

Culture and identity

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society, there are different conceptions and definitions of culture within this general approach. These are discussed below.

The dominant culture of a society refers to the main culture in a society, which is shared, or at least accepted without opposition, by the majority of people. Dominant culture The dominant culture of a society refers to the main culture in a society, which is shared, or at least accepted without opposition, by the majority of people. For example, it might be argued that the main features of British culture include it being white, patriarchal and unequal, with those who are white and male having things they regard as worthwhile rated as more important than those who are female or from a minority ethnic group.

Similarly, those who are rich and powerful (who are mainly also white and male) are in a position to have their views of what is valuable and worthwhile in a culture regarded as more important, and given higher status, than those of others. Subculture When societies are very small, such as small villages in traditional societies, then all people may share a common culture or way of life. However, as societies become larger and more complicated, a number of smaller groups may emerge within the larger society, with some differences in their beliefs and way of life. Each group having these differences is referred to as a subculture. Folk culture Folk culture is the culture created by local communities and is rooted in the experiences, customs and beliefs of the everyday life of ordinary people.

It is 'authentic' rather than manufactured, as it is actively created by ordinary people themselves. Examples include traditional folk music, folk

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songs, storytelling and folk dances which are passed on from one generation to the next by socialization and often by direct experience. Folk culture is generally associated with pre-industrial or early industrial societies, though it still lingers on today among enthusiasts in the form of folk music and folk clubs, and the Morris dancing which features in many rural events. A subculture is a smaller culture held by a group of people within the main culture of a society, in some ways different from the main culture but with many aspects in common.

Examples of subcultures include those of some young people, gypsies and travellers, gay people, different social classes and minority ethnic groups. Folk culture is the culture created by local communities and is rooted in the experiences, customs and beliefs of the everyday life of ordinary people. High culture High culture is generally seen as being superior to other forms of culture, and refers to aspects of culture that are seen as of lasting artistic or literary value, aimed at small, intellectual elites, predominantly upper-class and middleclass groups, interested in new ideas, critical discussion and analysis and who have what some might regard as ‘good taste’.

High culture is seen as something set apart from everyday life, something special to be treated with respect and reverence, involving things of lasting value and part of a heritage which is worth preserving. High culture products are often found in special places, like art galleries, museums, concert halls and theatres. Examples of high culture products include serious news programmes and documentaries, classical music like that of Mozart or High culture refers to cultural products seen to be of lasting artistic or literary value, which are particularly admired and approved of by elites and the

upper middle class. An elite is a small group holding great power and privilege in society. BROWNE CH 1-4 (M1203). qxp: John Q7 26/3/08 10: 47
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Culture and Identity Morris dancing is an example of traditional folk culture |
33 Mass culture, sometimes called popular culture or low culture, refers to cultural products produced for sale to the mass of ordinary people. These involve massproduced, standardized, short-lived products of no lasting value, which are seen to demand little critical thought, analysis or discussion. Beethoven, the theatre, opera, jazz, foreign language or specialist 'art' ?
lms, and what has become established literature, such as the work of Charles Dickens, Jane Austen or Shakespeare, and visual art like that of Monet, Gauguin, Picasso or Van Gogh. Mass, popular or low culture

Mass culture, sometimes called popular culture or low culture, is generally contrasted with high culture. This refers to everyday culture – simple, BROWNE CH 1-4 (M1203). qxp: John Q7 26/3/08 10: 47 Page 34 34 | Culture and Identity Video games are an example of popular culture undemanding, easy-to-understand entertainment, rather than something 'set apart' and 'special'. Mass culture is seen by many as inferior to high culture. Such aspects of culture are a product of industrial societies. They are aimed at the mass of ordinary people, but lack roots in their daily experiences as in folk culture, and are manufactured by businesses for profit rather than created by the community itself reflecting its own experiences of daily life.

Popular culture involves mass-produced, standardized and short-lived products, sometimes of trivial content and seen by some as of no lasting 'artistic' value, largely concerned with making money for large corporations,
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especially the mass media. Popular culture might include mass circulation magazines, extensive coverage of celebrities, 'red top' tabloid newspapers like the Sun or the Mirror, television soaps and reality TV shows, dramas and thrillers, rock and pop music, video games, blockbuster feature films for the mass market, and thrillers bought for reading on the beach. Such culture is largely seen as passive and unchallenging, often fairly mindless entertainment, aimed at the largest number of people possible.

