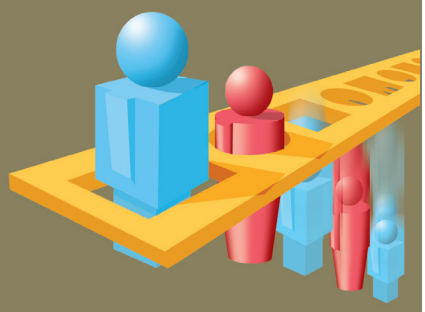
Chapter 10

Sociology of youth



By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

- understand the key concepts of youth, youth culture, youth subcultures and peer group
- identify and explain a range of spectacular youth subcultures
- understand how a range of agencies (the media, schools and the economy) and processes (consumption, demography and globalisation) contribute to the social construction of youth
- outline and evaluate functionalist, Marxist, feminist and postmodernist explanations of the role of youth culture/subcultures in society
- outline and evaluate post-feminist perspectives on the relationship between gender and subculture
- examine issues relating to ethnic involvement in subcultures (racism, ethnocentrism, resistance and hybridity)
- identify and explain key patterns and trends in youth deviance
- outline and evaluate functionalist, Marxist and labelling explanations for key patterns and trends in youth deviance
- explore the experience of schooling in relation to class, gender and ethnicity
- identify and explain patterns and trends in subject choice
- explore a range of pro- and anti-school/education subcultures

Key concepts and the social construction of youth

Youth

Although there have always been 'young people' in our society (people of a certain biological age), there haven't always been 'youths'. This follows because 'youth' is the *meaning* societies give to a particular biological age group. Pearson (1983), for

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example, suggests youth (as opposed to 'young people') first appeared in Britain in the late nineteenth century (with newspaper references to 'rowdy youths' around 1898).

Until the early twentieth century, most societies seemed to distinguish merely between 'childhood' and 'adulthood'. One reason for this was that since the lives of 'young adults' were not significantly different to their 'older adult' counterparts, there was little reason to distinguish between them.

Youth as a social construction

The fact that we do now distinguish between youth and adulthood suggests youth is a **social construction** rather than a biological given. This follows because the meaning of 'youth' has changed — and continues to change:

- **historically** — in our society over time
- **cross-culturally** — different societies define 'youth' in different ways

Labelling

In this respect, one way to start to explore youth is to see it as a **labelling process**. This age group is not only given a name but also a set of characteristics — social and psychological — associated with the label — something we can illustrate in the term '**teenager**'. At midnight on their thirteenth birthday, children acquire this **social identity** and, in so doing, are somehow changed in the eyes of the people around them. They have suddenly acquired a new **status** — one that has characteristics both:

- positive — the former child receives privileges reserved for 'teenagers'
- negative — adults associate things like moodiness and rebellion with teenagers

There is, of course, nothing different about the individual — the child has not been magically transformed overnight. What has changed is how people *react* to the new status — and this is significant for our understanding of not just 'teenagers' but youth in general.

Boundaries

Boundaries are a further aspect of contemporary youth that points to its social construction. At what age does youth begin and end? There are various age markers we can use to help us decide when youth begins:

- the age of criminal responsibility (10 years old)
- the start of teenage years (13)
- the school-leaving age (16)

Similarly, there are markers for when it ends:

- **rites of passage** (21 used to be the age at which 'adulthood' began, now it's 18)
- **t**he end of teenage years (20)
- the end of formal education (21 or 22 for some)

? Suggest two problems sociologists face when defining youth.

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Peer groups

If youth were simply a biological category, marking its beginning and end would be relatively straightforward. There doesn't, however, seem to be much agreement about which markers we should use to define youth — and this confusion reflects a general ambivalence in our society about youth that we can start to examine in terms of **peer groups** (people of a similar age).

If we consider youth a time of **ambivalence,** peer groups are significant in two ways:

- **Status**: Youth is a part of neither childhood nor adulthood — both of which are relatively **centred identities**. Children, for example, are generally told how to dress, talk, behave and so forth; while adulthood is centred around a range of rights (some of which are shared with youth) and responsibilities (the majority of which are not).
- **Situation**: Youth exists in the margins between childhood and adulthood. This is reflected in a kind of sliding scale of age-related rights — from what you can watch in the cinema, to things you can or cannot do until the appropriate age (legally smoke, drink alcohol, join the army, get married).

