this definition?

"And these children that you spit on as they try to change their world are immune to your consultations. They're quite aware of what they're going through." David Bowie.

Subcultures do not refer only to ethnic or linguistic groups within a larger society, they concern any segments of the population which are distinguishable from the rest of society by their cultural patterns. Subcultures are very broad in scope, and might include Naturalists, Goths, Hippies, Rastafarians, Mods etc. Some people might identify themselves clearly with a particular subculture, while others might move fluidly between a number of different ones.

Culture plays an important role in perpetuating the values and norms of a society, yet it also offers important opportunities for creativity, change, and opposition. Subcultures and countercultures (groups which largely reject the prevailing values and norms of society) can promote views which show alternatives to the dominant culture. Social movements or groups of people sharing common lifestyles are powerful forces of change within societies, therefore those who sought to deviate from the norm, re-create the norm.

The word 'culture' suggests that there is a separate entity within the larger society with which the dominant culture must contend. According to Jordaan and Jordaan in *Man in Context* (1984), "a subculture group is a social-cultural formation that exists as a sort of island or enclave within the larger society". One definition of subculture is: "subcultures are meaning systems, modes of expression or life styles developed by groups in subordinate structural positions in response to dominant meaning systems, and which reflect their attempt to solve structural contradictions rising from the wider societal context" (Michael Brake). The significance of subcultures for their participants is that they offer a solution to structural dislocations through the establishment of an achieved identity - the selection of certain elements of style outside of those associated with the ascribed identity offered by work, home, or school.

Jordaan and Jordaan found that subcultures share certain common elements including; relatively unique values and norms, a special slang not shared with society, separate channels of communication, unique styles and fads, a sense of primary group belonging seen in the use of 'us' and 'them', a hierarchy of social patterns that clarify the criteria for prestige and leadership, receptivity to the charisma of leaders and gratification of special unmet needs.

To suggest that there is a youth subculture requires proof that they are a distinct group with their own set of characteristics that oppose the dominant culture. This is true in two respects. Firstly, aesthetics: youth have a distinct

style and taste that is expressed in their personal appearance and an artistic flair expressed in spontaneity and creativity. Their values include an emphasis on community, a sense of belonging and on collectively shared experiences and good times. Youth culture also exists as shown in their distinct morality: there is a strong emphasis on liberation from all restraints and on a guiltless pursuit of pleasure. In the area of sexuality there is an aspect of life where the individual experiences themselves and others with complete freedom and honesty. There is a combination of both individualism (youth culture affirms the autonomy of each individual who has the 'right' to do their own thing) and collectivism (many individuals are fused into a common experience). The search for identity is at the core.

A subculture group forms when the larger culture fails to meet the needs of a particular group of people. They offer different patterns of living values and behaviour norms, but there is dependence on the larger culture for general goals and direction (unlike counter-cultures which seek to destroy or change the larger, dominant culture). Subcultures try to compensate for the failure of the dominant culture to provide adequate status, acceptance and identity. In the youth subculture, youth find their age-related needs met. It is a way-station in the life of the individual - it is as if society permits the individual to 'drop out' for a period of years and is even willing to subsidise the phase. However, for some people this break from the dominant culture becomes the place of permanent settlement. This is when a group moves towards becoming a counter-culture.

There are several different theories on why youth subcultures form. One is that it is a natural part of the journey from childhood to adulthood. Youth group together for support into groups that function as half-way houses between the world of being a child and the world of being an adult. Here youth subcultures are about survival in an otherwise hostile world. In societies with slow pace of social change the transition to adulthood goes smoothly and youth are similar to their parents. There is a unity and a solidarity between the coming generation and the generation of parents. In societies undergoing rapid social change a smooth transition to adulthood is no longer possible and there is a strong dissimilarity with parent generations. Here an individual cannot rely on their parents identity patterns as they no longer fit into the social context. Because youth realise that they cannot learn from past experiences, they search for new identities that are relevant. In fact, the greater the change in a society the more intense and strong the subcultures, as people identify more with their subculture in order to find identity and security. Another view is that of a class struggle expressed through the use of style. Members are always striving against dominant classes; older generations and against those who conform. They are always trying to find ways to disrupt the ideological and generational oppression in order to create spaces for themselves. The resistance through personal expression is often contrasted against the conformity of the 'normals'. In many writings youth are counterposed against adults - they hate and avoid adults and oppose them because they represent authority.

Linda Forrester speaks of 'youth generated culture' where visual communication is predominant and language is subservient to visual means of communications. Visual cultures include: skateboarders; graffiti artists; street dancers, various forms of 'deviant' apparel and other forms of

communication through movement or gesture. These are periphery groups empowered by the space that they have created through visual representation. Their cultural production is recognised by mainstream culture and in that recognition they are given power to speak. The process empowers them and provides identity. Group control is managed through the visual display of creative talent, i.e., skaters out-skate each other, graffiti artists out-image each other. Mainstream, or dominant, culture discourse is primarily verbal but in youth generated culture discourse is primarily visual. It is through style that criticism of performance and image occurs and it is through criticism that higher forms of visual representation occur.

