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.

Functionalism

Traditional functionalist explanations focused on what Parsons (1964) termed the role of youth culture in 'easing the difficult process of adjustment from childhood emotional dependency to full maturity'. The general logic of this **systems approach**, therefore, was to explain how modern industrial societies developed ways to 'manage the transition' between the two relatively fixed cultures of **childhood**, centred around *affective relationships*, and **adulthood**, centred around *instrumental relationships*.

For writers such as Eisenstadt (1956), the extension of education coupled with an increase in general spending power among the young (something Abrams (1959) characterised as 'affluence without responsibility') led to a situation where youth increasingly straddled an uneasy gap between childhood and adulthood cultures. The ambivalent status of youth left them open to **anomie**: young people experienced confusion and uncertainty about the behaviour expected of them by society. In essence, they found themselves 'in limbo' between childhood and adulthood.

Since all young people were faced with a common problem — how to successfully manage the transition from full childhood to complete adulthood — it was assumed they developed a 'common response', a form of cultural adaptation specific to youth. Coleman (1961), for example, found the behaviour of young people was influenced more by their peers than by their families or by wider social values and norms. They developed a culture that was both separate from and in many ways opposed to adult culture.

Although this is sometimes taken to mean youth developed a common culture notable only for its **homogeneity** — the idea that all young people basically shared much the same norms and values — this is not what functionalists were arguing. Eisenstadt, for example, expressed the need for a 'common response' to a 'common problem' (anomie and the transition to adulthood).

Young people could and did respond to this general problem in a range of ways, the most notable being in terms of **gender**. Male and female youth responded in different ways precisely because they were positioned differently within the social structure. Cohen (1955), for example, argued that some young working-class males experienced **status deprivation/frustration** and joined subcultural groups that would allow them to achieve the status/respect denied to them by wider society.

The female route to adulthood was seen to be very different. Their status would come from starting their own family, which meant they rapidly moved from one private sphere governed by affective values (their parents' family) to another private sphere (their own family). Since there was no real disunity of values in their lives (young women did not, for example, have to develop strong instrumental values and orientations), their cultural response was very different.

Eisenstadt argued that particular forms and variations within youth culture are unimportant. If some youth find their way to adulthood as Teddy boys, mods or rockers,

while others take the educational route of school and university, it makes no real difference; all that's important is that they find their way through to adulthood.

While the overall **function** of youth culture was to manage the transition between the family (childhood) and work (adulthood), we can identity some of the specific functions involved.

Integration

Youth culture provided norms, values and statuses that create the sense of belonging and common purpose required to help young people negotiate the stresses and strains of a potentially difficult experience — leaving the comfort and security of the family home to make their own way in the world.

Youth culture resolved the problem of anomie and ensured young people would be successfully **integrated** into adult society. This was marked by **rites of passage**: youth was 'a necessary phase' through which everyone had to pass — a transitory phase marked in different ways by different societies (in the 1950s it was common to celebrate the 21st birthday as the symbolic entry point into adulthood).

Social solidarity

In a society, such as Britain in the 1950s, undergoing rapid social and economic changes, strains and tensions develop that must be successfully managed if the system is to continue to function. Where a gap develops between the private and public spheres (through the extension of education, for example) societies have to find ways to integrate a category of young people who are no longer children but not quite adults.

Tension management

Eisenstadt noted that the break from the family is a stressful period, especially for young people who may not have the emotional capabilities to deal successfully with such a split if it is sudden and clear-cut. Youth culture, therefore, was seen as a way of reducing tensions by gradually allowing young people to turn away from the family towards the peer group — people in a similar position who had personal experience of the problems involved. The group could, consequently, help each other navigate the choppy waters towards adulthood.

> The function of
> youth culture
>
> **F** unction
> **I** ntegration
> **S** olidarity
> **T** ension

? Identify and explain two functions of youth culture.

Evaluation

Homogeneity

Although functionalists don't see youth as a homogeneous category, there is a general assumption that categories such as adulthood are unproblematic. However, the idea that adulthood represents a clear, homogeneous category which youth simply have to

reach can no longer be sustained (if indeed it ever could). For example, Mitterauer (1993) suggests four 'markers of adulthood' that have stayed fairly stable over time:

➢ leaving the parental home
➢ finding employment
➢ setting up a new home
➢ marriage

The problem here is that although these markers would, up until the last 30 years, have been fairly unremarkable, it's debatable as to whether they are useful in contemporary societies — not least because:

➢ Fewer people marry, and when they do it's later (in their early thirties) than in the past.
➢ Young people find it much harder to leave the family home.
➢ 'Leaving home' is not necessarily a simple, clean break any more. Manacorda and Moretti (2006) estimate, for example, that: 'In Britain, roughly five out of ten men aged between 18 and 30 live with their parents.'

