Youth culture : A Sociological Analysis

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At the heart of sociological perspective lies the question of how people are influenced by their society. Societies are formed by group of people at varied levels of territory, identifying themselves in form of different ideas, customs, and behaviors. One such group in the sociological construct is known as 'Youth,' which operates multitudinously as an individual young person, an attitude of being, an age criterion, and an institution. Youth is often characterized as a different group due to its diversity of forms, genres, and behavioral ideas owing to a transitional phase of age. They transform and act as a complex symbolic system, which complicates the study of sociocultural phenomenon and demands a deeper inspection of this age group.

Social media outlets unfold a wide avenue for youth to participate, observe, and adopt anything which potentially influences their attitudes and perceptions, and provides them their own different identifiable space. Within a dominant cultural value system, social media thus allows youths to accept this platform as a space for their own 'youth culture.' However, this ignites a debate by propagators of 'dominant culture' that social media has made youth arguably anti-social, and the youth culture is likely to turn into a counterculture. Nevertheless, negative criticism must not lead to neglect; instead, it becomes necessary to examine how culture affects the society, and why the presence of different cultures and subcultures are not unusual. It is pertinent to inspect why and how social media impacts the youth culture, and whether the consequential impact of society as large serve a purpose or not.

Object and Purpose of the Study

Culture plays an important role in shaping an individual and the society. However, one such group of the society, which is youth, often falls in the dilemma of 'identity crisis' owing to numerous social changes occurring within and outside him. Therefore, he seeks exploration of himself through any means available. One such means of propagation of material culture is social media, whose use has increased ever since 2002, with no limitation. As youth gets access

to various social media platforms, they are likely to be influenced by different ideologies he comes across. Therefore, it is likely that a different culture of this age group, often termed as 'youth culture' is likely to emerge and get impacted. This paper seeks to understand how social media impacts youth culture by employing an in-depth analysis of different sociological theories.

Research Question/ Hypothesis

The study has been undertaken with the objective to examine what is culture and how it has the youth culture been impacted?

Research Gap

A keen academic observation conducted by the researcher suggests that apart from various other theoretical observations on youth culture, only the latest study by Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, UK, proposed social media to be one of the major aspects behind the social change of formation of youth culture. However, not many sociological researches on the same have been conducted by means of employing different communication theories and other sociological concepts on identity formation, which is likely to elucidate the impact of social media on youth culture. This paper seeks to full the aforementioned research gap.

Research Methodology Used

Analytical research has been carried out throughout the paper using content analysis utilising available secondary sources such as eBooks, journal articles, research papers, and news articles concerning the paper topic.

Theories of Youth Culture

Mid 60s came up with a more profound development of a number of concepts, specifically based on youth culture. Levi-Strauss presented those clothes serve as a symbol, because by wearing clothes and accessories, young people give new meanings to these symbols, rather than confining to the meanings that already exist. According to this view, youth styles are a type of resistance not because they oppose a functional society, but because the use of social signs provides them a sense of dignity and control over their life, even if it is symbolic, and serves as a form of protest against established norms and values.

Tenbruck claimed that youth exist in a particular subculture which is characterised by an ever-escalating interest in musical and dance movements. He claimed that *"a youth, in essence, is an inter mediate step, a transition, a preparation for the implementation of adult roles, an introduction to the culture."* In Tenbruck's notion, informal groupings become essential and are given a substantial role based on the concept of youth subculture. A young person's personality develops only within the context of an isolated group (peer group). The study of socialization as a process of an individual's inclusion into the domain of social connections reveals that the construction of social competence in modern societies indirectly belongs to peer groups.

With the research conducted at Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, UK, youth cultures were linked to class-specificity. The CCCS model assumes society to be made up of two hierarchical dependent cultures,— the dominant bourgeois and the the discriminated working class— within which differentiation based on ethnicity, age, and sex may occur. These characteristics allow individuals to learn class-specific cultural socialisation process and equip to solve their daily life problems by their own identity construction in the form of 'youth culture and subcultures.'