Another view is that subcultures emerge as a rebellion against the dominant culture using shock tactics. Young people in creating subcultures are setting out to shock. One of the key ways in which they shock is through the clothes they wear. Oppositional subcultures (ie. Punk, Goth and Hip-hop subcultures) are movements dedicated to rebellion against the dominant culture, primarily through image and internal competition to dress more outrageously. Fashion plays a role in all subculture groups and that some are more strongly defined by their fashion, while others take the clothing that relates to the music or sport to define the subculture group. Working class youth tend to place greater emphasis on fashion as it is the one way in which they can show off what they own, whereas middle class youth have other things to show off, such as homes, smart cars, fancy sound systems, etc.

A sociocultural view of youth can be considered, where youth are involved in the development of society through their creations. Youth must be allowed to exercise the power to bring change - they do so in their cultural expressions all the time. A popular theory is that youth culture is predominantly about individualism - an expanding degree of separation of individuals from their traditional ties and restrictions. As people have 'broken free' they feel a need to look for fixing points - material with which to form a new social and cultural identity. The motivation behind participating in the activities of a subculture involves coping with suffering such as alienation, loneliness, meaninglessness, etc. The motive is to be reinstated into responsive and responsible relationships. The individualisation has produced post-traditional communities - because they are focussed on the individual they are looser and more fluid than traditional communities but they are still settings in which youth find self-expression and identity. The subculture is an identity-related substitute for the lost collective world of modernism but with the disintegration of tradition, subcultures have lost their identity-creating potential. There is now a pluralisation of needs and interests that result from the process of individualisation and culturalisation - so culture ruptures are normal. Not only do these ruptures affect all social classes, but the traditional generational gap is also blurred.

Though ways to rebel may have evolved, the reasons to participate in subcultures remain a constant. "Youth identify with subcultures because they are looking for a home, looking for the thrill, the risk of being perceived as dangerous," says Beth Doll, an expert on youth development and a professor of educational psychology at the University of Colorado. Nanette Potee adds; "Young people are going through rebellion and experimentation just as previous generations did, but today's easy access to information widely expands the experiences available to contemporary kids". Such

communication barriers as time and space are shattered by technology, and cultural distinctions between geographical areas become more obscure. Whichever way one looks at subcultures, it cannot be denied that the media is at the very heart. In its rawest form, most subculture groups could be identified with a specific music genre and in some instances music was the defining characteristic around which the group was formed (such as with Ravers, Metalheads, Homeboys, Ethno-hippies, Goths, Technos, Rastas and Punks). In other communities music is a key feature, but another factor would be the key characteristic, such as with Bladers, Bikers, Skaters, Surfers, etc.).

The phenomenal growth in world media accounts for the globalisation of society. The rate at which cultural objects and ideas are transmitted in large parts of the world today is a significant factor in the number of youth subculture groups that are identified. Where a society is connected to the global village through communication technology, they experience simultaneous pressures to unity and fragmentation. A major change in terms of subculture groups in recent times is that there are so many more groups around than before. When my parents' generation was growing up it was common to be classed as either a mod or a rocker. You tended to be either one or the other. Nowadays, there are so many more groups within our community that youth can align themselves with. It's obvious that the mass media has played a role in encouraging the formation of subculture groups - as it has helped young people to see and identify with role models representing different groups. But more fundamentally, youth culture has become more accepting and accommodating of various groupings within the community. While there are subculture groups on the fringes of the community who may be counter-cultural in orientation (such as Punks, Goths, etc), by and large there seems to be a strong sense of tolerance for differences and there is a feeling that this diversity may even be a strength. This tolerance of diversity is a very postmodernist viewpoint. Not only are we a global village, but each village in the global village seems to be filled with people from all over the globe. One implication of this new acceptance of different subculture groups, is the greater number of groups that seem to have formed. Changes in the face of society have given room for the computer to become a powerful influence. Many children have both parents working and this tends to mean they look more outside the family for identity. What they are discovering for themselves, through the infinite possibilities made available by computers, often defies easy categorization by mainstream society. "Youth today are more technology oriented, technology driven. As a result, what used to be a huge division between urban and suburban no longer exists," comments Potee. "The experience of the kids in the suburbs is, at times, not so different from the kids in the city." Potee calls the mosaic of youth groups "co-cultures," and Doll says teens may shift from one group to another. Most subcultures are constantly in flux. Lacking any rigid hierarchical structure, subgroups have a tendency to resist definite labels. Any one subgroup may share features of other groups.

The Goth scene is just one of the many subcultures that have grown exponentially as a result of technological advancements. Yet gothic remains a relatively loosely defined concept, and is often grossly misrepresented by the media. "It is difficult to say what is gothic," Birdwell says. "It is not, as portrayed by the media, an organized group with leaders. It is basically artists

and creative people who have decided not to follow the masses in letting television and fashion magazines tell them what is hip to wear this month." As one of the more 'popular' subcultures in modern western society, misrepresentation and stereotyping by the media is particularly damaging to the Gothic subculture. American High School teacher Joni Paige says she has noticed that her students are dramatically affected by the media images issuing from electronic sources. She points to the response of her students in the aftermath of the events at Columbine High School, where the perpetrators were branded as 'goths' by the media, thus causing a panic and widespread mistrust of the subculture. "Students were just as confused and had just as many questions about the images coming out of Columbine as everyone else." She adds, "They really were anxious to talk about what was happening." Daren Garratt (1997), when talking about the representations of Punks in the media said 'media coverage represents how they should behave even if, largely, they haven't been.'