In the 1960s it was usual for young couples to set up home together only when they got married

Stages

Functionalist theories assume 'youth' is an age category that has associated physiological and psychological **characteristics** that mark it apart from other categories; 'youth' is simply a developmental stage through which everyone must pass. This, however, raises the question of why 'youth' is so difficult to define precisely; if it is a fixed and functional life stage it should be relatively easy to categorise.

The fact that it is not suggests that definitions of youth and youth culture are more complicated than might at first seem to be the case. White and Wyn (1997), for example, suggest that youth is a **relational concept**: it changes over time, and how we define it depends on a range of social and cultural factors and practices (such as how we define the school-leaving age or, more radically, whether we have schools at all).

Consensus

While functionalism sees youth cultures and subcultures as essential and ultimately supportive of social order, Marxist approaches argue youth subcultures are indicative of something more threatening (and so have to be discouraged and demonised by those in power).

> **?** Suggest one criticism of functionalist explanations of youth culture.

Marxism

Although Marxist perspectives are also based on a structural, systems approach to understanding society, their explanations for youth subcultures are substantially different. The focus here is on **conflict** — specifically that arising in capitalist societies between social classes. It is no great surprise that most spectacular youth subcultures have their origins in working-class youth. Marxists have carved out a unique take on youth subcultures by focusing on two ideas, hegemony and relative autonomy.

Hegemony

'Hegemony' means how a ruling class exercises its leadership and control over other social classes through cultural values. People buy (literally) into consumption values; they buy the idea that happiness is found through desirable products, or that these products are **status symbols** (things used to demonstrate an individual's standing within a group or society that also serve as significant sources of personal identity).

Relative autonomy

People enjoy a level of freedom (autonomy) to make decisions about their behaviour, albeit heavily influenced by structural factors (wealth, power and so forth). Although the vast majority choose broadly **conformist** behaviour (partly because they're 'locked in' to capitalist society through family and work responsibilities), others (mainly young, working-class males) are in a position to resist 'bourgeois (ruling class) hegemony'. Their cultural position (as neither children subject to direct adult supervision, nor adults with the weight of social responsibilities that inhibit their ability to break free of ruling-class control) gives young people a unique (if perhaps fleeting) sense of freedom and opportunity.

The focus here, therefore, is on youth subcultures as **forms of resistance**: as groups in capitalist society whose behaviour is seen as:

➢ **threatening** to the social order (youth subcultures have traditionally been labelled as 'deviant youth')
➢ **resistant** to dominant values and norms — they frequently put forward values and behave in ways that present a challenge to the 'normal way' of thinking and behaving in capitalist society

The resistance of subcultural groups to conventional norms and values is seen by Marxists as indicative of two 'solutions', real and symbolic, to the problems some young people face in capitalist society.

Real solutions

This approach is characterised by the **Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies** (**CCCS**), with research focused on how working-class subcultures develop as a response to, and attempt to resist, economic and political change. For example, we can note how

youth subcultures developed as a reaction to changes in areas like **social space**. This refers to both:

➢ **Literal space**: This is the 'loss of community' thesis put forward by writers such as Cohen (1972a), according to which urban renewal in working-class communities created a subcultural reaction (frequently violent and ill-directed) among young, working-class males (mods).

➢ **Symbolic space**: Subcultural groups develop as a way of establishing and developing a 'sense of identity' in a rapidly changing world. Cohen, for example, argues skinhead subculture, with its violent response to the loss of a traditional 'British' identity (with anger directed towards immigrants in 'Paki-bashing' and 'deviant sexualities' in 'queer-bashing') — is indicative of this type of resistance to change.

Subcultural behaviour, therefore, represents a **collective attempt** to deal with a sense of loss and, in some respects, reclaim spaces through the fear and revulsion of 'normal society'. Hall et al. (1978) linked youth subcultures to tensions and upheavals in capitalist society by suggesting that increases in deviant behaviour (real or imaginary) were linked to periodic 'crises in capitalism' (high levels of unemployment, poverty and social unrest, for example).

While spectacular subcultures have attracted a lot of attention, writers such as Willis (1977) and Corrigan (1979) transfer the subcultural focus away from the streets and into the classroom to examine less spectacular, but equally significant, forms of cultural resistance. Young (2001) notes how, for Willis, subcultural development among lower-stream, lower-class 'lads' was an attempt to 'solve the problem of educational failure' by 'playing up in the classroom, rejecting the teacher's discipline' and giving 'high status to manliness and physical toughness'.