Some Marxists argue that mass culture maintains the ideological hegemony (or the dominance of a set of ideas) and the power of the dominant social class in society. This is because the consumers of mass culture are lulled into an uncritical, undemanding passivity, making them less likely to challenge the dominant ideas, groups and interests in society. BROWNE CH 1-4 (M1203). qxp: John Q7 26/3/08 10: 47 Page 35 Culture and Identity | 35 The changing distinction between high culture and mass culture Some now argue that the distinction between high culture and mass culture is weakening. Postmodernist writers, in particular, argue that mass markets and consumption now make the distinction between high and popular culture meaningless.

There has been a huge expansion of the creative and cultural industries, such as advertising, television, film, music, and book and magazine publishing. This means there is now a huge range of media and cultural products available to all. Technology in industrial societies, such as mass communication technology like the internet, music downloads, cable, satellite and digital television, film and radio, printing for both mass production and personal use in the home, the global reach of modern mass

media technology, the mass production of goods on a world scale and easier international transportation, make all forms of culture freely available to everyone.

Such technology enables original music and art and other cultural products to be consumed by the mass of people in their own homes without visiting specialized institutions like theatres or art galleries. High culture is no longer simply the preserve of cultural elites. People now have a wider diversity of cultural choices and products available to them than ever before in history, and can ‘pick and mix’ from either popular or high culture. High culture art galleries, like Tate Modern in London, are now attracting very large numbers of visitors, from very diverse backgrounds. Live opera is now available to the masses, through popular venues like the OperaBabes, or concerts in the park.

Strinati (1995) argues that elements of high culture have now become a part of popular culture, and elements of popular culture have been incorporated into high culture, and that there is therefore no longer any real distinction between high and popular culture, and it is ever more difficult to find any one set of ideas of what is worthwhile culture to dominate in society. For example, artist Andy Warhol painted thirty pictures of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa in different colours, arguing that ‘thirty was better than one’, turning high culture art into popular culture. Although Warhol’s work has been marketed to millions through postcards and posters, at the same time it is widely admired by the supporters of high culture.

In 2007 there was some controversy in Britain when the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, generally seen as an institution of high culture, held ‘

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Kylie: The Exhibition’ – an exhibition of costumes, album covers, accessories, photos and videos from the career of the then 38-year-old pop singer Kylie Minogue. This drew widespread accusations from critics that high culture was being ‘dumbed down’. High culture art forms are themselves increasingly being turned into products for sale in the mass market for consumption by the mass of BROWNE CH 1–4 (M1203). qxp: John Q7 26/3/08 10: 47 Page 36 36 | Culture and Identity ordinary people, and there is no longer anything special about art, as it is incorporated into daily life. Technology now means mass audiences can see and study high culture products, such as paintings by artists like Van Gogh, on the internet or TV, and have their own framed print hanging on their sitting-room wall.

The originals may still only be on show in art galleries and museums, but copies are available to everyone. High culture art like the Mona Lisa or Van Gogh’s Sun? owers are now reproduced on everything from socks and t-shirts to chocolates and can lids, mugs, mouse mats, tablemats, jigsaws and posters. (Visit [or](#) for some bizarre images and uses of the Mona Lisa.) Classical music is used as a marketing tune by advertisers, and literature is turned into TV series and major mass movies, such as Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice. Global culture Global culture refers to the way globalization has undermined national and local cultures, with cultural products and ways of life in different countries of the world becoming more alike.

The same cultural and consumer products are now sold across the world, inspired by media advertising and a shared mass culture spread through a media-generated culture industry, and they have become part of the ways of life of many different societies. For example, television companies sell their

programmes and programme formats like Big Brother and Who Wants to be a Millionaire? globally. Companies like McDonald's, Coca Cola, Vodaphone, Starbucks, Nescafe, Sony and Nike are now symbols that are recognized across the world, along with the consumer lifestyles and culture associated with them. As Ritzer (2004) shows, using the example of the American food industry, companies and brands now operate on a global scale.