Youth, therefore, is largely a **decentred identity** — there are few, if any, hard and fast guidelines about 'how to be a youth'; Fine (2001), for example, argues young people 'engage in both adult and childish activities simultaneously'.

While young people are given freedom to develop their own ideas about the meaning of youth, freedom and choice lead to **uncertainty** — there can be no guarantees you're 'doing youth correctly' and this makes youth an increasingly **risky** status. As Furlong and Cartmel (1997) argue, 'young people in contemporary industrial societies have to negotiate a set of risks which were largely unknown to their parents'.

Peers, therefore, play an important role as a **reference group** whose behaviour can be monitored, copied, modified and so forth in a way that allows young people to retain a sense of individuality, freedom and choice while simultaneously being part of a much wider group of similar-minded individuals. Peer groups operate on two levels in this respect:

- **Primary peer groups** generally involve a few close friends whose help and advice is strongly valued. As Ellis and Zarbatany (2007) found, these people tend to be important influences on our behaviour (as we, of course, are similarly influential), to the extent that primary peer group members adopted similar forms of behaviour (partly under the influence of **peer pressure** to conform to group norms).
- **Secondary peer groups** involve a much wider network of relationships, some of which are face-to-face (such as being connected to other peer groups through shared friends), but also include relationships derived from secondary groups such as the media.

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One of the most significant influences of secondary peer groups is in terms of **consumption patterns** relating to the development of particular youth fashions and behavioural styles. While the precise role played by the media is much debated, their general role seems to be one of picking up and amplifying styles that originate within particular youth groups. Punk, for example, originally began within a very specific and highly localised group of young people in a small area of London. The media picked up and amplified this style by bringing it to the attention of a much wider youth audience.

The significance of the peer group also suggests youth is a **negotiated process**. In the absence of clear guidelines about how young people are supposed to behave (on the one hand youth is celebrated as a time of choice and freedom from responsibility while on the other young people who exercise these choices and freedoms too vigorously are demonised as being 'out of control', 'feral youth' and so forth), they are, in some respects, left to their own devices. They are relatively free to construct youth in whatever way they see as fit or appropriate — options that frequently bring them into conflict with adult values and norms.

Youth as a peer group

S tatus/Situation
I dentity
R eference group

? Suggest one way youth is a decentred identity.

Youth culture

Although, as we have suggested, the idea of 'youth' has been around for some time in our society, it wasn't until the 1950's that the idea of 'youth culture' as something in need of explanation really began to develop — Hine (2000), for example, argues 'teenagers' didn't make much of an appearance in Britain 'until the mid-to-late 1950's'.

A significant reason for this was the development of compulsory universal **education** (at least in Britain) following the 1944 Education Act. By setting a school leaving age of 15, the Act created a '**period of dependency**' for all young people (while middle- and upper-class boys had historically been educated into their mid- to late teens, this wasn't true of youth as a whole). This led to the idea of youth being 'qualitatively different' to adulthood or childhood.

Youth culture as transition

Youth culture refers to a 'shared way of life' among young people. The emergence of this new and distinctive social grouping was initially explained by **traditional functionalist sociology** in terms of its being functional for both the individual and society. Specifically it was argued that 'youth' developed as a way to 'manage the **transition**' between:

- childhood, governed by **affective relationships** within the family group, and
- adulthood, governed by **instrumental relationships** in the workplace and wider society

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Since 'all youth', regardless of class, gender or ethnicity, faced the same general problem of making this transition successfully, it followed they must develop a common culture designed to help them manage and cope with it — hence the idea of a 'youth culture'.

There are, however, two initial problems we can note with this idea:

- **Definitions**: If it's difficult to define 'youth' precisely, then it will be equally difficult to see what this particular group has in common by ways of values, beliefs, norms and behaviours.
- **Transition routes**: Even if we accept the idea that all youth face much the same general problem — how to manage the transition to adulthood — it doesn't necessarily follow they all manage it in the same way. Middle-class youth, for example, take a very different route into adulthood to working-class youth — and where the transition routes are different it makes more sense to analyse the particular ways different groups handle the transition.

The generation gap

While the idea of a clear and distinctive form of youth culture gradually fell out of favour, a more recent revival of the concept focused on the idea of a **generation gap**. Although popular versions of this idea focus on simple age divisions between youth and adulthood, Mannheim (1936) focused on the idea of **cultural generations** — groups born around the same time characterised by common cultural experiences and, latterly, distinctive consumption patterns.