Three aspects of social change have been identified in particular: first, growing structural differentiation, which has resulted in the blurring of age boundaries and the shifting significance of social standing; second, the growing importance of the social sphere of leisure; and third, the role of the media in the construction and dissemination of symbols of youth style.

About Culture

For developing a sociological imagination of youth culture, it is essential to understand what culture exactly means, and how culture affects a social group. For a simple illustration— seeing an Indian woman dressed in a Sari, speaking in Hindi, and gesturing hello with a Namaste in the United States makes it immediately evident that her culture is different from what is generally observed in the US. All these characteristics— attire, language, gestures, beliefs, norms, and even material objects— are indicative of one's culture. However, for a sociologist, the term 'culture' requires a deeper understanding that what is widely implied as 'popular culture.'[1]

Therefore, in order to embrace every learned behaviour that is socially acquired, culture in sociology can be understood as both material,— art, buildings, machines, hairstyles, and clothing and nonmaterial beliefs, values, and assumptions about the world.

Impact and Orientations of Culture in People's Lives

As an anthropologist Ralph Linton once said, *"The last thing a fish would ever notice would be water,"* the same schema applies with people: we imperceptibly take *our* speech, *our* ideas, *our* customs, and *our* beliefs as natural and appropriate. This leads to an important consequence of 'ethnocentrism'— a tendency of using our own group's way of doing things as a yardstick to judge others. As a concept developed by sociologist William Sumner, ethnocentrism can be regarded as *"one's own group is the centre of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it."*

This concept provides a ponderous idea to what extent culture can shape a social group. On the positive side, it has the potential to create in-group loyalties, while contrarily, it can lead to

discrimination and unacceptance of people whose ways differ from ours.

Components And Propagators of Material and Nonmaterial Culture

People attach meanings to things in order to communicate with one another. Anything which allows such communication is termed as symbols, which form the nonmaterial or symbolic culture. Gestures, language, sanctions, norms, values, folkways, and mores are some components that allow ideas to exchange, be understood, and let the culture exist.[2] On the flip side, culture also has components that allow ideas to exchange, be understood, and let the culture exist.[3] On the flip side, culture also has material aspect, central to which is technology— *"In its simplest sense, technology can be equated with tools. In a broader sense, technology also includes the skills or procedures necessary to make and use those tools."*

With the rising use of technology, such as communication and social media, groups are getting more open to coming into contact with cultures of other different groups. This process leads to the formation of various other social phenomenon, such as cultural lag, cultural change, cultural

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diffusion, and cultural levelling, which ultimately creates sub-cultures and sub-groups in a society.

Youth is a distinct phase of life owing to age and societal expectations of fitting in prescribed social roles.[4] Just like other periods of the life course, *"youth is a social construct that changes with time."*[5] The notion of 'youth' was initially proposed by a pioneer psychologist, G. Stanley Hall, who defined it as *"a stage of life between childhood and adulthood, one that social institutions should preserve as a period of self-exploration."*[6] Age being a basic element in social structure,[7] variation in social roles, membership, and differentiation of the youth group is a natural phenomenon; and so is the emergence of culture specific to youth.

Emergence of Youth Culture: History and Formation

Hall advocated that schooling and institutional reforms would delay the entry of youth (adolescents) into adult society by providing extended time to explore themselves. The concept eventually turned into reality as High school and college students began to create an age-specific culture centred on their schools, mainly through extracurricular activities and clubs, such as after-school dances, choruses and gee clubs, school newspapers, and school government. This allowed status competition among students, leading towards shift in fashion and fads as their unique representation—coined as 'youth culture.' Commercial forces and advertisers quickly recognised the value of young consumers with a different way of self-identity against the mainstream adult culture, and therefore, consumerism closely intertwined with the newly emerging youth culture becoming the primary means of either conforming to peer groups ('fitting in') or competing for the status of nonconformist hipness ('standing out').

