Global Youth Culture

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"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 amongst youth throughout the world due to the proliferation of media like film, television, popular music, the Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) in their everyday lives. 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" based on new media technologies has produced a particularly dynamic media culture. In this cultural matrix, global and local, as well as homogenizing and diversifying, influences 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 young 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 and the multinational corporations that trade in global media commodities actively target young people as a consumer class now believed to be worth more than $2 trillion in potential sales.

"Global youth culture" draws upon the Frankfurt School's conception of "culture industry" that, in this updated context, signifies the process by which industrialized, mass-produced culture and commercial imperatives drive global capitalism and attempt to

legitimate its aims by integrating youth into the capitalist system by means of their involvement with new media technologies. 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 even the Internet, or other aspects of popular media, global youth are seen as actively responding to and identifying with 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, hybridized cosmopolitanism, and 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" and represents a form of "McWorld" that 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 and the profits of primary multinational media conglomerates like 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 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 became appropriated by the mainstream, 1960s youth turned to the mods, on the one hand, and hippie and countercultural styles of sex, drugs, and rock and roll, on the other. After the commercialization and appropriation of the counterculture in the 1970s, youth turned to new movements like punk and as the 1980s onward have seen the rise in global popularity of hip hop culture, youth have increasingly turned to more urban and underprivileged "gangsta" styles of violent rap subculture.

However, the thoroughly mediated aspects of today's youth culture, with technology like the Internet able to provide youth the world over with instant access to a wide diversity of cultural styles and artifacts, has led recent theorists to question the applicability of the concept of "subculture" in a global context. Proposing "Post-subcultural Studies" that emphasize the complexity, multiplicity, diversity, and syncretistic aspects of youth cultures as they localize global media influences and globalize local lifestyles, postmodern cultural theories are attempting to account for the ways in which global youth negotiate individualism amidst market-based tribalism and strive for political agency within a world of media spectacles. In this perspective, one would trace the international appeal of a rapper like Eminem, but also observe how local forms of hip hop have taken root from New York to Tokyo and Berlin to Sao Paulo, with global music channels and websites broadcasting not only these performances, but also hybridized forms of club music that mixes rap styles with a mélange of cultural sounds and ideas. Further, whereas it was once believed 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 like the anti-corporate globalization movement that 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 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% of the world's youth, evidence suggests Asian website popularity may still be regional in large part; but the Japanese Anime-styled Internet phenomenon of the Neopet site, where over 70 million global youth have created virtual pets that they care for and compete with 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 global youth 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.

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