

## YOUTH AND THE CONSUMER INDUSTRY

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### *Abstract:*

Mass culture, is a form of culture in which people are manipulated as consumers. As a consumer group, young people are distinguished from other groups in terms of their market choices, and these choices reveal a new youth culture. In this study, sociological bases of this culture are analyzed.

### *Özet:*

### GENÇLİK VE TÜKETİM ENDÜSTRİSİ

Kitle kültürü, tüketicilerin yönlendirildiği bir kültürdür. Gençler, tüketim biçimleriyle diğer gruplardan farklılık göstermektedir. Bu çalışmada, bu kültürün sosyolojik temelleri tartışılacaktır.

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**Key words:** Youth, mass culture, mass society

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Gençlik, kitle kültürü, kitle tüketimi.

## Introduction

Culture is an equivocal word in sociology and has controversial meanings. Williams (1961: 57) defines culture as "a particular way of life which expressed certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions." Thus, youth culture can be defined as "the way of life" shared by young people. Youth culture describes the particular pattern of beliefs, values, symbols and activities that a group of young people share (Frith, 1986: 8). Certain youth groups have distinct ways of dressing, listen to certain type of music, develop their own language and values.

Abram's (1959) study of modern youth in relation to the consumer goods' industry was one of the first major analyses of this issue. As a new consumer group, youth was distinguished from other age groups in terms of their market choices and these choices revealed a new youth culture.

The consumption of goods and services became possible for more and more groups in Western societies and in other parts of the world. Consumption may be seen as a social and cultural process involving cultural signs and symbols; it is not simply an economic process. Sociologists focused on consumption as a social activity. The concept of consumption has a variety of meanings, depending upon the major theoretical framework, of which it is a component part.

In this article, no attempt is made to rely on a single theory or model of consumption of youth. It is aimed to present some of the important, valid and generally relevant theoretical frameworks of youth culture (as a way of life or consumption).

## Theoretical Framework

The structural functionalists described youth as a more or less passive receiver of the dominant culture. Parsons' (1942) description of youth-culture reflected the new social climate of the period of the affluent society. One of the key players in this affluent society was the 'youth'. The youth was a new social phenomenon and seen as a direct product of the new society characterized by rapidly expanding leisure and entertainment industries, and an extension of period of youth due to the opportunities for further education. The teenager thus came to be seen as a key economic actor; developing particularly teenage patterns of consumption. Abrams (1959) showed that it was the size of teenage spending in specific areas which created a specific teenage market.

Abrams's book (1959) was an empirical survey of a new consumer group which had emerged in the 1950's. The significance of his book was that it described

a distinctive form of youth behavior. As a consumer group, youth were distinguished from other age groups in terms of their market choices. This culture was defined in terms of leisure and leisure goods - coffee and milk bars, fashion clothes, motorcycles, cinema admissions, rock'n' roll records, cosmetics, dancing, alcohol and tobacco (Abrams, 1959: 10-11). According to him, youth culture was manipulated by mass media.

Mass culture or mass society theories were developed by Marxist thinkers (Morrow, 1994: 98). The key concept of the Frankfurt School concerned with the critique of culture in advanced, capitalist societies was that of the 'culture industry' (Held, 1980; 92). The culture industry was used by Horkheimer and Adorno to describe the ways in which cultural products had been turned into commodities for the extraction of profit, and were used by those holding property and power to control individual consciousness and thus protect the status quo (Ibid: 90). Mass culture in modern society was not a culture of the masses, but for the masses; since the culture industry did not respond cultural demands but manufactured those demands. These cultural forms thus created -which were standardized, unoriginal conventional and undemanding- and acted to produce set responses, recognition and affirmation and thus reduced criticism and resistance. (Ibid: 101-4)

In Britain, well-paid manual workers and increasing numbers of white-collar employees developed. This group provided the bulk of the market for capitalist mass production (O'Donnell, 1985: 31). Abrams (1959) showed that the teenage market was mostly of working class. For the 1950's Abrams' observations seemed correct. However, by the end of the 1960's his statement was no longer valid, because the youth consumer market expanded further during the 1960's and after. The first reason for this expansion was a demographic one as it was projected by Abrams. Secondly, the "affluence" factor became more marked.

A different way of interpreting these socio-economic trends was that the skilled working class was becoming 'more middle class' in its economic, social and political behavior (O'Donnell, 1985: 30).

Although being not a mass society theorist, Dahrendorf (1959) claimed that class conflict had become "institutionalized" in post-capitalist society and that almost no possibility of revolution remained (O'Donnell, 1985:31). The institutions which expressed working-class interests played an important role within 'liberal democracy'. (Ibid.:32).

Mass society theory was more influential in the United States than in Britain. An alternative framework to class analysis is the elite/mass theory (Ibid.).