American functionalists figure the emergence of youth culture owing to problems that came along with post-war changes in American society and across the world in consequence of industrialisation. British sociologist M. Brake defined 'youth culture' as *"a special form of the organization of the activities of the youth, a relatively autonomous and comprehensive formation within a cultural tradition dominant in the society, different in its norms, values, institutes,*

lifestyle, and thinking." Baacke defined youth culture is simply a behaviour and experience, rather than being something organised or defined. It is an inimitable style of behaviour, expressed at the level of communication symbols.

While the extension of schooling contributed to the development of youth culture by isolating age groups, youth culture was also forming among working-class kids outside of schools, in the city's streets and entertainment venues. Millions of young people from immigrant families would be at the forefront of cultural transformation in western cities, rejecting ethnic culture and customs in favour of a modern identity defined by consumer culture and the mass media. Department stores, dance halls, and amusement parks were among the marketed leisure destinations where working-class adolescents congregated and developed a distinct cultural style. These urban amusement and consumption areas provided young working-class women with unparalleled chances to escape the patriarchal constraints imposed on their immigrant households.

Young people's dispersion into various social groups facilitated the emergence of subcultures marked by symbolic resistance to established norms. Flappers were a pioneering subculture of young women who defied prevailing norms of femininity by their distinctive attire and affinity with the hedonism of the "Jazz Age," which arose in the 1920s. The "flappers" were introduced to the greater public through the mainstream media, which inevitably characterized them through a prism of sensationalistic fears about shifting gender roles and sexual behaviour, as were all other youthful subcultures that followed.

Youth culture thus materialised as a *"cultural practice of members of this age group by which they express their identities and demonstrate their sense of belonging to a particular group of young people."* It emphasised on shared symbolic ideas such as—sports, music, clothes, and dating, being different from the adults of the community. Within this youth culture, other smaller groups based on ethnicity, race, and economic status, emerged as youth subcultures. With the increasing proliferation of youth cultures in late twentieth centuries, theoretical currents and development of western youth research rose to peak, bringing out a detailed analysis of different groups of theories of youth life and culture.

Literature Review: Theories on Generation and Youth Culture

With the onset of intensive development of western youth research, a detailed analysis of different definitions and theories on youth culture came into light.

The Legacy of Mannheim's Concept of Generation

The Problem of Generations, a 1923 essay by Karl Mannheim, is widely regarded as a foundational theoretical analysis of generations as a sociological phenomenon. His essay contributes as a key to the sociological issues with regards to 'generations of youth' including *"nature of time, the relationship between biology and the social, and socio-psychological connections of language and knowledge."*

Mannheim tried to systemize the concept of youth. He defined the nature of youth as neither progressive, nor conservative—rather, it has potency ready for any endeavour. He maintained that during the life stage of adolescence, formation of generation is most likely to occur, and these formative years equipped with experience of social circumstances and historical events create long-lasting profound effects. Mannheim recognised that the generation location (*Generationslagerung*) is not sufficient. He emphasised that *"although common location in history provides access to a specific range of potential experiences, the generation as actuality (Generationszusammenhang) presupposes the 'participation in the common destiny of this historical and social unit.''* Therefore, until the family serves as a primary source of child's intellectual formation, the child's views align with the family traditions. However, as the social climate of family is very rarely identical to the social climate of society at large, in which the adolescent has to live, he is likely to have a shift in his social location. Mannheim acknowledged the possibility that groups of youths exposed to the same generation location may '*work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways*;' hence, these groups constitute separate generation units (*Generationseinheit*).

He thereby proposed two elements in his theory of social generations. First, a generation had a 'site' or 'location', the social conditions in which a new generation could emerge. Thus*, "a generation is more than simply a group of people born around the same time; they must share, at least to a significant degree, experiences and challenges."* Thus, when ways of life pursued by the previous generation in the same culture no longer seem realistic, new generational location

emerges. Second, this location shapes the modes of expression, action and feelings of those within the group. Mannheim marks that *"Generation shapes subjectivity, but not in a mechanical way. It delimits the range of possible beliefs and actions."*[8] When a new set of social structure rises, it demands more novel ways of expression, acting as a catalyst of driving generational change within a culture— termed as 'generation in actuality.' Therefore, Mannheim conceptualised generations as in relation with social processed and historical events as opposed to biological age boundaries. A new political, social, or cultural generation emerges when shared investment into novel political or cultural stakes takes place. These different groups within a generation Mannheim labelled generational 'units.' This way, young people within the same generational location are likely to develop different cultural orientations and style of behaviour based on their common identifiable experiences.