Although this idea is similar to youth culture, generational differences arise not from 'problems of transition to adulthood' but from fundamentally different experiences linked to major and rapid **social changes**. The generational experiences of those entering their teenage years in the late 1950s, for example — a time of general and increasing affluence — were very different to their children's. For the younger generation affluence, plentiful jobs and a general feeling of social progress and optimism were replaced by the realities of widespread unemployment, falling living standards and a general pessimism about the future. In America, for example, Kitwana (2002) has argued the hip-hop generation of black youth developed cultural forms based around music, art (graffiti), dance, fashion and style that marked it apart as distinctive from previous generations of black youth and hence adults.

Youth subcultures

Although the concept of **subculture** is linked to culture, theories of youth subculture are different to notions of youth culture for three main reasons:

- **Fragmentation**: 'Youth' is not a **homogeneous** category; young people are not 'all much the same' in terms of their values, beliefs and norms. As with the general population, they can be differentiated by categories like class, gender and ethnicity — each with their own particular problems and outlooks (the experiences of white,

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male, middle-class youth, for example, are qualitatively different to those of black, male, working-class youth).

- **Generations**: Youth subcultures are not linked to generations in the way that theories of youth culture suggest. Rather than seeing their development as specifically related to 'general problems of cultural transition', we can trace their development to the particular circumstances of distinctive groups of young people, in terms of things like:
  - **economic** problems — punk subcultures, for example, developing as a reaction to high levels of youth unemployment in the mid-1970s
  - **political** problems — the 1960s hippie movement developing, initially in America, as a reaction to the Vietnam War
  - **cultural** problems — in the sense of each new subcultural wave developing in opposition to the norms and values of previous subcultures (punks, for example, being particularly opposed to the hippie philosophy of 'peace and love'; or the racism and homophobia of skinhead subcultures)
- **Adulthood**: Brannen (2002) argues that theories of youth culture (and, in a slightly different way, subculture) focusing on the 'problems of youth' in relation to transition to adulthood assume 'adulthood' in contemporary societies to be unproblematic, something fixed, stable and clearly defined. While youth is seen as a *decentred* identity, adulthood is seen as *centred*. For Brannen, however, 'the problem for youth', is not so much finding ways to manage a clearly defined transition between youth and adulthood, as having little or no clear idea of what adulthood actually means. As she argues, 'rapid economic changes have created uncertain job markets' where 'traditional notions of male adulthood are increasingly redundant, while new notions of female adulthood are still emerging'.

Ordinary youth?

Before we look at some examples of youth subcultures and explanations for their development, we need to note a criticism of youth subcultural theory (and also, in a slightly different way, cultural theories of youth). This is the idea that most young people are not involved in youth subcultures (and only a small minority are involved in the spectacular variety we'll examine in a moment). Since part of the rationale for cultural/subcultural theories of youth is that they develop in response to various problems faced by young people, it seems surprising more youth are not involved in these behaviours. Contemporary responses to this argument focus on two ideas:

- **Submerged subcultures**: Subcultural behaviour is more widespread than the simple 'ordinary youth/subcultural youth' split might suggest. The argument here is that young people have always developed a wide variety of relatively small, highly localised, subcultural groups, the vast majority of which have not attracted wider attention. This is particularly the case, as we'll see, with more recent subcultural activity influenced by globalisation processes.

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- **Normalised deviance**: A second response is that while in the past we could establish a relatively clear distinction between 'ordinary' and 'subcultural' youth on the basis of things like how they dressed, the culture they consumed, how they behaved and so forth, this is made more difficult in contemporary societies because behaviour that was once 'different and deviant' has become — for many young people — normal and everyday. Gourley (2004), for example, notes that the kind of recreational drug use associated with youth subcultures in the past has become 'normalised' in the sense of 'the emergence of widespread recreational drug use amongst relatively large numbers of ordinary youth'.

? Briefly explain the difference between youth culture and youth subculture.

Spectacular youth subcultures

Cohen and Young (1981) used the term '**spectacular**' to describe a range of youth subcultures (Table 10.1) notable for their high social visibility. These were the subcultures (mods, skins, punks) that burned most brightly in the cultural firmament and, by so doing, captured the interest and attention of the media and public alike.

