

Chav culture | subcultures and cultural criminology



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The word chav is defined in the oxford dictionary as: “ a young lower-class person typified by brash and loutish behaviour and the wearing of designer clothes.” It is described as an informal derogatory word in British slang. The website, www.urbandictionary.com, which is known for its definitions of British slang words, rather than define the word chav, depicts the image of a 12 year old boy wearing an imitation tracksuit whilst smoking a cigarette and simultaneously showing off his jewellery. The website describes young boy’s attitude as arrogant walking around “ as if he is 8 feet tall and mouthing off to strangers that walk by. This website does a great job of posing a truthful image of what a chav is deemed to be.

The importance of cultural criminology lies within understanding human social behaviour through the recognition of cultural factors which enables theorists to view behaviour as dynamic rather than determined giving rise to different views on transgressive behaviour. The actions of the youth considered to be chavs on a daily basis can be deemed as part of their lifestyle, which has subsequently lead to the increase in the term chav subculture. The word subculture is used to describe a culture with qualities that differentiates them from a larger culture, for example the chav culture within British culture. The qualities that this chav subculture observes that differentiates are; a different fashion sense predominantly tracksuits and baseball caps; the wearing of lots of ‘bling’ which is generally gold jewellery whether fake or real; and general loitering (hanging out) in public places such as street corners, town centres.

Cultural criminology aims at looking at crime in the context of its culture. It aims to show the relationship between media culture, youth culture and

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crimes. It is the idea that the reason for committing an offence due to the thrill received. This may be due to excessive boredom meaning offenders have to resort to crime as their only source of pleasure. Cultural criminologists argue that offenders are influenced by media, and are in the mindset of that is the way to behave. In the context of the chav phenomenon they would argue that the chav phenomenon has occurred through choice, primarily for youngsters to fit in with their surroundings. An example of this can be seen through chav fashion and style. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies describes style as a means of resolving structural contradictions; however cultural criminologists, such as Martin, take this a step further and describe style as a way of connecting an individual to society. By following the fashion trends, and wearing designer gear, regardless of its legitimacy it is an attempt by chavs to connect with society. Fashion may be seen as a form of exclusivity, with the elite wearing exclusive designer labels; an art form with an agenda of keeping the non-elite at a distance. I believe that the subversive use of Burberry wear by chavs is undeniably an attempt by chavs at connecting with society; by separating themselves from normal fashion and creating their own rebellious trends.

Taking into account Bennett's notions of lifestyle, I would argue that the choices taken by the working class youth are an effort to attain an identity, to be realised and accepted in a community in which they believed they are ostracised. This conclusion was also drawn by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies who believe the chav phenomenon can be " a reaction to

analogous transformations in working-class identity, community and culture, now taking place in the context of consumer capitalism.”

Chavs tend to socialise or loiter in places which are public such as town centres, street corners due to boredom. The only form of entertainment available to them is shouting abuse at passers. This deviance is conceived as the ‘thrill of transgression’ and ‘self-transcendence’ as ‘a way of overcoming the conventionality and mundanity typically associated with the banal routines and practicalities of everyday regular life. I believe the reason chavs walking around flaunting their designer gear a bid receive attention that isn’t obtained elsewhere.

The word ‘chav’ is connected to communities that have suffered social deprivation. Lawler takes this a step further and describes them as “the poor and dispossessed.” Furthermore, Cohen and Ainley describe chavs as a “post-industrial youth underclass”. However I do not believe the words chav and underclass are entirely synonymous. I fear “underclass” is the word that has confused caused arguments regarding class prejudice. Skegg notes that “terms such as social exclusion and the underclass have been cynically promoted and utilized by successive British Governments and policy makers, and have rapidly taken the place of terms such as working class.” It is this point that illustrates the fact that despite post 1980s studies of culture that showed a decline in the analysis of social class; class distinctions have not disappeared rather they have been replaced. As the recognition of class inequalities has been buried so have class identities making the work on social class appear out of place. However the fact that the economic polarisation reached its pinnacle in the 1980s meant that the working class

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became the new 'underclass'. This is echoed by Sayer who deems that the term working class has become one of embarrassment and shame after a decline into the issues of class equality.

