Teenage hoodies a threat to society or a media-made panic essay sample

Sociology, Social Issues

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Introduction

A hoodie is a form of clothing that resembles t-shirts but is hooded and made of thick cotton. It may or may not have a zip. It can be understood as a sweatshirt with an attached hood. Teenagers wearing a hoodie are commonly known as hoodies. A hoodie is quite prevalent in teenage for two reasons. First, it is apparently considered as a style statement and a display of ' macho-ism'. Second, it is used as a windbreaker and to keep oneself warm from the cold breeze. There is also a third, and not so social, reason for using hoodies. Criminals may use it for hiding their face and concealing their identity. Because of this, sporting a hoodie is being increasingly associated with criminal activity. Hoodies are commonly perceived as younger teenagers, who have underperformed in life, are economically constrained, and therefore have developed a deviant and anti-social behaviour.

While criminals are a threat to society, wearing a hoodie is not. However, it is being considered as an act of deviance in the society and becoming a huge social problem. Rather than typecasting a set of people based on the attire they prefer to wear, it is essential to take the route of sociological imagination and understand the role played by society and media in building up this image.

Description of the Social Problem

The stereotyping of hoodies is a social problem as it adversely affects a part of society. It is a problem for those innocent teenagers who prefer wearing a hoodie but also realise that they may have to face societal outcast as a result of this. Not only this, such teenagers may always be under surveillance and, time and again, may have to prove their innocence to the society. They are questioned by the various social institutions like media and police. The teenagers point out that this is a big problem.

Boss (2012) narrates a story of Devin in U. S. who was confronted by police during a late night trip. Devin claims that he has never been questioned before and his wearing a dark hoodie that night played a key role. It is more common to suspect young men of a particular race wearing a hoodie and it is creating frequent racial tensions. Another story narrated by Grimes (2012), is about a school kid who was shot dead while walking down a street. The common perspective and criticism against this act is that the child was killed because of the hoodie he was wearing that day. Grimes (2012) mentions a tweet, in response to this incident, stating that hoodie is like a sign of ' shoot or stop and frisk me'. Hence, sociological perspective against hoodies is a

social problem as it leads to discrimination against a particular age, gender, economic class and race. The stereotyping and social inequalities faced by a group of people can be explained with the help of the different theories of social problems, which is being discussed in the following section.

Theories of Social Problems

The two key constituents of theories of social problem are structural and cultural build-up of a society. The following section discusses the social problem of teenage hoodies with various theoretical perspectives; the functional perspective, conflict perspective and symbolic interactionist perspective.

Functional Perspective

According to this perspective, rapid change in the society and social institutions play an important role in the societal problems commonly encountered. The rapid change is society increases the generation gap. Sargeant (2011) has aptly quoted Deucher who states that " Every generation of adults had demonised the behaviour of its youth". Fashion is an element of a society that changes rapidly. A fashion change that society has witnessed in recent years is in the way people like to dress. There has been a shift in preference from wearing formal attires to a casual way of dressing. Hoodies and sweatshirts have taken place of formal shirts and trousers. The younger generation of the society are more encouraged to adopt this new fashion statement. However, hoodies are not well received by the adults and old age people. These differences have led to the stereotyping against hoodies.

Social institutions also have a key role to play in building stereotypes against hoodies. Media is the major player in creating these so called ' moral panics' against teenagers in general and hoodies in particular. Bastian (2011) states moral panic is a widely used term that refers to criminal action. Moral panic is created when society changes rapidly. According to Marsh and Melville (2011), social institutions like media react to situations in such a way that magnifies the ' panic' surrounding people. This builds a negative social image about a certain group of people.

According to Garner (2003), half of the stories about teenagers in UK in 2002 were crime related. The associated words used by media were ' hoodie', ' evil', and ' monsters'. This has led people to associate the word hoodies with evil and monsters. In fact, the numerous crime stories about teenagers resulted in teen boys being wary of other teen boys. Hence, media plays an important role in branding the hoodies as dangerous for the society.

Conflict Perspective

The main learning from the conflict perspective is that economic inequality, opposing values and interests and power are the three reasons for social problems. Hoodies are perceived as teenagers who are not economically affluent. Hence, the economic heterogeneity in the society is one of the reasons for this social problem.

Difference in values and interests among different groups in the society is another reason for this problem. Different groups and different institutions are guided by their own interests. While a teenage is keen on style, media is

interested in blowing issues out of proportion to increase their viewership. A politician's stand on the social problem is dependent on how they want to position themselves in front of the society.

With clash of interest, it is evident that some groups will gain and some will lose. The allocation of benefit is always in the direction of the powerful groups in the society. Media is a powerful institution given its vast reach to the people. Politicians are powerful because of their influence on formulation of rules for the society and defining the right and the wrong.

According to an American Politics and Election News, as media hyped the donning of a hoodie in public, the MPs supported the initiative to ban hoodies in shopping complexes (Secrecyandprivilege. com, 2011). Apparently, it was aimed to make the public feel safe from the commonly perceived evil hoodies. Venugopal (2012) narrates another story where politicians in the U. S. sported the hoodie to show their support to a victim Trayvon Martin. Hence, these two powerful groups end up determining the acceptable and deviant behaviours of a society. The ultimate sufferers are the powerless teenagers who do not have any control or influence on the society.

Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

A symbolic interactionist theory states that symbolic manipulation of social experience causes social problems. This is usually done to fulfil some ulterior political or economic agenda. Creation of ' moral panic' is an example of economic agenda being fulfilled by media and banning hoodies in a shopping mall is a part of a political agenda to gain public confidence. In both the

cases, the rules of society are being created in such a way that wearing a hoodies becomes a deviant behaviour. As a result of this, sanctions can be imposed on people who deviate from such rules.

Conclusion

Hoodie is a like a hooded sweatshirt and has become popular in the teenagers. It can also be used as a medium for concealing identity. Hence, hoodie is being increasingly associated with crime and anti-social activities. This is a social problem as it impacts a section of society and is discrimination based on class, age, race and gender. Using various sociological theories to understand the social problem, it can be concluded that the social institutions play a major role in creating stereotypes among people. The economic agenda for media companies influence them to magnify issues and created moral panics. Politicians use moral panics to further their ulterior motives. The two powerful social institutions define the rules of the society in such a way that wearing a hoodie becomes a deviant behaviour. The powerless teenagers are the victims of this media created panic situation. Hence, wearing a hoodie is not a social threat but a media-made panic. There is a need to build awareness among people against this stereotyping that is impacting the youth.

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