Table 10.1 Timeline of spectacular UK youth subcultures

Name	Main appearance	Basic composition	Style
Teddy boys	Mid-1950s	Male, working-class, white	Drape coats, crepe shoes, quiffs, rock 'n' roll
Rockers ('greasers')	Late 1950s/ early 1960s	Male, working-class, white	Leathers, motorcycles, tight T-shirts, slicked hair
Mods	Early 1960s	Male, working-class, white	Parkas, mopeds, soul music
Hippies	Mid-/late 1960s	Male and female, middle-class, white	Kaftans, long hair, flared trousers, 'flower power', 'peace and love', psychedelic rock
Skinheads	Early 1970s	Male, working-class, white	Crombie overcoats, Ben Sherman shirts, braces, Doc Marten 'bovver' boots, cropped hair, ska music
Glam	Early 1970s	Male and female, working-class, white	Androgyny, glam rock
Punk	Mid-1970s	Male and female, working-class, black and white	Ripped and torn 'DIY' clothing, zips and safety pins, mohicans, punk rock, reggae
Goth	Late 1970s	Female, working-class, white	Black clothing, heavy coats, big boots, black makeup, goth rock
Rave/ acid house	Early 1980s	Male and female, working- and middle-class, white	Dance music, raves
Hip-hop	Late 1980s	Male, working-class, black	Sampling, beatbox, bling, emceeing, graffiti, break-dance, hip-hop, rap, urban music

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Although this list is by no means exhaustive (groups such as New Romantics in the early 1980s, for example, have been excluded) and only lists subcultural developments as they appeared in the UK (hip-hop, for example, made its initial appearance in America around the mid-1970s), it does tell us something about youth subcultures.

Gangs of mods and rockers in the early 1960s famously saw themselves as opposed

In general we can note a number of ideas about spectacular subcultures:

- **Social change**: They cover a period of around 30 years, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, since when (unless we include subcultures such as Emo, an offshoot of goth) they have all but disappeared from the cultural landscape. This timescale reflects a period of rapid and widespread economic, political and cultural changes (from the appearance of Teddy boys in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, through punk appearing at a time of severe economic problems, to the advent of postmodern society). This suggests explanations for spectacular youth subcultures are tied in to wider social changes.
- **Class**: With one or two exceptions (hippies, for example, originated among middle-class American students at a time of widespread disillusion with involvement in the Vietnam war), spectacular youth subcultures overwhelmingly originated in the working class. This once again suggests a relationship between subculture and social change — working class youth are most likely to feel the negative impact of economic changes.
- **Age**: Although youth subcultures clearly involve 'young people' the problem, as we've previously suggested, is how to define 'youth'. This is significant for two reasons:
  - While most spectacular subcultures appeal to relatively young people (around the 15–18 axis), this is not always the case. Hippies were older (university students) and eventually embraced a significant range of adults (in their mid- to late twenties, for example). Skinhead groups also seem to expand beyond the simple constituency of 'youth' as, arguably, does hip-hop.
  - Explanations that focus on youth subcultures as a reaction against 'adult society' are difficult to sustain if adults are involved.
- **Gender**: One feature of early spectacular subcultures is the general lack of female involvement (an exception being hippies — partly explained by any movement preaching 'free love' and 'equality' being hardly likely to exclude women). While women did feature in these subcultures, their participation was generally **marginal**; as peripheral roles played out through their attachment (as girlfriends, for example) to male members. Later subcultural groups, such as punk, goth and rave, seem to

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have reversed this situation to some extent, with women playing similar roles to their male counterparts.

One explanation here is changing social attitudes; by the latter part of the twentieth century women were less likely to be seen as subservient to men. The sexist nature of some aspects of hip-hop (with women reduced to 'bitches') points to both the validity of this argument and the fact there has been a (male) reaction to changing female statuses.

- **Ethnicity**: Most participants in early spectacular subcultures were white — something that reflected both the ethnic composition of Britain (in the 1950s and early 1960s there were far fewer black minority young people) and the lack of cultural mixing between black and white youth. Later subcultures, such as punk, began to see not only greater black involvement but also the development of predominantly black youth subcultural groups.

Spectacular subcultures

C lass
A ge
G ender
E thnicity
S ocial change

Explanations

Affluence

At various times some groups of youth find themselves with increased spending power that they can use in consumption of various products and styles (clothing and music in particular) that marks them apart from other youth. Teddy boys, for example, appeared at a time of increased youth affluence, as arguably did rave culture.

