

Youth subcultures and its influence on youth media essay



About: This report intends to analyze the complex relationship between media and youth subculture and argues that subcultures can be reproduced and constructed through the media. It therefore, states that the national media should take responsibility in the discourses that are used to represent youth groups and youth subcultures as they impact on the activities of broader youth communities worldwide.

The cultural universe of young people is a complex and dynamic one (White, 1999) and there has always been a tendency among youth researchers to investigate the significant social changes that are being revealed through the experiences of contemporary youth (Leccardi & Ruspini, 2006). Some of the earliest sociological researches on youth can be linked to the emergence of new forms of consumption and distinct youth cultures that began to rise in the late 1950s. The changes in youth at this era were highly visible through music and fashion the young populations were consuming. This was viewed both as a result of the increase in time available for leisure and personal resources (Leccardi & Ruspini, 2006) as well as an attempt to create some symbolic meaning for self (White, 1999). In times of high unemployment where youth were caught in between the ideology of spectacular consumption promoted by the mass media and the traditional ideology of capitalism and the meritocratic work led to a proliferation of empirical studies across a wide range of diverse issues from homelessness to unemployment, youth crime to street gang violence that engages in research relevant to both empirical and theoretical matters in order to stretch the conceptual boundaries in the contemporary society (White, 1993). Youth subcultures can be viewed as a response to the interaction

between these different areas. This response is seen by some as an identity seeking reaction between resistance to consumerism created by the production based Puritanism and the new hedonism of post war consumption (White, 1993).

This paper looks into the contemporary youth subcultures and the media discourse used in the representation of these subcultures. It is argued that such negative representations of youth subcultures would result in the popularization and re enforcement of activities rather than limiting or controlling such deviant behaviors and thereby confirming the labeling of a demonized and at risk youth groups. Further, reports supports the idea that the media interventions in crime and social problem areas can lead to misplaced reactive political resources in mythic rather than real social problem areas resulting in amplified and exacerbated social problems generating moral panics (White, 1999).

A culture can be defined as 'designs for living' that constitute people's way of life (Macionis & Plummer, 2008: 128). The five components of culture identified by Macionis and Plummer (2008: 130) include; symbols, language, values, norms and material culture. Culture has several, often contradictory meanings that carries ambiguity that can be traced in its different uses throughout history (Brake, 1985). While the classical perspective views culture as a standard of excellence ('high culture'), others view culture as a way of life which expresses certain meanings and values attached with a particular way of life known as the 'low culture'(Williams, 1961, p. 57). It is this conceptualisation of low culture that is central to the development of subcultures as an analytical concept (Brake, 1985). Subcultures can be <https://assignbuster.com/youth-subcultures-and-its-influence-on-youth-media-essay/>

defined as a 'cultural pattern that set apart some segment of a society's population' (Macionis & Plummer, 2008: 139) or a social group which is perceived to deviate from the normative ideals of adult communities (Thornton, 1995: 2). The earliest use of subcultural theories within sociology can be linked to its application as a subdivision of a national culture (Gordon, 1947). Culture in this context was viewed as learned behaviour with emphasis on the effects of socialisation within the cultural subgroups of a pluralist society (Brake, 1985).

In most of the Western world, studies of youth subcultures have been dominated by a tradition associated with the 1970's work of the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, England (Thornton, 1995). The Birmingham subcultural studies tend to banish media and commerce from their definition of authentic culture seen media and commerce as 'incorporating' subcultures into the hegemony and effectively dismantling them (Hedbrige, 1978). Chicago School sociologists on the other hand were concerned on researching empirical social groups by taking precedence over their elaboration of theory and were mainly focused on the 'shadier recesses of polite society' (Thornton, 1995). This report will look at subcultures as cultures that are labelled directly or indirectly by the media with a problematic authenticity and as media and commerce integral to the authentication of its cultural practices. Supporting this, A. K. Cohen states that a major determinant of subcultures among the youth as 'what people do depending upon the problems they contended with' (Cohen, 1955, p. 51). Cultural theorists argue that what it means to be young should be seen in the context of its cultural significance indicating that it is the context of

cultural significance that makes been young so distinctive and not the structural focus of society (Alan, 2007). That is, the context the youth are exposed to and the issues that their exposures carry play a significant role in the construction of a youth's culture.

