

Topic Page: [Youth culture](#)

Definition: **youth culture** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*
Imprecise term for the variety of subcultural phenomena associated with young people as a social group. These may oppose the norms of adult life and are often symbolized by distinctive styles of clothing and taste in music.

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British Youth Council

Summary Article: **Youth Culture**

From *Encyclopedia of American Studies*

The phrase *youth culture* was a product of the twentieth-century realization that young people had acquired enough power in the society to create autonomous cultures distinct from and often resistant to adult cultures.

The concept of “youth” as a distinct period in the life cycle began in the late nineteenth century, when changing social and economic conditions, coupled with social reform movements, began removing the child and the teenager from the workforce. By the early twentieth century the proper place for the young person was in school and in organized recreation. Youth, then, especially for the middle class, came to be seen as a protected period of life, a time to learn and play before the economic responsibilities of adulthood. Psychologist G. Stanley Hall's two-volume work, *Adolescence* (1904), firmly cemented that term and concept in American thought, adding scientific, Darwinian legitimation to the idea that children and adolescents were not simply small versions of adults but that they and their peer groups had their own developmental, psychological characteristics.

Youth culture emerged when the peer groups began to have control over a substantial amount of discretionary income, for the story of emerging youth cultures is the story of a complex relationship between the social and economic conditions of working-class and middle-class young people (up through college age) and the dynamics of corporate commodity capitalism. When young people discovered that they could use commodity goods (including clothing, body adornment, food, music, comic books, leisure activities, and cars) to create and manage their individual and group identities, the people responsible for making and marketing those commodities discovered a lucrative audience for those goods. The synergy of this relationship between youth cultures and commodity capitalism has meant that neither element has been in control of the entire system. Young people have never been passive consumers of commodities created for them. Trends in commodities and styles have been created as often by the youngsters on the streets as by the marketing executives in their offices.

Youth acquired their discretionary income in fits and starts through the first five decades of the twentieth century, and white youths have had more access to the means of discretionary income than have most youths of color. The end of child labor meant that youth would acquire this income through family “allowances” and through employment at part-time, “after-school” jobs. Middle-class youth generally shared the prosperity of the 1920s, when a commodity-based youth culture began to emerge clearly; but surprisingly the Great Depression did not have the devastating effects on adolescents that it had on the adults. As Glen Elder, Jr., reports (in *Children of the Great Depression*, 1974), teenagers

were able to get part-time work in the 1930s, so they were able to maintain something of the commodity-based youth culture begun in the 1920s. The classic comics, such as *Superman*, began in the 1930s, which also saw the emergence of radio programming aimed at youth, along with advertising and “premiums” (for example, secret-decoder rings). Adolescents had increasing access to cars as relatively cheap means of leisure-time entertainment. Youth in the early 1940s shared the wartime deprivations with their families, although the shortage of adult male workers created by the war sustained opportunities for part-time work and its accompanying discretionary income.

The youth culture of the second half of the twentieth century arose primarily with the increasing disposable income available to baby boom youth (born from 1946 to 1964). Subsequent generations of youth have had enough members and disposable income to command a large segment of the market for “cultural” products.

Youth culture has always had a paradoxical relationship to adult culture. On the one hand, young people often use commodities—such as cars, cigarettes, and alcohol—as symbolic props for their dramatic performances of maturity; they emulate adults. But just as often, youth create cultural performances of individual and group identity completely oppositional to adult culture. Adults have tended to view these oppositional performances as dangerous threats to adult society.

One can see the almost hysterical adult reactions to youth culture as early as the late nineteenth century, when adults deplored “dime novels” and their influences on young readers. The fact that the explosive rise of a commodity-based, baby-boomer youth culture in the 1950s and 1960s coincided with the cold war set the stage for a generational conflict. The middle-class white youth of the period gladly performed the 1950s version of being “teenagers” using clothing (blue jeans, poodle skirts), hairstyles, music (rock and roll), dance, and cars as the ritual accoutrements of their performances. Adults reacted in panic. If one adopts the anthropological insight that the human body stands as a symbol of the society, then one can see why adults of the 1950s saw in the teens’ wild, exuberant use of their bodies a threat to a society already suffering the multiple anxieties of the cold war. Worse, middle-class white teens were appropriating in many cases the cultural performances (the music, the dance, the vernacular speech) of black and lower-class Americans. In short, these teens were violating every boundary of race, class, and decorum that white middle-class adults were trying to maintain in the 1950s.

The “juvenile delinquent” emerged as a social type during this period, and historian James Gilbert (*A Cycle of Outrage*, 1986) thoroughly addresses the draconian responses by the authorities to such staples of youth culture as comic books, music, and films. Two 1955 films, *The Blackboard Jungle* (based on the novel) and *Rebel without a Cause*, captured both the youth culture and the adults’ uncertainty about what to do in the face of this dangerous development.

The 1950s battle between youth culture and adults established the pattern for the remainder of the century and into the next. From small skirmishes in family living rooms to large-scale campaigns in the media and in the halls of Congress, adults and youth have struggled over control of the commodities the youth use to create their distinctive cultural “styles.” Music has been an especially contested terrain. As rock and roll morphed into various musical genres in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, alarmed adults came to blame teenage suicides, drug use, violence, and promiscuous sex on the music’s lyrics and mesmerizing sounds. Some called for national legislation restricting the access of youths to such music.