Other youth groups arise as an explicit **rejection of consumerism**, for ideological reasons in the case of hippies and political reasons in the case of punk. The latter's 'do it yourself' attitude to style (illustrated by plastic bin-liner clothing) was seen as a reaction to the lack of jobs and opportunities for some working-class youth in the mid-1970s.

Socialisation

Explanations based on socialisation take a range of forms, mainly focusing on a failure by parents to properly socialise and control their offspring leading to the development of deviant subcultural behaviour. This concept is also occasionally used to explain gender differences in subcultural behaviour. While young males are given more freedom in the public sphere (to hang around in groups 'on the streets' for example), female behaviour is more tightly controlled. Girls are given less 'freedom of association' in the public sphere and therefore less opportunity to form or participate in youth subcultures.

Extension of education

This argues youth subcultures developed once young people were forced to stay in education for longer — something that created a clear break between dependent childhood and independent adulthood. Youth started to be seen as 'different' in the sense of going through a 'special phase' in their development. Commercial interests saw youth as a new and developing market and so started to create products aimed at young people — which led to the development of various different and unique youth styles.

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Globalisation

Initially this explanation focused on the way cultural ideas, products and styles (mainly from America) were imported and adapted by youth groups to create their own sense of style and difference. More recently it has been applied to the way the internet has 'internationalised' cultural ideas and styles; people in one country are quickly able to see, pick up and purchase a range of cultural styles developed in one country and subsequently exported to others around the globe.

In this latter sense of 'globalised youth', the multiplicity, **fragmentation** and disappearance of large, spectacular subcultural styles is explained by the highly specialised nature of cultural exchanges. Young people are exposed to such a wide and rapidly changing cultural landscape that spectacular styles have little time to develop before youth move on to the next style.

Mass media

One version of this idea is that youth subcultures are simply 'creations of the media'. A more sophisticated argument, however, is one noted by Thornton (1995) when she argues 'there is a continual and shifting exchange between subcultural authenticity and media manufacture'. This observation reflects Cohen and Young's (1981) argument that while spectacular youth subcultures begin authentically, with a group of young people developing a new and different form of behaviour, this is then picked up and amplified by the **mass media**. Two consequences follow from this:

- The publicity given to a relatively small group attracts more and more 'followers' — the vast majority of whom simply pick up on the *style* rather than the *substance* of the behaviour being copied. Hippies, for example, originally developed around a very specific set of ideas and issues that were important to a relatively small group of American students. By the time hippies appeared in Britain the attraction was a set of new and exciting styles (of behaviour, clothing and music); the experiences that produced the original, authentic subculture had little or no interest or meaning to the 'new hippies'. Punk followed a similar trajectory: originating in a small, specific area of London, its style was rapidly adopted across the country.
- A shape, structure and meaning to youth behaviour is created through media reporting and commentary (in postmodern terms, a '**subcultural narrative**' was created that explained, for those who had merely picked up on a style, the 'meaning' of 'punk' or 'rave', for example). Young people who have little or nothing in common except a desire to party are manufactured by the media into some form of social collective with common interests, aims and beliefs.

? Identify and explain one way youth subcultures are related to class.

Unspectacular youth identities

This mass media type of argument also goes some way towards explaining the decline in spectacular youth subcultures over the past 25 years. In the past, terrestrial media

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(newspapers, magazines and television) had both a **captive audience** (there were no real competitors) and one that included large numbers of young people (to the extent that a wide range of magazines aimed specifically at youth existed in a way that is no longer the case). When a particular aspect of youth behaviour was highlighted there was, therefore, a ready-made captive market for the style on offer.

While a huge range of youth identities/subcultures currently exist across the globe (Wikipedia (2011), for example, lists a very conservative 78 examples, but it's probable the actual number runs into the low hundreds), very few, if any, have developed spectacular identities in recent years. The argument here is that mainstream media's hold on the audience has diminished through competition from the internet. So while young people are increasingly exposed to a range of styles — which some pick up, play with and then discard — there is no coherent narrative coming from mainstream media to a youth audience about the meaning and content of these identities. They consequently appeal to a select audience of followers/adopters rather than the mass audience of spectacular subcultures.

The social construction of youth

'Youth' is a socially constructed category, whereby the biological ageing process (together with 'phases of social development' based around different age groups) is associated with a range of characteristics. In this section, therefore, we can examine the contribution made by a range of agencies and processes to this social construction: the media, consumption, schooling, demographic trends, the economy and globalisation.