Symbolic solutions

Although all forms of subcultural behaviour have symbolic elements (the skinhead 'uniform' of cropped hair, bovver boots and braces apes 'respectable' working-class work styles), the emphasis was shifted further into the cultural realm by focusing on how subcultures represent symbolic forms of resistance to ruling-class hegemony. Hall and Jefferson (1976) and Hebdige (1979) characterised youth subcultures as **magical** (or ritualistic) attempts at resistance by consciously adopting behaviour that appeared threatening to the 'establishment', thereby giving the powerless a feeling of power. This behaviour doesn't, however, address or resolve the problems that bring subcultures into existence — hence its characterisation as symbolic resistance.

Finally, the decline and disappearance of spectacular subcultures is explained by their being **taken over** or incorporated into the dominant culture. Rebellion and revolt — especially when restricted to relatively harmless symbolic gestures (attending gigs or wearing the T-shirt) — is attractive to many young people who use it to distance themselves from both their peers and adults. Clark (2003) suggests part of the attraction

of spectacular subcultures was their ability to *shock*; but images of 'rebellion' are also attractive to business interests and as subcultures become commercialised they become normalised; when 'everyone's involved', the exclusivity, power and status of a subculture loses its appeal.

> **?** Identify and explain two key Marxist concepts in relation to youth subcultures.

Evaluation

➤ **Spectacular subcultures**: Clark argues that 'with the death of punk, classical subcultures died'; if subcultures are symptomatic of 'structural problems' in society (such as mass youth unemployment), why have they disappeared over the past 30 or so years?

➤ **Symbolism**: Ideas like 'symbolic resistance' lack supporting evidence; one interpretation of 'symbolic' is no more and no less valid than any other. When Hebdige, for example, writes about 'the meaning of style', the problem is that it's *his* meaning filtered through *his* perception. As Young (2001) points out, Hebdige's assertion that some punks wore Nazi swastikas in an 'ironic way' is unsupported by any evidence (not least from those who wore them).

➤ **Identities**: The focus on class neglects a range of other possible factors, gender and ethnicity in particular; the majority of subcultural studies, both functionalist and Marxist, focus on the behaviour of white, working-class, men.

➤ **Manufacture**: Cohen (1972b), from a **social action** perspective, argues that what is significant about youth subcultures is that they are created by the mass media. Cohen argues youth subcultures are not coherent social groupings arising 'spontaneously' as a reaction to social forces. Rather, he questions whether youth subcultures are really subcultures at all.

   The media manufacture youth subcultures by focusing attention on disparate, possibly unconnected, forms of behaviour and giving them a shape or structure. Media **labelling** (mods, punks, goths, etc.) gives 'meaning' to these behaviours by assigning certain stereotypical characteristics (hippies = 'peace and love', punks = 'anarchy' and so forth). By applying a meaningful label, the media create something out of very little in that they provide young people with a framework in which to locate their behaviour (and live up to manufactured media myths concerning that behaviour).

➤ **The Other**: This concept of Stahl (1999) is connected to the idea of manufacture above. Marxist subcultural theory sets up 'the subculture' in opposition to some real or imagined outside group or agency (the school, media, 'ruling class hegemony', etc.). The problem, for Stahl, is that they ignore the idea subcultures may simply be a reflection of how they are seen by such agencies — as social constructions of the media, for example. Grossberg (1997) also argues that 'oppositional influences'

(such as the 'loss of community' explanation underpinning Cohen's (1972a) analysis of mods), against which subcultures supposedly develop, are little more than unsubstantiated attempts to give substance to a particular and partial view of subcultural development.

Feminism

Traditional feminist views on youth subcultures have largely been dominated by **Marxist feminism** (we will outline **post-feminist** views when we look at 'gender interests'), and analyses focus on two main areas, patriarchy and invisibility.

Patriarchy

While most spectacular subcultures involve women — either as full participants (Teddy girls, female skinheads) or in peripheral roles (wives and girlfriends on the margins of subcultural behaviour) — the focus has largely been on the lives and problems of men. One reason for this is that working-class youth subcultures reflected the everyday patriarchal sexism and practices of working-class life (especially, but not exclusively, in the 1950s and 1960s). Just as women didn't participate to any great extent in other public spheres, they were similarly excluded from subcultures.