However, little empirically oriented emphasis has been given to research on youth culture using Mannheim's fine distinction. This owes to the change in shape of sociological thinking in 1950s, curated by Parsonian structural-functionalism.

The Role of the Juvenile Subculture in the Transition to Adulthood: Parsons and Eisenstadt

Talcott Parsons provided a functionalist approach to youth culture by speaking about the great importance of the main cultural traditions in strengthening existence of society. Cultural traditions are passed down through the generations through teaching rather than biological inheritance. These traditions, which are properly learned by young people, provide society with a certain level of stability and span of time, resulting in a stable system of interaction. Youth culture, according to Parsons, develops values that are incomprehensible to adults. Consumption, busyness, and a lack of responsibility are among them.

Eisenstadt presented a more complete development of Parsons' theory by focusing on the role of age-homogenous groups or peer groups as agents of socialization. Young people develop a sense of stability, which helps to compensate for their social experiences of change. Since Eisenstadt points out, youth culture is a direct product of these goals, as it gives a clear set of values, attitudes, and behavioural norms to be followed regardless of what is going on around them.

In today's society, he believes, there is a significant difference between the home in which a child grew up and the social structure in which that child is expected to fill a specific place. As a result, a new structural position— the young man's position— arises. As a result, youth— as a time of life— plays a significant structural role in society. In keeping with this, Eisenstadt saw youth culture as a social institution that governs the process of educating young people to participate in their adult social roles.

On the one hand, culture is a force of association; on the other, it is a force of disengagement. People are born into and live in various social groups, which is their primary socialization. This sociocultural environment establishes rules and ideals on which social identity is based. That is why, in any stratified society, *"the presence of diverse cultures, their alternatives, and values choices leads to disputes, styles, life orientation, and antisocial image and behaviour."*

With the expansion of education system, higher and medium-level education reached masses, leading into differentiation of the system of social inequality, with a diversification of individual life course patterns. This allowed a substantial extension of the life stage 'youth,' and especially in the blurring of age boundaries between youth and adulthood.[9] Another important cause of social change owed to youth cultures being mostly integrated into leisure time and oriented toward mass media and consumption. Austin and Willard note that *"cultural practices such as music, dancing, movies, visual arts (e.g., comics), particular sports (e.g., skateboarding), and fashion (e.g., clothing and hairstyles) are preferred means of expressing a distinct way of life that is recognized by others as a sign and signal of a particular identity and group membership."* Nevertheless, the biggest and the swiftest circulation and dissemination of cultural signals of youth styles stormed with the introduction of media and computer. Clothing and hairstyles developed in informal youth organizations, for example, are frequently taken by the media and the market and turned into fads and fashion. As a result, a larger number of young people may have the opportunity to participate in this style, contributing to its spread. Cultural elements offered by the media, on the other hand, can be taken and reinterpreted by young people and used in the creation of juvenile styles. The quick fluctuation and rapid turnover of youth trends at the turn of the twenty-first century is due to the mutual approval and simultaneous change of

cultural signs and signals by groups of young people and the media. However, the role of the media in the construction, dissemination, and appropriation of juvenile lifestyles is considered highly prominent, research orientation towards the same has been insignificant.

Youths today intentionally or unwittingly absorb certain cultures into their own because of the practice of expressing personal thoughts and ideas online to a specific audience. Youths are trying to fit in, as well as seeking online acceptance from friends and classmates, thanks to social media. Youths use this platform to meet new people and build friendships. In consequence, social media may be regarded as instilling in teenagers the belief that they do not need to go out in public for this reason, and maintain their own youth culture over these virtual platforms.

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