The media

The role of the media in the social construction of youth can be outlined on two levels.

Role performance

The media are used by young people to understand and monitor how they 'perform youth'. Through **role performance**, media (from style magazines to music videos) aimed specifically at the youth market help young people understand the:

- **meaning** of youth: What 'young people' are supposed to be like, how to play the role of youth and so forth.
- **correct** ('cool') and **incorrect** ('uncool') styles and behaviours: This not only monitors fashion and style developments (what's hot and what's not) but also covers general beliefs about youth styles (60-year-old punks are probably not cool).

Contexts

Contexts are aimed at adults rather than young people (although youth will, of course, consume at least part of the general message) and relate to a media **discourse** on youth. This, according to Foucault (1980), is always exclusive; contexts are constructed to convey a one-sided message designed to influence how an audience sees and

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understands 'youth'. The dominant media discourse for much of the past 50 years has centred around **problem youth** — expressed in a range of **narratives** (stories that support the discourse) portraying youth as:

- an individual problem — the various forms of risky behaviour (from drug-taking to binge-drinking) that 'self-harm'
- a social problem — youth subcultures are simply one more example of how the behaviour of young people is 'a problem' (one that, as Pearson (1983) has demonstrated, has recurred over the past century or so)

Youth narratives within the overall 'problem discourse' focus on different specific problems related to areas like class:

- **Working-class narratives**, for example, frame 'the problem' in areas like:
  - sexuality and reproduction — not just teenage pregnancy and irresponsible fathers but wider problems of single parenthood and 'benefit dependency'
  - 'feral youth' — 'out of control' and a serious threat to social order
  - crime and delinquency
  - drug-taking and hedonism
  - unemployment — normally framed in terms of the 'unwillingness' of working class youth to take jobs 'in plentiful supply'
  - help and advice — how 'middle-class professionals' in particular can help working-class youth
- **Middle-class narratives** frame 'the problem' differently — in terms of how to successfully make the transition from youth to adulthood, through:
  - education — how to ensure 'high achievers' are not excluded from the 'best' universities
  - work — the problems associated with gaining employment that matches their abilities
  - housing — problems with 'getting on the housing ladder' at a time of high house prices

By constructing youth in this way the media frame the overall debate in terms of **social control**: although all young people are held to require adult supervision and control (as Lesko (1996) argues, 'adolescence becomes defined as problematic, out of control and needing to be constrained by adults'), this is framed in different ways:

- Working-class youth require strong, frequently punitive, controls to save them from both their own risky behaviours (the individual dimension) and the social problems these behaviours create.
- Middle-class youth require softer controls — ones designed to ease their way into a 'successful adulthood' by preventing them 'going off the rails'.

? Identify and explain one way working-class youth are constructed differently to middle-class youth.

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Consumption

Featherstone (1990) argues that in postmodern society consumption shapes identity: we use what we buy to make statements about who we are. In this respect, the lives of young people in particular are shaped by considerations of style and identity and by the forms of consumption used to support and enhance them.

The 'youth market' has been a social space mapped out by commercial enterprises and advertisers from the emergence of teenagers in the 1950s. Teenagers then were defined in terms of their consumption of styles in music, fashion, language and behaviour that were not only different to those of adults but in some ways opposed and threatening. The sense of self and style of contemporary youth is wrapped up in mobiles and connected networks.

Consumption of style in the **past** had two main features:

- **Gender**: Different media focused on different genders (young women, for example, were the target for style magazines built around fashion and relationships, young men were targeted for things like sport, music and technology).
- **Production**: In the main, youth were **passive** consumers of mass-produced, ready-made products.

Contemporary consumption — while still having these elements — has also seen the idea of youth as **active** consumers; emerging technologies (such as social networks) provide tools that allow youth to define their own social spaces and relationships.

Although they are clearly significant, we need to avoid over-determining consumption and style as integral features of all youth experiences. Just as young people are not 'all the same', there are wide-ranging differences, as Jones and Martin (1997) note, in consumption patterns among different categories of youth — not only in terms of the idea any 'transition to adulthood involves costs' (finding a place to live, for example) but also in terms of the idea 'Spending on style and leisure may mask, or be a response to, material or social deprivation.'

Schooling

Education contributes to the social construction of youth in two main ways.

