



YOUTH CULTURE

“Global youth culture” is the transdisciplinary category by which theorists and policy analysts attempt to understand the emergence of the complex forms of hybrid culture and identity that increasingly occur among young people throughout the world. The proliferation of media like film, television, popular music, the Internet, and other information and communication technologies is a major factor in the growth of this culture. While some measure of hybridity is a common aspect of culture generally, and the global exchange of products, people, culture, and identities has characterized all colonial histories, recent corporate globalization and the corresponding rise of a so-called information society has produced a particularly dynamic media culture. In this cultural matrix, global and local influences, as well as homogenizing and diversifying ones, continuously merge in the lifestyles, performances, and sociopolitical practices of contemporary youth.

Youth, defined alternatively as post-adolescent and pre-adult groups, or by the United Nations as the over 1.1 billion people between the ages of 15 and 24, are perceived as a primary engine for the growth of global media culture. Youth generally comprise the most media and technologically literate sector of their societies. The multinational corporations that trade in global media commodities actively target young people as a consumer class, which is believed to be worth more than US\$2 trillion in potential sales.

A theory of global youth culture can be strengthened through engagement with the Frankfurt School’s conception of “culture industry.” Arising in Germany in 1923, the Frankfurt School is probably best known because of émigré theorists such as Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno, who were associated

with the Institute of Social Research in the United States. They theorized the ways in which consumer and media culture were forming new modes of one-dimensional capitalist hegemony. In the context of the contemporary youth culture, “culture industry” refers to the processes by which industrialized, mass-produced culture and commercial imperatives not only drive global capitalism, but also attempt to legitimate its aims by integrating youth into the capitalist system by means of their involvement with new media technologies.

Other theoretical perspectives can be equally useful for grasping the problematic aspects of global youth culture. In the late 1980s, for instance, Stewart Brand’s magazine, *Whole Earth Review*, advanced the concept of a “global teenager,” theorizing that young people the world over were undergoing a transformation into a proliferating class defined mostly by the consumption of common culture, the identification with ubiquitous fashions, and the learning of a global standardized curriculum. From this perspective—whether it is through the music and stylings of MTV; the themes and aesthetic of Hollywood films; the news content broadcast through papers, television, and the Internet; or other aspects of popular media—global youth can be seen as actively responding and conforming to modernized and cosmopolitan Western culture. This potential for global media to enlist youth as agents for the cultural logic of advanced capitalist states has led some theorists to criticize global youth culture as dangerously ethnocentric and imperialist.

Others see global popular culture as promoting a progressive postmodern diversity, a hybridized cosmopolitanism, and a proliferation of voices, cultural forms, and styles. In this view, youth are being empowered by new

cultural opportunities to question reactionary and regressive cultural and political attitudes in their respective societies. Therefore, while global youth culture is mistakenly characterized as being simply homogenous and imperialistic, it also cannot be separated from a rigorous critique of its political economy. In this respect, there are ways in which global youth culture is undergoing a McDonaldization, through which it seeks to replace local and traditional cultures with universal liberal and egalitarian values that surreptitiously support the geopolitical aims of countries like the United States, as well as the profits of multinational media conglomerates like the News Corporation, AOL/Time-Warner, Vivendi Universal, Viacom, Bertelsmann, Sony, and the Walt Disney Company.

The category of youth culture can be traced back to theorists associated with and influenced by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (England), who emphasized its counter-hegemonic and generational qualities and examined the ways in which working-class youth subcultures resisted subordination through the production of their own culturally subversive styles. From this perspective, youth of the 1950s celebrated beatniks, teddy boys, and the styles associated with American rhythm-and-blues music. A decade later, when these styles had been appropriated by the mainstream, 1960s youth turned to either the mods or to the hippie and countercultural styles of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. After the commercialization and appropriation of the counterculture in the 1970s, youth turned to new movements like punk. From the 1980s onward, there has been a rise in the global popularity of hip-hop culture, with youth increasingly turning to more urban and underprivileged “gangsta” styles of violent rap subculture.

However, with technology like the Internet able to provide youth the world over with instant access to a wide diversity of cultural styles and artifacts, the thoroughly mediated aspects of today’s youth culture have led some theorists to question the applicability of the concept of “subculture” in a global context. Emphasizing the complexity, multiplicity, diversity, and syncretistic aspects of youth cultures as they localize global media influences and globalize local lifestyles, postmodern cultural theories attempt to account for the ways in which global youth negotiate individualism amid

market-based tribalism and strive for political agency within a world of media spectacles. From this perspective, one can trace the international appeal of a rapper like Eminem, as well as observe how local forms of hip-hop have taken root from New York to Tokyo and from Berlin to Sao Paulo, with global music channels and websites broadcasting not only these performances, but also hybridized forms of club music that mix rap styles with a *mélange* of cultural sounds and ideas. Further, whereas it was once believed that youth culture was little more than a symbolic political gesture of defiance, today’s youth have utilized new media to mobilize and coordinate global political expressions such as the antiglobalization movement, which voices youths’ desire for a progressive world based upon alternative globalizations.

While television and radio remain the most powerful and pervasive media in the lives of most global youth, the Internet is often supplanting them as a primary influence, and it will continue to do so under institutional frameworks that push for the further development of a wired world that is both “global village” and “global mall.” While Western corporations like Microsoft, Yahoo, Google, Ebay, ESPN, and Electronic Arts maintain top websites for global youth, Asian sites from China, Japan, Hong Kong, Korea, and Singapore also represent some of the most fashionable domains. As Asian countries are estimated to comprise 60 percent of the world’s youth, evidence suggests Asian website popularity may still be mainly regional. However, the Japanese Anime-styled Internet phenomenon of the Neopet site, where over 70 million global youths have created virtual pets that they care for—and compete with each other for real prizes—demonstrates the manner in which online global youth culture can be hybridic and complex.

The continued growth of the Internet throughout Asia, Latin America, and Europe, as well as in parts of Africa, means that material on the global Internet will continue to become more diverse. Still, the hundreds of millions of youths who live in abject poverty, who fight in wars, and who continue to be forced into slavery must serve as reminders that theories of global youth culture that overly celebrate its urbanity, cosmopolitanism, and mediated qualities can be misleading and not applicable to the cultural experiences of the downtrodden, whose youth itself has become a political question.

See Also

Americanization; Cable Television; Capitalism; Cosmopolitanism; Cultural Globalization; Education; Glocalization; Hegemony; Homogenization; Hybridity; Individualism; Internet; Late Capitalism; McDonaldization; Music Industry; Postmodernism; Self-Identity; World Music

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