Invisibility

A second strand focuses less on the content of youth subcultures and more on a '**male-stream bias**' among sociologists, expressed in two ways:

➢ McRobbie and Garber (1976), although part of the general CCCS school, argued that women in youth subcultures were invisible as a result of:
  ➢ **stereotypes**: 'When women do appear, it is either in ways which uncritically reinforce the stereotypical image of women…or they are fleetingly and marginally presented'.
  ➢ **the male gaze**: We invariably view female involvement and participation through the eyes of men — both male researchers and respondents (in Willis's (1978) study of biker subculture, for example, women are seen through male eyes and experiences).
➢ Neglected female cultures: McRobbie and Garber argue the preoccupation with *public sphere* activity (from which women were largely excluded) meant a significant aspect of young people's experience, the *private sphere* of the home and the family, was ignored — and this sphere, they argue, was precisely the one in which *unspectacular* female youth subcultures developed around what they called **bedroom culture.**

Bedroom culture

In common with their male CCCS counterparts, McRobbie and Garber were concerned with understanding how youth negotiated and colonised social spaces:

➢ **Physical spaces**: Whereas male subcultures looked outwards, to the public sphere of streets, pubs and clubs, female subcultures looked inwards, to the home. This

was because for most of the twentieth century female involvement in the public sphere was marginal, girls' behaviour was subject to far stricter social and parental controls and, as Valentine et al. (1998) note, girls 'were often unable to engage in spectacular leisure activities which were dirty, dangerous or hedonistic, such as motorcycle riding or hanging around the urban streets'.

➢ **Cultural spaces**: The restricted activity of girls explains how males and females developed different individual and cultural identities. Whereas male teenage resistance to dominant cultural norms (ruling-class hegemony) was expressed through subcultural groups that took spectacular public forms, female resistance was restricted by the sexist norms and assumptions surrounding 'femininity' that prevailed until the end of the twentieth century. In other words, females expressed their, largely **symbolic**, cultural resistance in the one arena where they were relatively free to express their identities — the bedroom.

Teenage female subcultures thus developed around a 'bought-in', pre-packaged and highly manufactured 'pop culture' of fashion, style and music which they nevertheless sought to adapt to their own particular subcultural **lifestyles**.

Although 'bedroom culture' is frequently dismissed as a commercialised, packaged and compromised form of subculture, Carter (1984) argued this misses the point. Consumerism itself wasn't particularly relevant; it was what girls did with what they bought that was of real significance. They didn't consume manufactured cultural products uncritically. On the contrary, Carter argues female subcultures deconstructed and reconstructed conventional consumer cultural products (such as manufactured 'teenybopper boy bands' like the Osmonds) in ways that allowed them to break free from conventional cultural norms surrounding female sexuality and desire.

> **?** Suggest one way feminist explanations of youth subcultures differ from Marxist or functionalist explanations.

Evaluation

➢ **Gender**: The focus on gender, while understandable and interesting, has tended to neglect analysis based around categories such as class and ethnicity — particularly where they relate to women.

➢ **Interpretations**: As with criticism of CCCS writers such as Hebdige (1979), part of the problem with these kinds of analysis is that they over-interpret the ability of young women to 'break free' from conventional ideas and behaviours — as evidenced, perhaps, by the simple fact they were restricted to a bedroom-based culture.

➢ **Identities**: The move towards looking at youth in terms of lifestyles and identities in many ways marked a move away from 'subcultural theories of youth'; this, coupled with rapid and far-reaching economic and cultural global changes, led to a significant change of emphasis in the analysis of the role of youth cultures in society.

Postmodernism

For postmodernists the world has moved on — which means we need to rethink the way we theorise the behaviour of youth in the light of societies that are:

➤ **Global not national**: Exposure to and interaction with other cultures, ideas and forms broadens our horizons; our eyes are opened not just to new ideas but also new opportunities — ways to adapt and develop cultural forms into different ways of looking and behaving.

➤ **Connected not isolated**: Whereas, in the past, youth subcultures could develop, grow and disappear in local or national isolation, this is no longer true. New styles flash around the globe in an instant — to be picked up, played with and discarded in rapid time.

➤ **Individual not collective**: The emphasis is on the 'individualistic development of self' in postmodern society. People work on their own individual sense of style and are consequently less likely to see their identity in collective, group terms as members of a distinctive subculture. This is a significant idea in the sense that, as Marx (Groucho as opposed to Karl) once said, 'I don't want to belong to any club that will accept people like me as a member'. In other words, we need to understand youth in terms of a **tension** between the *search for identity* and the *individualisation of choice.*

Identity and individualisation

While 'identity' by definition involves being part of a group — we can only know 'who we are' in the context of people who are 'like me' and, of course, people who are 'not like me' — group membership involves a loss of individuality.