Extension of schooling

As we've noted, compulsory secondary education, with a school-leaving age set at 15 (raised to 16 in 1972 and projected at the time of writing to rise to 18), created a category that came to be defined as youth. Advertisers began to cater for this new market of teens with money and freedom from mundane adult responsibilities (children, mortgage or a need to earn a living). This new status was reinforced through peer group interactions, and new identities emerged around new styles and consumption patterns.

School experience

A second aspect to education is the reinforcement of youth identity not only through the experience of being in school (as opposed to work) but more importantly through

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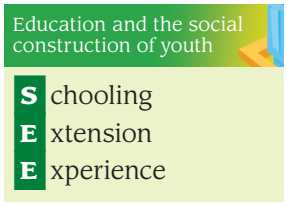
the age-grading system used. As young people increased in school seniority simply by getting older, age differences became associated with identity differences; the world of a 15-year-old became very different to that of a 12-year-old. This association represents a significant step in the social construction of youth because it anchors rapidly changing youth identities around age.

Besley (2002) also points out how schools contribute to general ideas about youth being a **deficit state**: young people are seen as both incomplete and involved in a process of 'becoming' that will culminate with their arrival and acceptance in 'adulthood'.



Demographic trends

The most significant demographic trend was the post-Second World War 'baby boom' that created a 'bulge' of young people in the general population (described in the chapter on 'Family'). This had two consequences:

- Young people, as a significant segment of the population, became far more visible as a distinctive social group.
- The greater number of young people, helpfully if inadvertently age-graded through education, drew the attention of media and advertisers to this new and economically untapped grouping.

The economy

Economic factors contribute to the social construction of youth in various ways.

Economic behaviour reinforces ideas about **age distinctions** in terms of a rough-and-ready set of age-graded divisions:

- children — no paid work
- youth — part-time work leading into full-time work paid at lower levels to adults
- adult — full-time work

In addition, while youth work is generally low-paid, low-skill and low-status (burger flipping being an obvious example), it does signify the ability to **participate i**n part-time work while still living in the family home (where there may be few, if any, general household expenses). This creates a pool of personal spending power that, for some young people, is focused on creating and cultivating youth identities (through the consumption of various cultural products).

Participation is, in turn, a significant **cultural marker**. Things like leaving school and entry into full-time work can be an important marker for the transition into adulthood. While this is perhaps not as clear-cut now as in even the recent past, it still represents a significant change in status for many young people. (In the study of working-class youth by Willis (1977), 'the lads' looked forward to leaving school at the earliest opportunity to enter an adult world of paid manual work that has fast been disappearing with the rapid decline of manufacturing industries).

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Globalisation

Global cultural processes have played a significant role in the social construction of youth in a number of ways.

- **Cultural imports**: In the 1950s the import of American cultural styles and products (music in particular) influenced the early development of British youth styles and subcultures (such as Teddy boys); later groupings such as mods and hippies were similarly influenced by musical forms and styles. More recently, various global products from T-shirts and jeans to baseball caps and beyond have been incorporated into youth styles. Large commercial interests (global companies like Nike, Coca-Cola and McDonalds) have also created products that have been incorporated into various youth identities. As Besley (2002) suggests, 'Now, more than ever, kids find their identities and values in the marketplace, rather than in traditional sources such as the family, church and school.'
- **Cultural exports**: Similarly, various forms of specifically British youth subcultures have been exported across the globe, from Beatlemania in the early 1960s to (to a lesser extent) punk in the mid-1970s).
- **Cultural hybrids**: The 'globalisation of youth' has seen different cultural products and styles incorporated and adapted by youth. Both Teddy boy and mod culture, for example, illustrate early cultural hybrids: global cultural products (such as rock and roll/soul music) incorporated into a more localised form of youth identity that was both new and very different.
- '**World-kids**': Besley argues the notion of 'a globalised sense of youth'. Youth, in this respect, has now become big business, a social space where multinational companies not only compete to sell things 'to kids' but do so on a global scale. This involves the construction of a 'globalised youth' that consume much the same global products, differentiated only by localised variations in the meaning of those products.

OCR examination questions

1 Identify and explain two features of youth subcultures.	(17 marks)
2 Identify and explain two ways the media contribute to the social construction of youth.	(17 marks)
3 Outline and evaluate the view that youth is socially constructed.	(33 marks)

The role of youth culture/ subcultures in society

In this section we examine how different sociological perspectives have analysed and explained youth culture and subcultures.

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