The unconscious consumption by youth of mass media products was particularly associated with rock 'n' roll and youth culture. The American produced film and its hit song 'Rock Around the Clock' created an unending stream of youth consumption. Since young people were still discovering their identities, they could be more easily influenced by those in the media images. The globalization of culture, which had arrived with developments in media technology, led to the loss

of a sense of differentiation, and thus a 'massification' of culture. This was resented by those who held a notion of high culture (Held, 1980: 81).

In contrast to the structural-functionalist discourse on youth culture, the mass culture debates were concerned with the category of class. It was mainly working-class youth who first got caught up in rock 'n' roll in Britain (Abrams, 1959: 13). In the United States the school system did not reflect class divisions as sharply as did in England. This and the higher level of disposable income among American youth encouraged the mass market approach of the media and leisure industries. Once the driving force had been settled, the music and films began to pour in. The fact that producers consider youth as a "mass" does not mean that there were no differences between groups and classes.

Berger and Berger (1976 : 251-2) argued that :

It is also important to understand the relation of the youth culture to the stratification system. To a considerable degree, the youth culture cuts across class lines. To take up once more Tom Wolfe's helpful term of 'status spheres', the youth culture has created symbols and patterns of behaviour that are capable of bestowing status upon individuals coming from quite different class backgrounds. In addition, the youth culture has a strongly egalitarian ethos which has not only made it a locale of quite remarkable racial tolerance but in a real way a kind of classless society.

Thus young people of all classes can participate in the collective ecstasies of a rock festival. Class lines begin to be more important when it comes to consumption patterns, since young people of different classes have different amounts of money to spend.

Frith's (1983) study of music listening among teenagers in the early 1970's also revealed class differences. Music listening of middle class youth centered around albums and concerts (Ibid.: 205). In contrast, students who left school as soon as they could preferred music for its sound and beat; listened to music in the youth club or disco, and identified themselves with a particular youth style (Ibid.:206).

Murdock (1972) examined the tastes of different youth groups. There was a 'street culture' of mainly working-class males, and there was also 'pop media culture' based on values, activities and roles sponsored by the mass media for youth consumption, involving music, fashion, magazines, movies. This was used by middle class students who had no access to street culture. Class membership was the key determinant of social experience which had resisted any generational consciousness that the mass market had emphasized (Brake, 1985: 66).

Cultural and critical theorists differ in their vision of the consumers. Frankfurt School saw them as a passive receiver of the new mass culture. The new

cultural theorists see them as an active user of the meanings expressed in the cultural commodities that they consume. In looking at contemporary leisure activities, Fiske (1989) discusses the watching of soap operas and concludes that far from dulling the brain to prevent resistance to the oppressive structures of the real world, the meanings issuing from the shows were used by the watchers in their everyday forms of resistance (Ibid.: 62-65).

The notion of active consumerism is also central due to Willis (1990). He terms consumerism as "symbolic creativity" (Ibid.:18). Featherstone (1991:83) has written:

In contrast to the designation of the 1950's as an era of grey conformisms, a time of mass consumption, changes in production techniques, market segmentation and consumer demand for a wider range of products are often regarded as making possible greater choice (the management of which becomes an art form) not only for youth of the post 1960's generation, but increasingly for the middle aged and the elderly... we are moving towards a society without fixed status groups, in which the adoption of styles of life (manifest in choice of clothes, leisure activities, consumer goods, bodily disposition) which are fixed to specific groups have been surpassed.

The society suggested here is one in which 'fixed status groups' or 'social classes' have disappeared as determinants of the new patterns of consumption. This situation has been termed 'post-modernity' by Featherstone and as well as by other social theorists of post modernity (Jameson, 1983).

In the study of leisure and consumption feminist theory should also be mentioned. Early feminist analysis of the fashion industry stressed the manipulation of the female image, later work has stressed that women have not simply been objectified by the advertising industry but have used fashion to their own ends. Carter, in her study of female consumer culture argues that universal adoption by women of nylon stockings symbolizes many things: an aspiration to freedom, democracy and the American way of life, or an expression of luxury (Carter 1984 : 208).

In short, it is seen that in contemporary capitalist societies there is more 'symbolic work' and creativity in consumption than in production.

## Conclusion

In recent years important developments have been occurred concerning youth culture and their consuming behavior. It has been the aim of this paper to have a quick look at some distinguished sociological theories relating youth culture and consumption. These theories included that of structural-functionalist, mass society and cultural. Conflict between theories is healthy to stimulate further

exploration. Also reference was made to research findings in Europe and the United States relating to concepts. Youth cultural studies are scarce in Turkey perhaps because the subcultures lack socially visible form that they take in Western countries.

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