Moran asserts that the 'chav' phenomenon surfaced as part of the 1980s turn towards neo-liberal thinking and enterprise culture. Moran claims society was perceived as groups comprising distinguished tastes and lifestyles, which further became known as 'yuppies', 'toffs', 'boffins' and 'chavs'. Despite various research about the declining importance of class, the creation of such groups has led to stereotyping resulting in new classes. One way of distinguishing the lower classes is their crass and flashy style illustrated in the clothes they wear, the jewellery they wear and the music they listen to.

News media has been one of the prime means through which the chav depiction has been composed and constituted. An example is an article titled "Sites to check out if you chav what it takes..." which appeared in the Edinburgh Evening News 2004, in which writer Gina Davidson declares: "And we will know them by their dress . . . and trail of fag ends, sparkling white trainers, baggy tracksuit trousers, branded sports top, gold-hooped earrings, sovvy rings and the ubiquitous Burberry baseball cap". In essence, writers such as this label and define the new underclass known as chavs. She writes, "Call them what you will, identifying them is easy." In addition to this statement, she continues in a defaming manner by stating that the girls wear too much gold plated jewellery that they will end up putting H Samuel out of business. She labels them as the dole-scroungers, petty criminals, football hooligans and teenage pram-pushers. Davidson's description

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demonstrates how the chav label has become an umbrella which encompasses a string of older stereotypes of the white working classes.

However the media distinguishes the fact that the chav image possesses a characteristic that makes it unique from previous images of the underclass; the attention paid to the exaggerated use of consumer goods, examples of which include cheap jewellery, branded sports gear and the excessive use of Burberry wear. This has been acknowledged by Hayward and Yar who argue that the “ chav phenomenon reiterates the discursive creation of the underclass, while simultaneously reconfiguring it within the space of commodity consumption.”

Through descriptive illustration of chavs, the news media has created a profile, and a person who fits the profile or is similar to the profile will be characterized as a chav. The media has created a class from which people may be pigeonholed purely based on their foreground; with no regard whatsoever as to their background.

Furthermore, theoretical writers such as Lawler , Skeggs and Tyler have laid emphasis on the fact that the portrayals of the ‘ chav’ plastered with a sense of disgust which leads to attempts of distinctions by the middle class who are insecure about being tarnished with the same brush as the lower class. An illustration of this antipathy is shown in a quote from a website regarding chavs:

“ I am so glad I have money and am not forced to live in local authority housing. This image just makes me realise how lucky I am to be an educated, cultured member of the middle classes.”

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This disregard for the background along with the sense of disgust created by the media towards this new underclass is what separates the middle/upper class from the chav underclass. I commend Billig's critique that these unhelpful media accounts of chavs have an underlying intent "to produce a disgust which is not simply reactive but is constitutive of social class." The expression of disgust within media portrayals of chavs must be seen as conscious and not unintentional. The chav figure has produced a boom of condescending scorn aimed at the lower classes by not only the upper class but the middle class as well.

I would argue that from the view of cultural criminologists, it is this ostracisation that breeds the chav culture and influences the youth to act in such a way that contravenes the conventional norm exhibited by society. These transgressions are what give these chavs their identity. Modern studies on youth frequently put emphasis on the notion that class has become less important in shaping young people's futures. This has become a powerful argument in sociological writing on youth. But it is this notion of class itself that shapes the youth to pick a culture to follow. The chav culture is just a new option that adds to the list of other youth cultures such as Goth, Emo and Urban.

Taking the viewpoint of conventional criminologists, when analysing the new underclass they would take into account the fact that chavs predominantly come from neighbourhoods that exhibit community disorganisation and physical deterioration. The neighbourhoods in which chavs grow up are generally estates which are mainly owned by the local authority or areas of rented housing. These areas are high in proportion of single parent families.