When understanding the conflicts surrounding young people and the way they use public space, the media plays a central role by constituting and shaping the principal form of the public sphere and by gathering and distributing important public information (Thompson, 1994 in Sercombe, 1999). One may argue that there is no certain measure of the direct effects of media coverage on the public. However, there are often negative and powerful cultural effects of media produced by the constant flow of its commercialized imaginary fictions and stereotypical coverage's that socially construct a moral and narrative set of offerings upon which the youth attempt to build their identities on (White, 1993). Not only in building identities, the youth tend to use these social constructions by the media also as a measure for their achievements and personal worth by simply deriving an identity from a set of meanings drawn on the basis of media constructed stimulations instead of their local experiences (Baudrillard, 1983). It is important to note that the notion of identities are constructed across and by differences, and the social construction of youth identities though historically varied is tightly bound with the media representations made available at the time (White, 1999). Therefore, we can argue that media is a critical component of the development and maintenance of the representation of young people which often feeds into the fears and negative attitude surrounding the presence of young people in public space as problematic or

threatening (Sercombe, 1999). Moral panics in relation to youth, music and subculture are not uncommon in the news and other current media (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2008, pp. 124-145 in *Journal of Media Culture*).

Most cities in Australia like many other cities around the world housed for a large number of subcultural activities ranging from skateboarders occupying the steps and benches in the Melbourne streets to Goths congregating the inner city suburbs (Gelder, 2007). It also has a number of drag night clubs, gay and lesbian bars, a remarkable graffiti subculture; in which Melbourne has been claimed as a 'stencil graffiti capital' (Smallman & Nyman, 2005). Australia has several times witnessed its teenage subcultures clash in the streets; like the Mods and Sharpies in August 1966 (Sparrow & Sparrow, 2004: 73-77).

Stan Cohen's classic *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1980) and the centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1978) both indicate how mainstream media contributes to the public anxiety about youth subcultures and youth groups that are deemed to be deviant. Cohen, in his work looks at the development of conflict between " mods" and " rockers", in a British seaside town, and particularly the escalation of conflict that arose as a result of the media's representation of these events. He argues that the media were responsible for amplifying the perception of deviance arising from a few of small-scale disturbances, which ultimately led to an escalated interventions from the police and judiciary, with the demonization and over-typification of young people involved in the mod or rocker styles. Similarly in Australia Cunneen et al. 1989, carried out a study on the disturbances at the Bathurst motorcycle races concluding that it was <https://assignbuster.com/youth-subcultures-and-its-influence-on-youth-media-essay/>

the over representation of the small disturbances that led to the large scale conflicts and that the press concentrated on authority opinion while sensationalizing the material published (Cunneen et al., 1989).

When analysing the literature published on the media representations of youth and youth subcultures it is evident that communications media create subcultures in the process of naming them and drawing boundaries around them in the act of describing them (Thornton, 1995). The way media is inextricably involved in the meaning making and organization of youth subcultures will be discussed through the analysis of the representations of many recent incidents related to youth subcultures, particularly the ravers, Goths and Emo subcultures.

The rave subculture emerged worldwide in the late 1980's as a musical subculture and was a phenomenon in the area that attempted to invert the traditional rock 'n' roll authenticity by remixing and creating a cutting edge 'disk culture' with a 'warehouse party' format and was established in Chicago, Detroit and across Britain (Thornton, 1995: 4). Soon groups of young people were clustered in sites conventionally aligned with musical performance to listen and dance to electronic dance music played by dj's in Sydney's alternative rock scene Unlike other musical subcultures such as alternative rock scene where performances generally took place in formal environments such as pubs and clubs the raves in Australian cities began to use spaces such as old warehouses, factories and train stations for their activities (Gibson & Pagan, 2006). Since the late 1980's rave culture worldwide has increased their members and was diversified and fragmented in many aspects becoming more contradictory with various subcultures

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emerging such as the 'Doofs', 'Drum and Bass' and 'Happy hard core'. Meanwhile controversies and public moral panics were starting to generate over the diverged more politicized illegal party culture that were shifting itself from the mainstream (Gibson & Pagen, 2006). Associations were made between these part scenes and illegal drugs such as ecstasy by the media providing the basis for a moral panic. Ravres were described as 'new age hippies' where their activities summed up to 'no sex, but drugs and rock roll' (Benette, 1999). Dance parties in Sydney eventually became associated with tropes of youth deviance and illegality making the rave space in the public consciousness as a site beyond the domain of mainstream, and thereby causing strong reactions from the public and a need for increased control over their events (Gibson & Pagen, 2006). A major shift in the perception of the public of youth subcultures could be related to the ecstasy related death of teenager Anna Woods from Sydney at an 'Apache' party in 1995. Her death was magnified within the media creating an unprecedented wave of media attention and public panic. With headlines such as 'Ecstasy agony' and 'Ecstasy secret world' running on the front pages for nearly two weeks, dramatically altering not only the rave culture but the perception of youth subcultures as a whole (See Sydney Herald Sun, 4/3/2007). The initial response of sympathy by the public to the incident soon turned into fear and anger that progressed from tension and social anxiety to a full blown social and political crisis (McRobbie, 1994) with scapegoating not only the ravers but creating fear against many youth subcultures (see Daily Telegraph, 27/3/2007: 73). The death of Anna was interpreted as 'a symptom of the malaise affecting many young Australians' (Daily Telegraph, 5/11/1995: 8),

with the NSW state government taking actions to close down clubs and bars which have promoted drugs in parties (Gibson & Pagen, 2006).