For example, McDonald's is a worldwide business, with 26, 500 restaurants in more than 119 countries (in 2007), Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken operate in 100 countries, and Subway in 72 countries, with Starbucks growing at a colossal speed. It is now possible to buy an identical food product practically anywhere in the world, promoting a global culture and also weakening local cultures, as local food outlets close in the face of competition and local diets change. Combined with global marketing of films, music, computer games, food and clothes, football and other consumer products, these have made cultures across the world increasingly similar, with people watching the same TV programmes and films, eating the same foods, wearing the same designer clothes and labels, and sharing many aspects of their lifestyles and identities.

Global culture refers to the way cultures in different countries of the world have become more alike, sharing increasingly similar consumer products and ways of life. This has arisen as globalization has undermined national and local cultures. Globalization is the growing interdependence of societies across the world, with the spread of the same culture, consumer goods and economic interests across the globe. BROWNE CH 1-4 (M1203). qxp: John Q7 26/3/08 10: 47 Page 37 The Mona Lisa ... Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa, c.

1503–1507, oil on poplar, The Louvre, Paris ... now has a spliff to relax and a mobile to keep in touch
Mona Stoner, c. 2006, posted on internet: Fine art is now available on cubes to play with
Source: The Mona Lisa is transformed into a window blind

In what ways do these pictures illustrate the erosion of the distinction between high culture and popular culture? Try to think of other examples of this BROWNE CH 1–4 (M1203). qxp: John Q7 26/3/08 10: 47 Page 38 38 |

Culture and Identity Activity 1 Refer to the pictures on this page, and explain in what ways they illustrate global culture. Try to think of other consumer products that are also global. 2 In what ways do you think consuming these products also involves lifestyle choices? For example, what's the difference between having a coffee in Starbucks and in the local cafe (apart from the coffee itself)? Explain what lifestyle you think is identified with your selected products. Identify and explain, with examples, three differences between high culture, mass culture and folk culture. 4 Identify and explain three reasons why the distinction between high culture and popular culture might be weakening. Globalization means that many of the same product brands are now found in many countries of the world. The concept of identity Identity is about how individuals or groups see and define themselves, and how other individuals or groups see and define them. Identity is formed through the socialization process and the influence of social institutions like the family, the education system and the mass media. The concept of identity is an important one, as it is only through establishing our own identities and learning about the identities of other individuals and groups that we come to know what makes us similar to some people and different from others, and

therefore form social connections with them. How you see yourself will influence the friends you have, who you will marry or live with, and the communities and groups to which you relate and belong. If people did not have an identity, they would lack the means of identifying with or relating to their peer group, to their neighbours, to the communities BROWNE CH 1-4 (M1203). qxp: John Q7 3/4/08 15: 49 Page 39 Culture and Identity | 39 in which they lived or to the people they came across in their everyday lives. Identity therefore 'puts' individuals into the society in which they live.

The identity of individuals and groups involves both elements of personal choice and the responses and attitudes of others. Individuals are not free to adopt any identity they like, and factors like their social class, their ethnic group and their sex are likely to influence how others see them. The identity that an individual wants to assert and which they may wish others to see them having may not be the one that others accept or recognize. An Asian woman, for example, may not wish to be identified primarily as an Asian or a woman, but as a senior manager or entertainer. However, if others still 'Look, don't identify me by the size and shape of my body, my social class, my job, my gender, my ethnicity, my sexuality, my nationality, my age, my religion, my education, my friends, my lifestyle, how much money I earn, the clothes I wear, the books I read, where I go shopping, the way I decorate my house, the television programmes and movies I watch, my leisure and sports activities, the car I drive, the music I listen to, the drinks I like, the food I eat, the clubs I go to, where I go on holiday, the way I speak or my accent, the things I say, the things I do, or what I believe in. I'm just me. OK?' continue to see her primarily in terms of her ethnic and gender characteristics, she

may find it difficult to assert her chosen identity. Similarly, the pensioner who sees him or herself as 'young at heart' may still be regarded as an old person by others.

Individuals have multiple identities, asserting different identities in different circumstances. An individual may, for example, define herself primarily as a Muslim in her family or community, as a manager at her work, as a lesbian in her sexual life, or as a designer-drug-user in her peer group. While the example of the Muslim, lesbian, drug-taking manager might seem a somewhat unlikely mix of identities, it does suggest that it is possible for people to assert different identities or impressions of themselves in different social situations. Identities may also change over time. For example, as people grow older they may begin to see themselves as different from when they were younger,