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These areas also exhibit socio-economic deprivation. The parents of the youths in these areas are largely unemployed, a study for the Centre of Social Justice shows that between 1981 and 2006 the proportion of social housing tenants of working age in full-time employment halved from 67% to 34%. Parents also tend to have histories of drug or alcohol abuse and backgrounds relating to criminality. Families living in these areas tend to lack good relationships between children and their parents with the parents lacking good parental skills resulting in dysfunctional families with high tendency of family breakdown. In turn the children of the parents have as a result of poor parenting and social upbringing been left with no or little social skills or work ethic and may be impossible to educate. These youths display a number of individual factors such as hyperactivity, impulsive reactions, mental and/or physical health problems and a low self esteem. It leaves these youths with poor academic performances in their schools, due to constant time wasting through disruptive and aggressive behaviour. Their lack of discipline and organisation can lead to poor attendance in schools and early leaving.

Edwin H. Sutherland put forward the notion of differential association which asserts that criminal behaviour is learned through interaction, it emerges when a person is exposed to " more social message favouring conduct than pro-social messages." He argues that criminal behaviour is an expression of general needs and values the same as non criminal behaviour. If we remove the criminal factor from this theory, it can be applied in the context of chavs; the reason for their behaviour such as loitering or the reason they conform to a dress code is because chavs would like to express themselves just as the

upper classes do. They too feel the need to follow a fashion, trend or culture just as much as everyone else.

Another theory that can be applied to the chav phenomenon is the theory of anomie and strain developed by Robert K. Merton. This theory when applied to the chav phenomenon would suggest that chavs divulge in transgressive behaviour as a result of culture and the structure of society itself. He echoes the fact that all of society shares the same values and goals. The theory asserts the reason for chav behaviour is due to a retreat from social norms as a consequence of unequal social opportunities causing the youth to drop into deviant subcultures. Taking this theory a step further we could interpret the culture of chavs a rebellion, which aims to seek new goals, such as creating a new identity or culture solely to differentiate themselves from those who distance themselves from chavs due to ignorance.

Furthermore, the theory of delinquent subculture could be applied, developed by Albert K. Cohen. He believes that the reason for delinquent behaviour was an uprising against the middle class society's perception of what society should be. He states the delinquent subculture, " takes its norms from the larger culture, but turns them upside down. The delinquent's conduct is right by the standards of his subculture precisely because it is wrong by the norms of the larger culture."

In essence, I believe that the chav phenomenon as subculture has come about due to circumstance as well as choice. I believe that the choice to adhere to this subculture made by the youth does not come solely by free will, but is based upon the circumstances and factors that surround these

youth, leading them to conform to a culture. This would lead me to say that the view taken by cultural criminologists that chav culture is a choice or a rebellion would not be true if taken out of the context of the argument put forward by conventional criminologist. I do not believe that chav label solely depicts someone following a culture. We have seen in the media, people who have come from chav like backgrounds are still regarded as chavs such as Jade Goody and Coleen Rooney. Although no longer displaying chav-wear, the fact that they come from chav backgrounds has permanently branded them as chavs with Jade Goody being regarded as the ultimate chav. The fact that she moved out of the deprived living conditions she once resided in the label has stuck with her despite her moving into a middle class society. I believe this has led to a social labelling and almost social prejudice against people who come from areas populated with chavs.

What people fail to see is what is hidden behind veil known as chav, the real social underlying problems that have led the youth to make those choices to follow this culture. Jade goody, labelled the ultimate chav, was ridiculed for her lack of general knowledge on national television, but a closer look at her background reveals that her upbringing was one of hardship and difficulty. She was brought up in an environment full of crime and violence, with her father was a chronic drug addict and her mother a thief, it was not an rearing full of values and ideals.

Tyler and Bennet claim in their article on celebrity chavs that " Media portrayals of these celebrities employ con- notations of the undeserving poor ... in order to generate accounts of the undeserving celebrity."

In reality I believe there is more to the chav phenomenon than just a culture, it has been introduced into society as a class; a class that you are born into and cannot leave. A class that has been produced as a by product of the decline of class and fashioned to produce fluid identities and to compensate for the change in political strategies. A class that the youth choose to be in purely because they fit in no other class.