Individualism, on the other hand, involves being different, standing apart from others. However, to be 'wholly individual' means we lose a sense of 'who we are'; we cannot sustain a sense of identity.

Malone (2002) captures this conundrum when she notes: 'Hip Hop as a cultural product and marketed commodity of youth culture has emerged as having a significant influence on young people seeking to explicitly celebrate and support ethnic diversity, individualism and collective communities — simultaneously!'

While, in the past, this circle of identity was squared by trading individualism for group (subcultural) membership, postmodernists argue the reverse is now the case: group membership is traded for individualism — and this means we must replace 'subculture' with a concept that captures the changed relationship between young people and society.

Maffesoli (1996) suggests we should see youth behaviour as **tribal.** Rather than a 'way of life', it involves dynamic, loosely bound and constantly changing groups with a range of different, fleeting identities and relationships centring around *lifestyles*. Behaviours formerly conceptualised as subcultures (punks, goths, etc.) could more

easily and consistently be explained in terms of young people gathering around a set of **totems** — clothing, music, language and so forth that could be adopted, shaped and moulded into various styles.

Neo-tribes

Bennett (1999) developed this tribal idea as '**neo-tribes**' — a descriptive term for contemporary youth behaviours. Neo-tribes reflect a wide range of styles and identities, adopted by what Luke (2000) calls '**hybridised world-kids**' — youngsters with a 'globalised sense of youth' connected:

➢ **Physically**: Some styles and identities common to very loose groups of youth are reinforced by personal, face-to-face contact and interaction
➢ **Virtually**, through social networks and messaging. Such contacts create a sense of identity, belonging and community, even though these youth will never be in the same physical space.

World-kids adopt a range of global — and globalised — styles, fashioning them into a range of unique (hybrid) identities. Some of these may be picked up and adopted by large numbers of youth and others only have meaning for relatively tiny numbers.

The concept of neo-tribes replaces the idea of relatively permanent and physically tangible subcultures with that of:

➢ loose-knit, fluid, unstable associations
➢ interactions that shift and change
➢ temporal associations — the product of a particular time, place and set of circumstances
➢ lifestyles that favour appearance and form

Neo-tribal development is facilitated by technology. The development of the internet, for example, has led to what Polhemus (1994) calls **supermarkets of style**. Just as with traditional forms of consumption supermarkets opened up a massive range of consumer choice, the global arena — opened up by new communication systems — is now a supermarket for the sale and consumption of style. This has important consequences for postmodern youth identities:

➢ **Appearance equals identity**: In a complex, fragmented and anonymous world, how we choose to look becomes 'a calling card signalling who we are and where we are at'.
➢ **Brands** are more than just status symbols and displays of conspicuous consumption (expensive brand = 'I am very wealthy'). They are **lifestyle statements**, an immediate, visual, shorthand way of signalling the 'values and beliefs of potential consumers'. Branding, under this interpretation, becomes an identity statement. (There are, of course, alternative interpretations: that branding simply represents the power of global corporations to embed their identity into individual cultural relationships, for example.)

➢ **Style** refers to how youth tribes mark out their boundaries, in terms of similarities within and differences between tribal groupings. Polhemus argues traditional social categories such as class or age 'have become increasingly irrelevant to personal identity'. The latter is now based around:

➢ '**People Like Us**': those who share the same sense of taste and identity
➢ **styles-r-us**: style 'has emerged as the key defining feature of social life'; those who share a style also share an identity

Neo-tribalism is sometimes seen as an example of **post-subcultural theory**, replacing subculture as an explanation for youth behaviour. Thornton (1996), however, suggests subculture is still a useful concept, albeit in a modified form. Her study of **club cultures** suggests youth tribes are not necessarily as fluid and free-forming as writers such as Polhemus suggest; some youth behaviours have strong subcultural elements (such as divisions in terms of **status**, **power** and **identity**).

Thornton uses the concept of **subcultural capital** to reference the ability of individuals to establish their identity within a particular group through things like different types of knowledge:

➢ **insider**: knowing how a particular 'scene' (such as a club) works in terms of organisation; who you know, your relationship to 'prime movers' and so forth; being, in other words 'in the know'
➢ **cultural**: understanding the history and development of a style, for example
➢ **consumption**: knowing what to buy and what to reject
➢ **style**: knowing what to wear and how to wear it

> **?** Suggest and explain one postmodernist criticism of the concept of youth subculture.