Entire subcultures of youth coalesced around these musics and the dress codes, body adornment, dances, vernacular speech, live concert cultures, and even drugs of choice that became part of the alternative youth cultures. Youths were as likely as not to criticize other subcultural styles, although the youth could achieve solidarity in the face of adults' views that lumped all the subcultures together into a unitary, "dangerous" youth culture.

As before, with the jazz youth subculture of the 1920s–1940s and the rock and roll subculture of the 1950s, perhaps most alarming to middle-class white adults was the sight of white teenagers appropriating elements from African American music, dance, dress, and speech. The emergence of "hip-hop" style (breakdancing, graffiti, dress, speech, and so on) in the 1980s, and the subsequent easy movement of rap music into the musical mainstream, attracted teens of every race and class, much to the dismay of many adults.

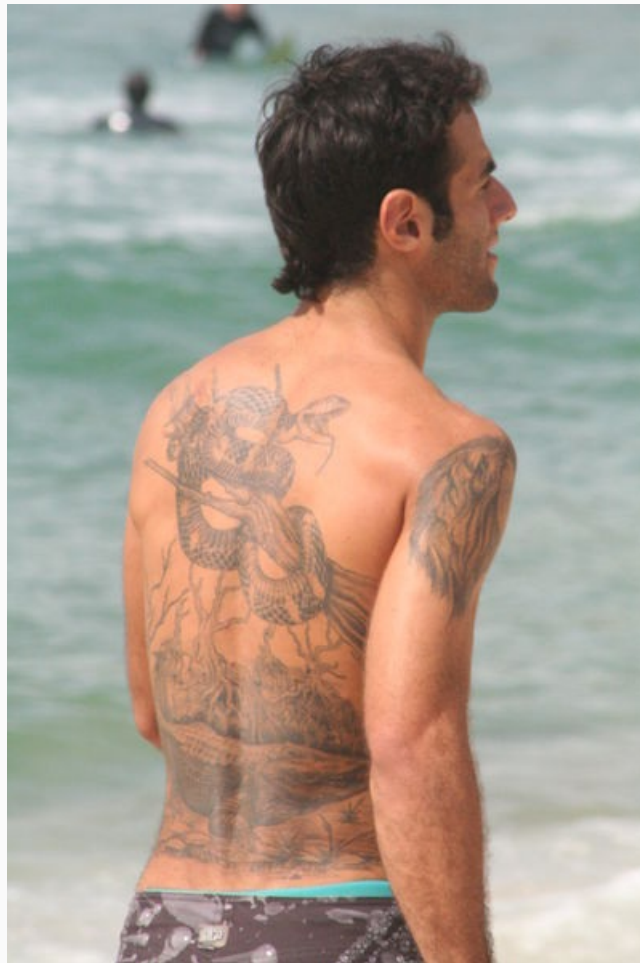
Almost as dismaying to many adults as the teens' embrace of these oppositional cultural styles was the way the institutions of commodity capitalism rushed to exploit the youth market. Record companies, cable's Music Television (MTV) network, and other institutions of the mass-mediated entertainment industry received criticism from parents and elected officials alike, who saw the products marketed to youth as evidence of the moral decadence of modern culture. Warning labels of "explicit lyrics" on compact discs were one of the industry's attempts to fight off official censorship.

The 1980s also saw the rise of another key genre in the battle over youth culture. Video and computer games moved quickly from crude to sophisticated, often violent, graphics. Again, adults became alarmed at the vast popularity of these and other forms of entertainment for youth (including violent and sexually provocative films aimed at the youth market). A series of tragic school shootings beginning in the late 1990s and involving troubled students directing their anger and frustrations at their peers through the use of gun violence made even more heated the public debate over youth cultural styles and issues of social alienation.

Although most scholars have studied youth culture through public, mass-mediated discourse, in the 1980s some scholars began to realize that they would have to undertake the ethnographic, fieldwork-based study of youth culture in order to understand how young people actually use their stylized, expressive cultures to construct meanings in their everyday lives. Attuned to the tensions between cultural reproduction and resistance, these fieldworkers have discovered how creative and resourceful youths can be in appropriating the materials of mass-mediated, commodity culture and converting those products to their own uses in a society in which young people are simultaneously neglected and over-scrutinized. The debate over youth culture needs this ethnographic view of the lives young people construct if the adults are to make wise public policy affecting those lives.



Ecstasy tablets. 2003. U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.



Man with tattoos on his back at the beach. 2006. Wikimedia Commons.



Hip Hop group Jurassic Five. Sallie Mae benefit concert for the Shade Tree Women's Shelter in Las Vegas. 2004. PRNewsFoto, NewsCom.com.



Marvel Comic action hero Captain America autographs a copy of the new armed forces comic book while Spiderman meets with children at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., on April 28, 2005. Sgt. Cherie A. Thurlby, photographer. U.S. Department of Defense.



Punks HITS Festival. 2003. Rainer Theuer, photographer. Wikimedia Commons.



Child playing video game. 2005. Quinn Norton, photographer. Flickr.com.

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