The universality of the computer-focused world, in particular, with its diversity of images, provides young people with a broader experience. But at times that can be disorienting. Paige says, "The more intelligent kids exhibit more disillusion." And David Birdwell notes, "It is traumatic for kids to grow up seeing adults in the media fighting, having affairs; 'Just Do It' and 'Just Say No' on the same TV." The contradictory messages contribute uncertainty to the already unstable period of adolescence. And at times, any form of identity the young develop represents, for them, a sense of security amid the confusion. Birdwell adds, "Many kids feel that they should be able to wear black and pierce their nose, since it is so much more tame than what their parents were doing when they were that age. As consumption of alternative cultures increases, subcultures become mainstream. So youth must continually reinvent themselves in order to remain distinct. Going back to Birdwell's view on the Gothic subculture that is comprised of 'creative people who have decided not to follow the masses in letting television and fashion magazines tell them what is hip to wear this month', this explains the evolution of subcultures in their interaction with the media. For example – Goth kids wear (and therefore buy a lot of) fishnet tops. The media and the highstreet pick up on this, and adopts it as its own. Topshop starts selling black fishnet tops, and the previously 'underground' fashion has now become mainstream. As a reaction to this, the Goth kids must find something else to wear and the subculture has therefore evolved away from the dominant culture again. This game of fashion volleyball between dominant and subcultures is not always so basic, but it is this very fluid process that keeps subcultures on the move.

Media provides us with so much information so quickly that new subcultures are swallowed up by the mainstream media almost at conception. Over media saturation could eliminate the existence of youth subculture. This would mean the end of creativity which is so important at this stage of life. Culture has a recycling effect - once alternative subcultures products are revived into the mainstream - ie. retro, rave and punk. The dominant culture incorporates the emergent culture through mass communication such as print media and TV. The theory of hegemony says that the ideologically dominant in society continuously secure popular consent to an established social order. The prevailing values of a society change over time as members of challenging subordinate groups are incorporated into the dominant culture. This is how

social order is maintained - usually without cultural disruption - and the control of the dominant group changes only gradually, if at all. An elaboration of hegemony adds the concept of residual and emergent cultures to the model: 'Residual Culture' is the product of a previous social formation that remains part of the dominant culture but survives as an anachronism. 'Emergent Culture' contains new meanings, values, practises and experiences that may be alternative to or in opposition to the dominant culture. A dominant culture efficiently absorbs emergent cultures into the hegemony - a process of incorporation. Sometimes the dominant culture is changed through the incorporation of the emerging culture.

The functionalists have been the main perspectives of the theory of sub-cultures as an explanation of deviance. One of the first sociologists to put forward this explanation was Merton in the USA with his theory of Anomie. He thought that the overwhelming aim in a capitalistic society was 'money success'. Poorer working class people who were unable to attain the success which they saw others achieving turned to crime. Merton put this forward as a view why some working class people appeared to reject the norms and values of society as a whole. However, there are problems with this point of view, not everyone turns to crime, and some crimes as petty vandalism do not bring 'money success'. A Marxist critique has been suggested which infers that because the poorer sections of society are subjected to so much contradictory advice, they react by rejection and forming subcultures. Teachers, parents etc. encourage young people to work, job prospects are bleak, the media stresses material goods and 'fun'. Reaction to try to make sense of this has been to form subcultures such as Mods and Rockers, Punks, Skinheads etc. Marxists say that this is a way of rejecting the values of capitalism, but it is difficult to be sure exactly what does motivate young people. The reasons may not be the same as those implied by sociologists. In the 70's the post structuralists view the upper class as embracing the working class, thus motivating them and the lower class to become more affluent. Subculture emerged from this to resolve the conflict between classes. The common thread there is the resistance to dominant culture. If culture is the social production and reproduction of sense, meaning and consciousness, then the dominant culture must be the most popular culture - the culture with the power. Miller in this theory of sub-cultures thought the young working class males were not rejecting the norms of society as a whole. But they were attempting to live up to the norms of working class life. Lack of suitable role models, fatherless families' etc have left the lower classes with very different norms from the middle classes.

Pete Ward (1997) commented: "In the UK I am aware that dramatic youth subcultures have all but disappeared. I have two ideas on this: A Postmodern break down in the large defined 'blocks' e.g. working class, middle class, etc. Much smaller and fluid groups with inter-relationships between social class groupings, race groupings, etc. That dramatic youth subcultures are somehow formed by cultural stress at a macro level in the economy etc. Thatcher years were marked by conflict and unemployment in the UK and the collapse of communism."

A 16-year-old mod from South London said: "You'd really hate an adult to understand you. That's the only thing you've got over them - the fact that you can mystify and worry them." From: *Generation X* by Hamblett and Deverson, (1964).