Evaluation
Style
The differences between 'old-style' youth subcultures and 'nu-style' tribal cultures is overstated — a difference in terminology rather than substance. Thornton's work suggests similar internal processes of status, powli i Toc

➤ **Social divisions**: Shildrick and MacDonald (2006) argue subcultural theories (such as those of the CCCS) are more convincing explanations of the relationship between youth and style than neo-tribal explanations would suggest. They argue 'youth cultural identities and practices' in contemporary societies are still shaped by notions of class, gender, age and ethnicity.

Issues relating to gender

Feminism and postmodern views

Post-feminists have pointed to significant **social changes** over the past 30 or so years that have altered how we think about gender and female involvement in youth subcultures.

➤ **Economic**: Women have greater involvement in the public sphere and, in consequence, have gained greater access to a significant form of **power** (economic independence).

➤ **Political**: Perceptions of women have similarly changed as they take on new social roles equal to men in many areas of social life. A range of **stereotypes** (such as women as natural mothers) and **stigmas** (surrounding divorce, lone parenthood, childlessness, work and so forth) have also gradually disappeared.

➤ **Cultural**: The patriarchal attitudes and assumptions that relegated women to a peripheral role in male-dominated youth subcultures or to a 'bedroom culture' that looked inward to the home (centred around commercially manufactured and packaged 'youth icons' and concerns about 'love and relationships with boys') are no longer as strong as they were. Young women, in particular, have a new freedom to develop and express their identities in postmodern culture.

These changes are expressed in terms of:

➤ **Choice**: Women have greater freedom to construct gender identities in a range of ways (from conventional notions of femininity to new notions based around masculinity and self-expression).

➤ **Exchange**: Behaviours once considered 'masculine' may now be incorporated into female identities (and vice versa). Traditional ideas about masculinity and femininity are questioned and women have greater access to behaviours — such as youth subcultures and styles — that were once the preserve of men.

Girl subcultures

One consequence of these changes has been the development of both greater female involvement in 'youth culture' (such as the rave scene) and female subcultures. McRobbie (1994), for example, explored a shift away from the relatively *passive consumption* of culture noted in her earlier analysis of **bedroom culture** to one where young women have become more *actively* involved in the creation of female styles and identities, which we can outline as follows.

Bedroom culture revisited

Harris (2001) argues computer technologies have transformed how young women use space. Where 'the bedroom' was once a physical space into which various consumer products (such as magazines and music) were brought, 'The days of girls gazing longingly at posters on their bedroom walls and hoping to gain status by attaching themselves to popular boys seem long past.'

This private-sphere space has been transformed by the ability to link into wider global networks. This has resulted in the development of a range of 'female voices' being heard by young women. Harris argues this new form of bedroom culture is one some women have chosen as a way of challenging conventional notions of 'girlhood' and of creating new forms of female participation.

Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008), for example, investigated young female use of 'online journals' (such as personal blogs and social networks) as **private social spaces** which they used both to 'exhibit and develop' a sense of personal identity and to engage in a variety of virtual social interactions with a wide circle of friends and acquaintances.

This use of bedroom culture suggests a need to rethink our understanding of female subcultures, participation and identity in the light of technological developments that allow global participation in virtual spaces focused on private physical spaces.

Hodkinson (2003), however, argues that while post-feminists have theorised the potential for young women to participate in a variety of different cultural groups 'from the comfort of their homes', the reality is somewhat different. While social networks clearly expand the possibilities for young women to engage in wider cultural activities, Hodkinson argues they are used not to explore fluid and rapidly changing identities and styles but rather to solidify conventional behaviours and concerns. In this respect he argues contemporary societies are not inevitably '**post-subcultural**'.

Grrrl power

This represents an alternative development that examines female participation in the public sphere through the formation of various female subcultures/tribes.

➢ **Riot grrrl**, for example, was an early form of female subculture based around punk bands, fanzines and some forms of political action focused on ideas about female identities and exclusion.

➢ **Girl gangs** might be a more conventional subcultural form (especially in America). Although juvenile male gangs of the kind described by Venkatesh (2008) are far more common, female gangs such as the Playgirls (an off-shoot of the male Playboys) are not unknown. An interesting feature of these gangs, documented by writers such as Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn (1999), is how they develop hierarchical structures allied to ways of introducing and socialising new members into the gang structure.

? Suggest two significant changes in female lives over the past 30 years.