For a few months in 2007, the dangers of emo and computer use were significant themes in Australian newspaper coverage's (Phillipoy, 2009). Emo is an abbreviation of the terms "emocore" and "emotional hardcore" which is a musical subgenre of punk rock music, characterised by "emotional" or personal themes. They adopt a look that includes black stovepipe jeans, dyed black hair and side-parted long fringes, which might merely have been one of the many "tribes" (Bennett, 1999) that characterise this contemporary youth culture(Phillipoy, 2009).

Following the deaths of Melbourne teenagers, Jodie Gater, Stephanie Gestier and Carly Ryan in 2007, over an approximately five months period the media portrayed the two separate incidents linking the suicide and the murder to the emo subculture and to the social networking site MySpace, presenting both as dangerous and worrying developments in contemporary youth culture (Phillipoy, 2009). These media discourses surrounding the deaths included many features of moral panic uncluding a build-up of concern disproportionate to real risk of harm (see Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2002, pp. 33-41). While the emo youth were viewed as straightforward "folk devil" (Cohen, 1972) or the "enemy", the "problem" of emo was also framed as a product of much broader problems of youth culture (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2002). The connections between emo and the deaths of these young girls were tenuously published over the mass media and was seen as

symptomatic of what John Hartley (1998) describes in the context of

reporting on young people more generally as a "profound uncertainty in the
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textual system of journalism about where the line that defines the boundary of the social should be drawn" by the broader groups of non-subculturally affiliated youth. The result of this according to Phillipoy, is a " cultural thinking out loud" (Hartley, 1998) where broader cultural anxiety are expressed and explored that can be described as anxiety about disclosure. The newspaper coverage's on the deaths focused on the dangers of young people's disclosures that made them inaccessible to adult authority that otherwise could have prevented the tragedies. Though some of these concerns were connected to the specificities of emo subcultural expression, with " excessive" emotions on display and the enigma associated with subcultural imagery respectively, they were on the whole linked to a broader problem in contemporary youth culture that was seen to apply to all young people, irrespective of any subcultural affiliation. The expressions of anxieties that the private lives of young people were becoming increasingly " unknowable" to adult authorities, and, hence, that youth culture itself was increasingly " unknowable" were popular statements made by the media (Phillipoy, 2006). Reporting's such as " bizarre teenage 'goth' and 'emo' world" world constructed both as dangerous (in the sense that her apparent involvement in subcultural activities was presented as " disturbing" and something that put her at risk of harm) and impenetrable (in the sense that subcultural imagery was understood not simply as harmful but also as " bizarre").

In conclusion, the representations of young people in the media directly or indirectly depend on the interest of the newspapers and the discourse of its source. Language used by these media allows painting young people in

different colors (Sercombe, 1999) and as youth subcultures are prime fare for the news media as in terms of news value they are both exotic and familiar (White, 1993) media and youth subcultures have a complex and symbolic relationship where young people are devoted consumers and producers of media and engage with media in the approval and adaptation of subcultural forms for their own context. Therefore, many of the subcultures can be argued to be reproduced and constructed through the media (White, 1999). The mainstream media however tend to represent youth subcultures mythologically as they often attempts to represent not the real world but the world that suits the advertisers, owners and the government. This leads to the constant stereotyping, reinforcing and exaggerating issues, particularly in relation to the youth (White, 1993). Youth was portrayed within the media as the 'mindless hedonism' of lost youth and were categorized as a careless generation that was only concerned with seeking pleasure and satisfaction from personal risk taking and drug use (Brown, 2005 in Allan 2007).

By constructing notions of deviance and illegality, commercial media not only position youth and youth subcultures but are implicated in defining authentic underground activities that further strengthen subcultural practices that are deemed deviant (Gibson & Pagan, 2006). Therefore, it is clear that media have been and is today, a major influence in fuelling and reinforcing perceptions of 'problem youth'. Subcultures are constructed and stereotyped by the media as deviant and the media representations linked to the issues around subcultures have created an image of uncaring, hedonistic and self centered youth (Alan, 2007). Hence, this report suggest that the

media is directly or indirectly responsible for the fuelling and reinforcing of such deviant activities that they have constructed aligned to youth subcultures and that youth subcultures are a social construction mainly influenced by the national mass media. Therefore, the national media, particularly newspapers as the most commonly used news media has a responsibility in the discourses that are used to represent youth groups and youth subcultures as it carries an impact on the broader youth communities worldwide.