# Issues relating to ethnicity

Ethnocentrism

A feature of many *spectacular* subcultures is the relative absence of minority ethnic groups. One reason for this is that researchers have generally taken an **ethnocentric** view of subcultures, considering them mainly in a British context focused around **class** (the CCCS approach) and **gender** (Marxist feminism). As Böse (2003) puts it: 'The racism of white working class youth was not always at the top of the subculturalist's agenda.'

Although many of the early spectacular subcultures developed among white working-class boys in the relative absence of substantial numbers of minority ethnic youth in the population, there was also a tendency to downplay the significance of **black youth subcultures** (Jamaican Rudeboys, for example, in the late 1950s) and cultural influences. Punk, for example, was heavily influenced by reggae and Rastafarian political ideas. While Rastafarianism could be considered a form of black youth subculture, this characterisation is slightly misleading; it is, first and foremost, a *religious movement* with an appeal across all age groups. While many black youths identified with Rastafarian ideals and objectives, it was never a specifically youth subculture.

More recent analyses have drawn attention to minority ethnic involvement in a range of styles:

➤ **Historical**: Some aspects of punk drew heavily on black Jamaican influences (the incorporation of reggae music for example), styles of dress and language, and symbols ('red, green and gold', for example, the colour of the Ethiopian flag, Ethiopia being the spiritual homeland of Rastafarians).

➤ **Contemporary**: Examples here range from the development of hip-hop and rap subcultures, initially in black urban America and subsequently around the globe, to Asian Desi subcultures ('Desi' being the self-given name for those originating in the Indian subcontinent). One commonly discussed is 'Big Bhangra' (the fusing of rock music with Indian Bhangra folk music).

Post-subcultural theory has arguably been less **ethnocentric** (something that reflects both the increasing **globalisation** of youth behaviours and the move away from analyses based on categories like **class** and **gender**). Huq (2003), for example,
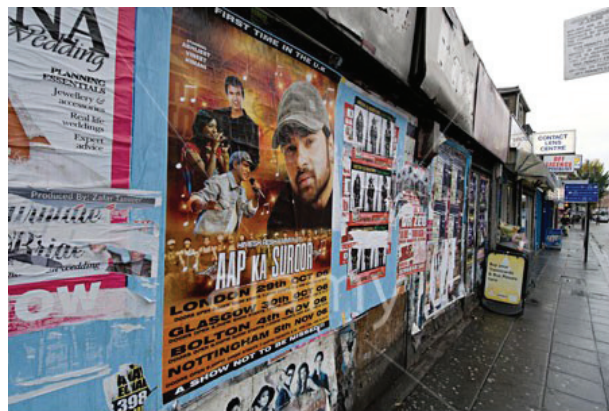

Poster in a British street advertising Indian and Pakistani music

analyses the popularity of 'new Asian dance music' in Britain and the appeal of French rap music in the context of the development of 'transnational European identities' — identities that reach across national borders.

However, analyses of ethnic involvement in youth subcultures are present in something like the CCCS work we outlined earlier. Perhaps the best-known of these, Hall et al.'s (1978) analysis of the 'black mugging' media panic in the early 1970s, drew on ideas about racism and black cultural history but nevertheless focused mainly on how black youth were targeted and scapegoated as a symbol of political and economic problems in Britain at the time.

Post-subcultural theory and ethnicity

P ost-subculture
E thnocentric
G lobalisation
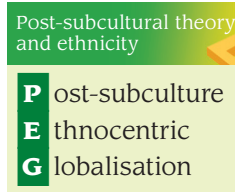
Racism

Analysis of early youth subcultures (from Teds to skinheads) generally shows a lack of ethnic minority involvement. Two possible reasons are:

➢ **Racism**: Perhaps these subcultures reflected the racism of British society at this time (the 'No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs' mentality that prevailed through the 1950s and 1960s). In other words, youth subcultures, largely constructed around white, working-class youth, both reflected these racist mentalities and, in some cases, were openly antagonistic to non-whites (skinheads being a classic example). Although this may explain ethnic minority exclusion from 'white' youth cultures, it doesn't explain why minority youth didn't develop subcultures based around their own ethnicity.

➢ **Demography**: Ethnic minority subcultures might not have developed because of the demographic make-up of minority populations. Large-scale ('first-generation') immigration to Britain began in the 1950s and it took time for second-generation immigrants to become sufficiently numerous to form youth subcultures. Greater black involvement in the subcultures of the 1970s and 1980s suggests this may partly explain the relative absence of minority participation in earlier subcultures.

The development of 'Big Bhangra' among young (second- and third-generation) British Asians, for example, represents a youth subcultural style that did develop, as a unique (hybrid) cultural identity, embodying elements of white British and Asian music, dress, language and style. Its development arguably represented a search for a positive self-identity — among young minority males in particular — in a situation where they faced both racism and a sense of alienation from mainstream white and Asian culture.

Post-racial youth styles (the idea contemporary youth tribes are largely unsegregated and 'race blind') have been highlighted by post-subcultural theories, but Moore (2010) argues this is largely wishful thinking. The dominant figures in the majority of American style movements are, as in the subcultural past, largely white males: 'strong, individualistic characters navigating a world in which white male hegemony is

crumbling amid globalization'. These 'new cultural groupings', he argues, 'replicate and support traditional roles and power in white, patriarchal American society'.

Retro-subcultures (the revival of **older** forms of swing, ska and rockabilly for example) are not post-subcultural but merely attempts to recreate times when 'men were the makers of their own fortunes'.

> **?** Define ethnocentrism and suggest one way it can be applied to an understanding of ethnic participation in youth subcultures.

Resistance

One of the main themes of Marxist and feminist subcultural theories ('resistance' to dominant economic and/or cultural norms and values) is largely absent in the analysis of minority youth behaviour. This, however, may owe more to how we define both youth subcultures and 'resistance'.

One suggestion here is that ethnic minority resistance is directed **inwards** rather than being expressed in **outward** forms of opposition. The idea is that minority youth identities involve resistance in areas like:

➢ **Self-description**: Minorities label their own behaviour (a recent example being Desi styles), as opposed to being labelled by a dominant culture. This is a significant aspect of minority youth identity. On occasions, self-descriptions can resist cultural stereotypes by actually employing racist labels designed to stigmatise a minority group (an example being the self-labelling of 'paki-culture').

➢ **Ascription**: Identities and styles are also shaped through resistance to dominant cultural labelling. The negative media stereotyping of young blacks, for example, led to the adoption of ironic references (such as 'gangsta') that resisted this type of labelling.

Hybrid subcultures

True cultural hybridity — a fusion between elements of different cultural traditions to produce something new and culturally distinct — is actually quite rare. It's difficult to identify many youth subcultures that fit the bill (one of the closest is probably Big Bhangra, but even here the hybrid element is largely focused on musical development).

We can, therefore, more usefully think about hybrid subcultures in two ways.

Hybrid elements

Many youth subcultures have hybrid **elements** — from hippies co-opting military uniforms, insignia (such as dog tags) and symbols in the name of 'peace', to skinheads taking working class styles to exaggerated levels (bovver boots, belts and braces). As Luke and Luke (2000) argue, 'hybridity is not new, nor an invention of postmodernism and globalization'.

Glocal subcultures

Glocal subcultures, Malone (2002) suggests, are a more recent form of hybridity in contemporary societies. Glocal involves **global** styles and identities filtered through **local** subcultural groups (hence 'glocal'). Styles existing on a global scale are given a unique local interpretation and twist through their incorporation by different cultural groups.

As Malone suggests, hip-hop exists as a **global youth culture** based around a particular style and identity. However, the meaning of this style is interpreted differently by youth in different countries, depending in part on their own local cultural background and traditions, so it is also glocal.

Glocalised youth subcultures are, by definition, hybrids since they involve mixing and matching a variety of different cultural traditions in the context of a global youth style. They have obvious advantages for their members: they are able to key into a global (virtual) community of youth who all have a common understanding of this style (reflecting Thornton's (1996) concept of **subcultural capital**), while simultaneously being part of a local subcultural community that allows hip-hop styles, for example, to be adapted to particular individual tastes.

OCR examination questions

1 Identify and explain two features of girl subcultures. (17 marks)

2 Identify and explain two features of hybrid subcultures. (17 marks)

3 Outline and evaluate Marxist views of the role of youth subcultures in society. (33 marks)

4 Outline and evaluate the view that the role of youth culture is to assist in the transition from childhood to adulthood. (33 marks)

Youth and deviance

In this section we explore the idea of 'problem youth' in more detail by looking at the extent to which young people engage in deviant/criminal behaviour and at various sociological explanations for that involvement.

Key concepts

Deviance

All societies develop **rules** (norms) to guide the behaviour of their members, and 'deviance' refers to any and all behaviours that 'break the rules'. Deviance, therefore, is behaviour that deviates from the norm:

➤ **Criminal deviance** involves breaking **formal**, legal rules (**laws** or **formal norms**).